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Retracing the Black Venus: Figures of Intimate Commerce in the Atlantic World

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Lauren Elizabeth Dembowitz

2022

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Retracing the Black Venus: Figures of Intimate Commerce in the Atlantic World

by

Lauren Elizabeth Dembowitz

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Yogita Goyal, Chair

The term Black Venus most often conjures a racist label used to overwrite Black women's humanity with stereotypical assumptions about their alleged primitive and overdeveloped sexuality. This is because studies of the Black Venus overwhelmingly focus on the figure's most iconic iteration—Sarah Baartman. Billed as the Hottentot Venus, this South African woman was put on display in London and Paris as an exotic oddity for her ample posterior (1810-1815). She later became instrumental in pseudoscientific theories of racial difference designed to affirm the allegedly superior virtue of white women. The Black Venus has since become a potent icon of the material and symbolic violence of slavery and empire at the intersection of race and gender. Black feminist scholars and artists in particular use the Black Venus to expose the ongoing legacies of this violence and to repair it through projects of archival recovery. This dissertation argues that, in reducing her to a sexual stereotype, engagements with

the Black Venus have overlooked more flexible and equally influential versions of the figure, both in her own moment as well as in her contemporary afterlives.

Regardless of the historical period grounding their inquiry, interpretations of the Black Venus largely situate her within anachronistically rigid conceptions of racialized womanhood. However, in the eighteenth century, and even during Baartman's lifetime, racial categories were still fairly fluid, and representations of the Black Venus throughout the Atlantic world were fraught with contradiction. She personified freakishness and exotic beauty, African atavism and savvy entrepreneurship, abject victimization and seductive power, and, perhaps most surprisingly, Black and white women. Focusing particularly on the racially ambiguous Black Venuses of the eighteenth century—Imoinda, Yarico, and the Sable Venus—I radically redefine the figure against her stereotypical function as a hypersexual foil to virtuous, white womanhood, and read her instead as an embodied contact zone between domestic intimacy and imperial commerce. I contend that, rather than reaffirming racial categories already in place, the Black Venuses of this period index the porousness between Black and white womanhood as an expression of the unprecedented scale on which commercial capitalism—with slavery at its center—was transforming the social fabric of English domestic life. Redrawing the contours of the Black Venus paradigm opens new ways of understanding her contemporary afterlives because it foregrounds how profoundly Atlantic societies past and present have filtered their experiences of capitalist modernity through the circulating cipher of Black womanhood.

Tracing her appearances across a vast range of genres—including staged drama, ethnography, the periodical essay, poetry, visual culture, and parliamentary proceedings—I contend that the Black Venus's persistence across three centuries has never been the result of her simple or static character. Instead, it reflects her capacious adaptability to diverse and even

opposing ideological positions in both the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries: she has been marshalled to critique and excuse slavery, to celebrate commerce and warn of its perils, and, most recently, to recover the voices and humanity of Black women reduced to types in colonial archives, and to assert the impossibility of such recoveries. Upending established critical accounts of the Black Venus as a simple construct easily dismantled by a more enlightened present, I consider how different versions of the Black Venus layer onto one another to form a living record of the way histories of race, gender, commerce, and intimacy accumulate into the present, as well as the way that contemporary legacies of slavery and empire shape our engagements with the past.

The dissertation of Lauren Elizabeth Dembowitz is approved.

Felicity A. Nussbaum

Saree Makdisi

Richard A. Yarborough

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2022

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## Introduction

### **Locating the Black Venus in the Deep Eighteenth Century**

...as many times as we open slavery's closure, we are hurtled rapidly forward into the dizzying motions of a symbolic enterprise, and it becomes increasingly clear that the cultural synthesis we call 'slavery' was never homogenous in its practices and conception, nor unitary in the faces it has yielded...to rob the subject of its dynamic character...freezes it in the ahistorical. —Hortense Spillers

When people invoke the Black Venus, either in academic scholarship or popular culture, they most often refer to the hypersexualized stereotype of the Hottentot Venus and her function as a foil for white female virtue.<sup>1</sup> This seemed true of Pulitzer-prize winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, a controversial retelling of one Black woman's tragic life on display. In 1810, just three years after Britain abolished the slave trade, a Khoisan woman named Sarah Baartman was brought from South Africa to London where, under the billing of Hottentot Venus, she was put on display as an exotic oddity for her putatively oversized buttocks. After four years of continuous exposure in person and in print, Baartman was taken to Paris where the French naturalist Baron George Cuvier studied, measured, and, after her death a year later, dissected her. Cuvier's published findings in *Memoires du museum d'histoire naturelle* interpreted Baartman's body as evidence of all African women's primitive and overdeveloped sexuality, thus sealing her legacy as an instrument of white supremacy sanctioned by racist pseudoscience. Cuvier displayed Baartman's brain, skeleton, a painted cast of her corpse, and her genitals in the Musée

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<sup>1</sup> While the Roman goddess Venus has long been a potent symbol of love and beauty, scholars like Regulus Allen and Shirley Ann Tate understand the racial qualifiers "Black" and "Hottentot" to render the moniker a mocking oxymoron, an effort to mark the categorical failure of African women to live up to white European standards of beauty and virtue. They both rightfully point out that the name Black Venus also recasts the sexual exploitation of African and African-descended women as their categorical inclination to seduction and promiscuity. See Regulus Allen, "'The Sable Venus' and Desire for the Undesirable," *Studies in English Literature*, 51.3 (2011): 667-691; and Shirley A. Tate, "Looking at the Sable-Saffron Venus: Iconography, Affect and (Post)Colonial Hygiene" in *Black Women's Bodies and the Nation: Race, Gender and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17-46.

de l'homme, where they remained until they were repatriated to South Africa in 2002. It is little wonder that Baartman has become such a powerful icon of the material and symbolic legacies of slavery and colonialism at the intersection of race and gender. Through the efforts of writers, scholars, and artists alike to reclaim the individual woman from the Black Venus type that so long silenced and occluded her, Baartman has also become a vehicle for amending those legacies. Herein lies the controversy of Parks's play: she makes Baartman's disentanglement from the Black Venus impossible and, in doing so, prompts alternative ways of understanding who the Black Venus is and what work she is enlisted to perform.<sup>2</sup>

To begin with, Parks refuses to cast her heroine as a helpless victim of sexual coercion and spectacular dehumanization. Instead, Parks's Venus is an ambitious participant in her own exhibition who fantasizes about having slaves fetch her sweets and powder her buttocks with gold dust as she discusses "the Negro question" with Napoleon Bonaparte. She engages in an adulterous affair with the French anatomist—the Baron Docteur—whose professional reputation depends on her imminent dissection. Looking to her own interest, she concedes that while "He is not thuh most thrilling lay Ive had...his gold makes up thuh difference."<sup>3</sup> Their reciprocal if asymmetrical exploitation is complicated by shared tenderness and a genuine desire for a legitimate future in married domesticity. The Venus aborts two children to safeguard the Docteur's career, assured that "He will leave that wife for good and we'll get married/ (we better or I'll make a scene) oh, we'll get married."<sup>4</sup> For his part, the Docteur muses that "[s]he'd make

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<sup>2</sup> I use "she" and "her" rather than "it" and "its" to acknowledge the humanity of women buried beneath and between figurative Black Venuses.

<sup>3</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus: A Play* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 135.

<sup>4</sup> Parks, 125.



uh splendid wife.”<sup>5</sup> This future never comes to pass: the Docteur expedites the Venus’s death and dissects her after all. Parks’s Venus *is* a tragic victim, but she is never reducible to this or any one role. She is the savvy diva and the pitiful captive, the enthusiastic gold-digger and the earnest Bride-to-Be. She is both an insatiable consumer of mass-produced Valentine’s chocolates and the “Coco candy colored” object of colonial consumption.<sup>6</sup> She is a flesh and blood human being and a costume white women can put on, the sexually liberated Black goddess of love. Parks’s protean portrayal of Venus is undoubtedly radical, but it is not new: it simply seems so because more layered iterations of the Black Venus have been occluded by the dominant characterization of the figure as a flat and unchanging stereotype.<sup>7</sup>

*Retracing the Black Venus* contends that a widely circulating, broadly influential, and rhetorically complex Black Venus paradigm proliferated in English culture well before the London debut of the Hottentot Venus and persisted through Baartman’s lifetime. The Black Venus permeated nearly every popular genre of the eighteenth century, featuring in wildly successful staged dramas, authoritative ethnographies, popular periodicals, obscure epistolary poems, and accounts of parliamentary proceedings. In some cases, as with Aphra Behn’s *Imoinda* or Richard Steele’s *Yarico*, individual Black Venus narratives endure extensive adaptation across a range of genres. Through deep layers of reiteration, these narratives become so embedded in the culture of the period that references to them appear buried in town gossip, tucked into corners of satirical prints, and woven into ephemera like lottery tickets and decorative tiles. Their tenacity, I argue, is not a reflection of their simplicity. Like Parks’s

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<sup>5</sup> Parks, 140.

<sup>6</sup> Parks, 8.

<sup>7</sup> As I will explore most fully in Chapter Four, the Hottentot Venus is often marshalled to reflect on histories of race and slavery in places where Baartman never set foot, such as the U.S.

heroine, these Black Venuses are fraught with contradiction: they are deployed to both critique and excuse slavery, they simultaneously signify African atavism and European entrepreneurship, abject victimization and seductive power. Perhaps most surprisingly, these Black Venuses embody both Black and white women. Examining an extensive network of these figures between 1688 and 2017, *Retracing the Black Venus* reveals racialized categories of womanhood to be far less stable, and the forms of violent dispossession they license less straightforward, than most critical accounts have allowed.

### ***Black Venus Beyond the Binary***

To this end, I begin by revisiting the pervasive assumption that the Black Venus reinforces a stable binary opposition between white women as chaste, civilized, and maternal, and Black women as licentious, primitive, and careless of their children. This assumption is fundamental to the two most frequently cited studies of the Black Venus which share an almost exclusive focus on the Hottentot Venus as a sexualized body. Sander Gilman weaves together a discussion of nineteenth-century racial science and French painting of female nudes to argue that the Hottentot Venus, as an emblem of Black female sexual alterity writ large, was linked rhetorically with white prostitutes as threatening to the racial purity of the nineteenth-century French polity.<sup>8</sup> T. Deanean Sharpley-Whiting argues that the Hottentot Venus is emblematic of how primitive savagery was projected onto the bodies of Black women as simultaneous objects of white male desire and repulsion, fascination and fear.<sup>9</sup> Of concern here is the way these

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<sup>8</sup> Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 204–242.

<sup>9</sup> T. Deanean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

studies—and those that build upon them—apply Victorian-era notions of Black and white womanhood to figures circulating on either edge of the eighteenth century. In doing so, they impose undue stability upon racial categories that were still coming into being. As I will argue, although these characterizations of Black women as primitive, sexually voracious, and insensitive to the familial pull of maternity permeated a range of discourses throughout the early modern period, they were by no means total or uniform until at least the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Anachronistic interpretations of the Black Venus reflect a widespread tendency in postcolonial and race theory to focus disproportionately on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the exclusion of the eighteenth century, when racial categories were more fungible. In “Between ‘Oriental’ and ‘Blacks So Called,’” Felicity Nussbaum illuminates the porous boundaries between “Oriental” and “Black” as racial categories and invites us to “reread texts that have been located and interpreted principally within [discourses of either Orientalism or Black Atlantic slavery], and to think of them instead as occupying unarticulated and unabsorbed spaces that fall in between these partial histories and systems.”<sup>11</sup> Along similar lines, Roxann Wheeler’s foundational study, *Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, calls for greater attention to the eighteenth century as a site for critical inquiry into constructions of race. Wheeler laments that “the eighteenth century has been absent from the most influential theories of colonialism and race” and that, consequently, “[m]ost

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<sup>10</sup> In *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (London, 1657), the original source for Yarico’s narrative, Richard Ligon deems the enslaved Africans he encounters “Chaste...as any people under the sun” (qtd. in Felsenstein 64). As I will show in Chapter One, Behn’s Black African Imoinda is herself a vision of constancy and modesty, as are the Surinamese natives with whom the English colonists trade.

<sup>11</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, “Between ‘Oriental’ and ‘Blacks So Called,’” in *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (Oxford University Press, 2013), 142.

colonial and critical theorists silently base their assumptions about race on the mid-nineteenth-century heritage of biological racism” whose attendant anxieties about “cultural and racial purity” were “largely absent from the eighteenth century.”<sup>12</sup> The implications of Nussbaum and Wheeler’s critiques are far-ranging for studies of the Black Venus. They alert us to the dual risk of imposing later-nineteenth-century racial paradigms onto eighteenth-century materials and, consequently, overlooking eighteenth-century iterations of the figure which fail to conform with those rigid paradigms.

Such rigidity has severely delimited interpretations of the eighteenth-century Black Venuses who form the focus of this project, including Imoinda, Yarico, and the Sable Venus. Arguably the most iconic Black Venus after Baartman, the Sable Venus is a joint fictional creation of poet Isaac Teale and painter Thomas Stothard. Together, Teale’s *Sable Venus, An Ode* (1765) and Stothard’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (1793) depict an African woman in the style of Botticelli’s Venus as she majestically traverses the Atlantic on a clamshell rather than in the bowels of a slave ship, apparently seducing all who encounter her along the way.<sup>13</sup> Much like her nineteenth-century counterpart, the Sable Venus is often reduced to a singular signifying function as a stereotype of predatory sexuality designed to affirm the superior virtue of white women.<sup>14</sup> For example, Shirley Ann Tate argues compellingly that the Sable Venus renders the

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<sup>12</sup> Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 45.

<sup>13</sup> While less frequently studied than the Hottentot Venus, the Sable Venus circulated widely in Jamaican planter and parliamentarian Bryan Edwards’s popular *History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793), an authoritative text relied upon by both advocates and opponents of slavery.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Allen, “‘The Sable Venus’”; Barbara Bush, “‘Sable Venus,’ ‘She Devil,’ or ‘Drudge’? British Slavery and the ‘Fabulous Fiction’ of Black Women’s Identities c. 1650-1838,” *Women’s History Review* 9, (December 2000): 761-89; Rosalie Smith McCreia, “Dis-Ordering the World in the Eighteenth Century: *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*: Connoisseurship and the Trivialising of Slavery,” in *Beyond the Blood, the Beach and the Banana: New Perspectives in Caribbean Studies*, ed. Sandra Courtman, (Kingston: Randle, 2004), 275-97; and Tate, “Looking at the Sable-Saffron Venus.”

Black female body a “fetish object which provides an essential texture for the production of the white US American/European woman’s body.” However, when Tate casts the Black Venus in binary opposition to an iconic model of “frail, thin, asexual white femininity,” she invokes a Victorian model of white womanhood that postdates the Sable Venus by half a century.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while I concur with Tate’s assessment that “white America, the white Caribbean and its metropolises” projected what they most feared about themselves onto Black women’s bodies in order to rationalize and justify oppression, I reject the notion that we can reduce what the white Atlantic world “most feared about itself” to unrestrained sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Even those eighteenth-century studies of the Sable Venus which attend more fully to the figure’s inherent contradictions and to the historical context in which she emerges nonetheless reproduce a relatively narrow interpretation of what the Black Venus signifies.<sup>17</sup> They emphasize, above all, the discomfort provoked by white male desire for Black women, and the threats posed by such desire to the racial purity and supposedly superior virtue guarded by white women.<sup>18</sup> The narrow parameters circumscribing the Sable Venus not only flatten a complex figure but also exclude two of the most recognizable Black Venuses of the eighteenth century, Imoinda and Yarico, because they are—counter to the type—virtuous, self-sacrificing mothers.

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<sup>15</sup> Tate, *Black Women’s Bodies and the Nation*, 19, 3. Recalling Gilman, Tate argues that calling Black women Venus, the patron goddess of prostitutes, identifies Black women’s bodies as indistinguishable from “those of sex workers, as ‘loose’, which invokes white moral, sexual and racial superiority (Yancy, 2008: 95)” (19).

<sup>16</sup> Tate, *Black Women’s Bodies and the Nation*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Two exceptions, which I discuss more fully in Chapter Two, include Felicity A. Nussbaum’s brief account of the Sable Venus in “Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White,” and in *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151-188; and Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003), 48-81.

<sup>18</sup> While “‘The Sable Venus’ and Desire for the Undesirable” largely focuses on the Sable Venus as a sexual emblem, Regulus Allen is unmatched in her meticulous examination of the ode’s revisions over the latter half of the century.

In *Retracing the Black Venus*, I neither dismiss the sexual valences of this figure nor propose a codified alternative. Rather, I advocate for a more open-ended hermeneutic approach that can accommodate the broad range of meanings this figure was used to convey before, during, and after Baartman's influential exhibition in England and France as the Hottentot Venus.

Here I follow recent studies by postcolonial and Black feminist scholars like Zine Magubane and Robin Mitchell, which attend more closely to the historically specific social and economic concerns Baartman embodied in British colonial and post-Revolutionary French contexts respectively.<sup>19</sup> Mitchell's recent monograph *Venus Noire* reinterprets an erstwhile flat Black Venus as, instead, a "layering [of] many social and political tensions onto one body."<sup>20</sup> Specifically, she explores the roles Baartman and other nineteenth-century women construed as Black Venuses played in the reforging of France's national and imperial identity after its disastrous defeat in the Haitian Revolution.<sup>21</sup> Echoing Wheeler and Nussbaum's skepticism about the stability of race, gender, and sexuality in colonial discourse, Magubane cautions against homogeneous accounts of European responses to the exhibition of the Hottentot Venus:

Although her body represented sexual alterity, that was not all it represented. Some observers looked at her and her captivity and saw a particular system of productive relations they wanted to overthrow. Others saw a new area of the world ripe for exploitation and a new way to exploit it. And still others looked and saw the aesthetic antithesis of themselves. Most probably saw a combination of these and more...and it is a

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<sup>19</sup> See also Robin Mitchell, "Another Means of Understanding the Gaze: Sarah Bartmann in the Development of Nineteenth-Century French National Identity" in *Black Venus 2010: they called her "Hottentot"* ed. Deborah Willis (Temple University Press, 2010), 32-46.

<sup>20</sup> Robin Mitchell, *Venus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *Venus Noire*, 5-6.

mistake to take their actions as expressions of a single, trans-historical, and unidimensional ideology.<sup>22</sup>

Magubane's assessment of Baartman here is true of the Black Venus more broadly across and beyond the eighteenth century: while she sometimes symbolizes sexual excess, this was not the figure's only or even her most critical function in the period. Restricting our analyses of the figure to ethnographic accounts of racial difference overwrites the figurative instability of the Black Venus and the signifying registers of her Blackness.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Intimate Commerce, Race, & Political Economies of Sensibility***

To state briefly what I will unfold in the following pages, the Black Venus indexes the instability of Black and white womanhood during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, locating the emergence of these categories at the intersection of domestic intimacy and imperial commerce. Before the Black Venus helped France navigate the collective handwringing provoked by the loss of Haiti, the figure mediated growing anxiety in England about the extent to which its circuits of imperial commerce—with Atlantic slavery at their center—were radically transforming domestic life at the level of the family and the nation. By uncovering the Black Venus's symbolic interchangeability with English actresses, prostitutes, and middling women seeking advantageous marriages—women whom today we would identify as white—I redefine the figure as an index of concern about the threats posed by female sexuality's domestic

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<sup>22</sup> Zine Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus,'" in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>23</sup> Magubane raises similar concerns in challenging Gilman's core assertion that "by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the Black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general (Gilman 1985, 228)" by asking "what social relations determined which people counted as Black, and for which people did Blacks become icons of sexual difference and why?" (48).

commercialization, rather than simply those posed by its colonial excess. By extension, I contend that the *Black Venus* betrays the instability of racialized categories of womanhood instead of reinforcing ones already in place.

For example, the *Black Venus*'s application to so-called white women prompts more expansive readings of Blackness in the period, particularly its imbrication with class. Blackness was ascribed not only to Africans but to a wide array of colonial others, such as South Asians and Native Americans. Blackness was also applied to domestic others, like Jewish, Scottish, and Irish inhabitants of England, and even to native English men and women of the lower orders.<sup>24</sup> According to Ann Stoler and Ann McClintock, the porousness between race and class persists well into the nineteenth century. Stoler alerts us to the ways in which “the language of class [was] itself racialized in such a way that to subscribe to bourgeois respectability entailed dispositions and sentiments coded by race.”<sup>25</sup> McClintock complicates apparently rigid racial binaries of the Victorian period arguing that Black womanhood symbolizes not strictly a breach of chastity but also a trespass into the market. She explains that women who “transgressed the Victorian boundary between private and public, labor and leisure, paid work and unpaid work became increasingly stigmatized as specimens of racial regression.”<sup>26</sup> These more nuanced accounts of Blackness notwithstanding, studies of eighteenth-century slavery and empire continue to take whiteness—and white femininity in particular—for granted as a stable category

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<sup>24</sup> See Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race* and Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and Education of Desire: A Colonial Reading of Foucault's History of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 100.

<sup>26</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 42.



when, in reality, it is a similarly contingent mode of racialization.<sup>27</sup> Building upon these studies, I expand the signifying registers of the Black Venus to argue that this figure emblemizes intimate commerce as a racialized phenomenon through which *both* Black and white womanhood were forged over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Attending to the racial instability of the Black Venus figure, I dedicate considerable attention to illuminating how profoundly white womanhood, as a domestic ideal of private intimacy, was being materially and symbolically constructed through the transformation of Black womanhood into its opposite—not primitive licentiousness per se, but commodified maternity. Specifically, I argue that representations of Imoinda, Yarico, and (later) the Sable and Hottentot Venuses repeatedly express the relationship between white and Black womanhood not as one of inherent difference but as one of troubling economic dependence. Here I draw upon the work of Lisa Lowe, Jennifer Morgan, Chi-ming Yang, and Lynn Festa who have productively theorized the ways in which intersecting forms of colonized and enslaved labor produced the conditions necessary for the creation of a bourgeois private sphere, an ideal of female domestic intimacy, and what I will call a political economy of sensibility.<sup>28</sup> Lowe and Morgan demonstrate how the

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<sup>27</sup> RaceB4Race scholars have given sustained attention to the construction of whiteness in the early modern period, particularly in Shakespeare's poems and plays. See, for example, Kim F. Hall, "'These Bastard Signs of Fair': Literary Whiteness in Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, eds. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (London: Routledge, 2010), 64-83; and Francesca Royster, "White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Early Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2000): 432-55. For an overview of Critical Whiteness Studies, see Barbara Applebaum, *Critical Whiteness Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 2017). See also Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory*, 8.2 (2007): 149-168.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Jennifer L. Morgan, "partus sequitur ventrem," *Small Axe: a Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 22.1 (2018): 1-17 and *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Chi-ming Yang, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

reproductive exploitation of enslaved women and colonial labor more broadly materially sustained the expansion of the British Empire and its exploding consumer culture, funding the formation of the very same domestic spaces ostensibly isolated from the corruptive intrusions of global commerce and its violent forms of dispossession. Yang and Festa help us understand how sensibility—public performances of virtuous sympathy—worked to disavow English complicity in the violent exploitation of enslaved and colonized laborers.

In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lowe highlights the dual logic by which the “ideal of bourgeois intimacy” is constructed as distinct from the public realm of the market even as enslaved and colonized labor “founded the formative wealth of the European bourgeoisie” and “colonized workers produced the material comforts and commodities that furnished the bourgeois home.”<sup>29</sup> Morgan unveils an even tighter bind between colonial commerce and metropolitan intimacy. Her study of the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which dictates that a mother’s enslaved status is conferred hereditarily upon her child, reveals how thoroughly this “transformation of kin into commodity” and the “routinized alienation of black life to the marketplace” were “constitutive of the European, and subsequently Euro-American, private sphere.”<sup>30</sup> Morgan’s account of the doctrine’s provenance reveals both its embeddedness within English culture and the profound discomfort that such embeddedness provoked. She demonstrates how its retroactive ascription to Roman law turned the Latin phrase into a “disavowal for English theorists intent on distancing the nation from the precedent of

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<sup>29</sup> Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 29. Lowe does point out that “despite this regulative ideal, the separation of the feminine private sphere and the masculine public sphere has been criticized at length by feminist scholars as various as Nancy Fraser, Patricia Hill Collins, and Evelyn Nakano Glenn as an abstraction for ordering relations in civil society that is contradicted by the social realities of women’s lives” (29).

<sup>30</sup> Morgan, *partus sequitur ventrem*, 13.

slaveownership.”<sup>31</sup> However, as Morgan clarifies, there were no explicit slave laws governing heritable slavery in England or its West Indian colonies.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the custom was upheld as an extension of *English* law, particularly the “fundamental notion of ‘absolute property.’”<sup>33</sup>

Although English laws governing property and specifically moveable chattel were thought to exclude human beings, the application of these laws in custom to enslaved Africans shrinks the distance between the English metropole and its colonies. In other words, hereditary slavery exposes something fundamentally corrosive about English laws governing property and inheritance if they can be used to justify severing the most treasured bonds of human kinship.<sup>34</sup>

Part of my contention here is that, as a figure of intertwined Black and white, colonial and metropolitan intimate commerce, the Black Venus unsettles the apparent opposition of these categories to reframe West Indian slavery as a persistent subtext for what have seemed to be more squarely domestic preoccupations.<sup>35</sup> For example, the attribution of *partus sequitur ventrem* to the Roman laws of a distant past signals a broad disavowal of England’s domestic complicity in the violent intimate commerce of slavery and empire. The separation of the

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<sup>31</sup> Morgan, 5.

<sup>32</sup> See Jerome Handler, “Custom and Law: the Status of Enslaved Africans in Seventeenth-Century Barbados,” *Slavery & Abolition* 37.2 (2016): 233-55. According to Handler the codification into law of *partus sequitur ventrem* regarding enslaved people happened in North America (Virginia) in 1662, in France’s West Indian colonies through the Code Noir in 1685, and in Spain’s *Siete Partidas*, but never in Barbados.

<sup>33</sup> Handler, “Custom and Law,” 239.

<sup>34</sup> Recognition of this practice as an emblem of imperial savagery is evident in early travel writing which deploys it in efforts to target the incivility of imperial rivals. Jennifer Morgan notes a pointed critique of Spaniards who would catch slaves and, “*even when some of the Indian women are pregnant by these same Spaniards*, they sell them without any consciences.” Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54.1 (1997): 175.

<sup>35</sup> Here I invoke the “semantic slippage” between the domestic as British national territory (distinct from the colonies) and “interior of the family,” because “[d]efining these two domestic sites in terms of one another helps to reveal the crucial role played by constructions of female virtue in articulating the relationship between Britain and its colonies.” Charlotte Sussman, “Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792,” *Representations* 48 (1994): 48.

bourgeois private sphere from an Atlantic market tainted by slavery functions too as a form of disavowal. However, its mechanisms of exculpation are more seamlessly woven into the period's economic revolution and domestic social transformation than we often recognize. As I argue in my first three chapters, the protean Black Venus of the eighteenth century facilitates the consolidation of the middle class and its ideals of self-regulating white womanhood, not as a foil per se, but as a vehicle for reconciling the violent formation of the domestic sphere through a political economy of sensibility. Here I am adapting Lowe's term, "'political economy' of intimacies," which she defines as "a calculus governing the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy." Demystifying this calculus, Lowe argues, "unsettles the meaning of intimacy as the privileged sign of liberal interiority or domesticity, by situating this more familiar meaning in relation to the global processes and colonial connections that are the conditions of its production."<sup>36</sup> As I will go on to discuss, sensibility becomes both a quality and a mechanism for actualizing the formation of domestic intimacies.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars of eighteenth-century consumer society have long observed that the mounting influence of the commercial classes precipitated by England's rapidly expanding trade necessitated new modes of legitimizing class power independent of "historically contingent factors like birth." To some extent, the "supple codes of sensibility" and its readily legible

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<sup>36</sup> Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> While I am focusing here primarily on representations of the Black Venus in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England, my assessments are deeply informed by studies on the domesticity of slavery in the U.S. See, for example, Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) and *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.) Spillers poignantly argues that the "horror of slavery was its absolute domesticity that configured the 'peculiar institution' into the architectonics of the southern household...slavery was, at once, the most public private institution and the ground of the institution's most terrifying intimacies, because fathers could and did sell their sons and daughters, under the allowance of law and the flag of a new nation, 'conceived in liberty,' and all the rest of it" (179).

demonstrations accommodated this need by “allow[ing] socially aspiring members of the middle ranks to...claim authority based instead on virtue or merit.”<sup>38</sup> However, sensibility bore the additional burden of reconciling that virtue with the widely acknowledged reality that “a significant section of the ‘middling rank of men’, who now aspired to the gentlemanly ideal and whom Hume hailed as the ‘best and firmest basis of public liberty’, made their fortunes directly or indirectly by colonial trade in the West as well as in the East.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, while we often position sensibility alongside the rise of the bourgeois novel as a domestic phenomenon, we should not overlook how it enabled an emerging middle class to publicly perform virtuous sympathy in direct response to the corrupting effects of imperial exploitation responsible for their rising influence. The *Black Venus*’s position within this political economy of sensibility betrays the separation of home and an Atlantic market in human captives. Whether through *The Spectator*’s account of Yarico’s betrayal into slavery, Drury Lane’s staging of Imoinda’s similarly tragic fate, or the abolitionist ceramicware adorning tea tables of upwardly mobile women of the town, the *Black Venus*’s provocation of public sensibility in eighteenth-century print, theater, and consumer markets effectively domesticates corrupting forms of imperial commerce into moralizing forms of domestic consumption.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire*, 16. See also *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013); G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Chi-ming Yang, *Performing China*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> O.U. Ince, “Between Commerce and Empire: David Hume, Colonial Slavery, and Commercial Incivility,” *History of Political Thought*, 39.1 (2018): 128. In historical terms, I am contesting assumptions that widespread concerns over slavery began only in the 1780s after the Mansfield decision (1772), arguing instead that anxieties about English complicity in the violence of the institution suffused the eighteenth century as constitutive of an emerging middle class dependent on Atlantic commerce for both its wealth and influence.

<sup>40</sup> The layered circulation of actual and symbolic Black women across and between these markets, which I will discuss more fully later, evokes Hortense Spillers’s observation about the long durée of Black women’s exploitation: “The captive body,” she argues, “brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for *value* so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless.” See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* vol. 17, no. 2,

The more dynamic and layered Black Venus that I trace here and throughout this project critically reframes the culture of sensibility in Atlantic, rather than strictly English, terms. According to Barker-Benfield, the “culture of sensibility” is a “culture of reform, aiming to discipline women’s consumer appetites in tasteful domesticity, but thence reforming male behavior.”<sup>41</sup> Within these operations of sensibility, the “home became the primary site for consumption on a broad social scale” affording women “significant authority over the relations of new objects to human activities therein, [and] creating what we think of as domesticity.”<sup>42</sup> I argue that we can no longer separate that domesticity or the place of white women within it from West Indian slavery and its designation of Black women as objects for consumption.

To this end, I use the term “so-called white” in describing a range of women—actresses, newly monied women of the town, and prostitutes—who we would understand today as white and English, but whose implication in various forms of intimate commerce excluded them from ideals of white womanhood regardless of the color of their skin.<sup>43</sup> While entrenched assumptions

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Culture and Counteremory: The “American” Connection (Summer, 1987), 68. Here I draw upon Chi-ming Yang’s important claim that “the ‘commercialization of virtue’ rendered sympathy the ‘ultimate commodity; a universal equivalent into which all other goods could be converted’” (14-15). Correspondingly, “[p]ractices of sentimentality signaled the exigencies of demonstrating an inner realm of virtue uncorrupted by commerce” (150). I also draw from Lynn Festa’s *Sentimental Figures of Empire* (2006), which productively theorizes eighteenth-century commerce and sentimentality as linked systems that policed the exchange of emotion as well as material goods and cultures, specifically between the British Empire and its colonies.

<sup>41</sup> Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, xxvi.

<sup>42</sup> Barker-Benfield, xxv.

<sup>43</sup> My use of the term “so-called white” follows Nussbaum’s parallel term “blacks so called,” and my readings of Imoinda and Yarico are indebted to her characterizations of them as “pliable heroines.” See Felicity A. Nussbaum, “Black Women,” 152. Saree Makdisi prompts us to reconsider similarly stable—or so we thought—categories of Occident and Orient. His accounting of how colonial methods of control and representation were deployed domestically sheds light on the ubiquitous ways in which the operations and logics of empire were shaping domestic private life; see Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western*. Suvir Kaul similarly argues that “the historical force of colonialist practices is also at work in the domestic political and economic consolidation of the nation.” See Suvir Kaul, *Eighteenth Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 3.

about racial binaries have prevented us from seeing them as such, my first two chapters demonstrate that these so-called white women were frequently represented as Black Venuses. Rather than discounting the influence of ethnographic and pseudoscientific characterizations of Black women, or the material differences in their lived experiences, I show how pervasively these stereotypical portrayals were layered over and under more fluid and capacious *figurative* renderings of them.

### ***Reading the Black Venus as a Palimpsestic Figure***

Herein lies the central methodological commitment guiding this project: *Retracing the Black Venus* proceeds from the premise that interpreting Imoinda, Yarico, the Sable Venus, and the Hottentot Venus as a palimpsestic figure best enables us to understand her tenacious presence in Atlantic culture of the last three centuries without dismissing its ruptures and recursions across distinct geographical and historical contexts. To ground this method in a broader theoretical foundation, I must first define its component terms. The word “figure” can mean “an embodied (human) form,” “a person playing a part,” the form of something “as determined by the outline,” “an important or distinctive person,” and “an emblematic representation.”<sup>44</sup> As I show in my first chapter, we first encounter Yarico as a real, embodied Native American woman living in Barbados. Over the course of the eighteenth century, various English actresses play the “role” of Yarico in George Colman Jr.’s comic opera, *Inkle and Yarico*. My second and fourth chapters examine how Sarah Baartman, a distinctive person, is also a woman instantly recognizable by her “outline,” and an “emblematic representation” of curvy Black women across the Atlantic

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<sup>44</sup> “figure, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2021, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/70079](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70079) Accessed 16 February 2022.

world. By identifying the Black Venus figure as palimpsestic, I insist that these various meanings of figure are, in her case, inseparable and densely layered.

Literally speaking, a palimpsest refers to a paleographic object in which a writing surface has been recycled by erasing and overwriting an original text with a new, unrelated one. The process of overwriting is imperfect however, leaving the original text visible (if not always legible) beneath the newly inscribed one. Beyond its material definition, a palimpsest also serves as a figure for a certain form of intertextuality where the layering of divergent, sometimes antithetical, texts reveals their shared contours.<sup>45</sup> By identifying Black Venuses from Aphra Behn's 1688 *Imoinda* to Parks's 1997 *Venus and beyond* as one palimpsestic figure, I demonstrate how their layering renders some of the figure's oft-repeated contours highly visible—such as those of the Hottentot Venus as sexual stereotype—while leaving others only vaguely legible. Diverging, then, from scholars who interpret the Black Venus as either a metaphor for slavery, a fixed symbol of Black female sexuality, or a living and breathing woman, I identify the Black Venus as performing all these functions simultaneously.

In theorizing the Black Venus as a palimpsestic figure, I build upon the work of Jenny Sharpe and Srinivas Aravamudan, whose important studies have outlined new ways to read seemingly rigid and flat colonial tropes. In *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*, Sharpe argues that as a term belonging to allegory, a figure “[relies] on a complex of signs for its meaning. As such, it draws attention to the codified interpretative systems on which our readings depend. This complicity in narration points to the need for defining our

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<sup>45</sup> I explore the material dimensions of the palimpsest most fully in Chapter Three. For in-depth theorization of these dual notions of the palimpsest, see Sarah Dillon, *Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Dillon is primarily interested in literary texts that explicitly identify themselves as palimpsests, which is not the case with the texts in my study.



project as something other than the recuperation of lost testimonies.”<sup>46</sup> Central to Sharpe’s intervention here is her insistence that “the [colonial] past is contingent upon a present that transforms it into an image we can recognize” rather than a discrete series of events unfolding across homogenous empty time.<sup>47</sup> Following Sharpe, I identify the Black Venus paradigm as an interpretive framework bearing ethical implications for the ways we narrate and read histories of colonialism. Most critically, *Retracing the Black Venus* illuminates how these interpretive frameworks—such as strictly metaphorical or allegorical readings of the Black Venus—layer the past we study onto the present in which we study it. For example, we see chattel slavery deployed everywhere as a metaphor for domestic forms of oppression across the eighteenth century and early Romantic period, whether the Crown’s enslavement of the common man through unfair taxation, or husbands’ enslavement of their wives through laws of coverture.<sup>48</sup> As I discuss in my second and third chapters, this persistent retreading of the *figurative* link between colonial slavery and metropolitan domesticity historically erased (and continues to erase) the *material* link between them.

Like Sharpe’s figure, Srinivas Aravamudan’s joined terms *tropicopolitan* and *virtualization* productively situate colonial tropes within broader systems of imperial signification and identity, both in the past and in the present. Aravamudan coins *tropicopolitan* as “a name for the colonized subject who exists both as fictive construct of colonial tropology

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<sup>46</sup> Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Sharpe, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft makes ample use of such a metaphor in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). For a detailed reading of chattel slavery’s use as a metaphor for political slavery and its connections to Orientalism, see Ashley L. Cohen, *The Global Indies: British Imperial Culture and the Reshaping of the World, 1756-1815*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 119-143.

and actual resident of tropical space, object of representation and agent of resistance.”<sup>49</sup> Here we see two definitions of “figure”—as emblematic representation and as embodied human form—come together. Aravamudan’s other term, *virtualization*, captures a third—the form of something “as determined by the outline”—which he deems critical to the ways in which colonial tropes are deployed. Virtualization “describes colonialist representations that acquire malleability because of a certain loss of detail, a process that enables reader identification and manipulation by readers, thus putting the trope of the tropicopolitan into motion toward an open-ended future.”<sup>50</sup> Together, Aravamudan’s terms unbind colonial tropes from the racist periods in which they were forged to consider their afterlives in critical discourse on figures ranging from Oroonoko to Toussaint Louverture. If Aravamudan’s rendering of the *tropicopolitan* and *virtualization* highlight “the intersection of the material and the representational,” my theorization of the Black Venus as a palimpsestic figure attends also to the materiality and embodiment of representation, the ways circulating print renditions of the figure layer onto the circulating Black women they often overwrite, or the way so-called white women physically inhabit the outlines of the Black Venus figure.

My understanding of the Black Venus as a palimpsest is not strictly ontological; it is also geographic and temporal. Analyzing the Black Venus as an *Atlantic* figure, rather than an African, British, French, or Caribbean figure alone, brings into focus the histories of global contact and violence she has persistently been deployed to express or rigorously deny.<sup>51</sup> As I

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<sup>49</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 4. Aravamudan elaborates on the term suggesting that *tropicopolitans* are also “the shadow images of more visible metropolitans,” in which form they “challenge the developing privilege of Enlightenment cosmopolitans” (4).

<sup>50</sup> Aravamudan, 17.

<sup>51</sup> I join eighteenth-century scholar Regulus Allen in arguing that the Black Venus is an ideal figure for an Atlantic Studies model of inquiry, “not only in her status as an African being transported to a different continent, but also in

have already suggested, most analyses of the Black Venus in the nineteenth century focus exclusively on the Hottentot Venus in England and France, but her antecedent, the Sable Venus, persisted in the Caribbean well into the nineteenth century. For example, Patricia Mohammed identifies Teale and Stothard's Sable Venus as one point along a continuum of Caribbean Venuses of color depicted until nearly the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> Analyzing paintings by Augusto Brunias among other visual artifacts, Mohammed effectively illustrates the strategic transportability of the Sable Venus trope from one group of marginalized women (enslaved Africans) to another (indentured "coolie" women) and its central role in imagining the relationship between desire and coerced labor in the linked British imperial legacies of African slavery and Orientalism in the region.

The geographical and historical commitments informing our study of the Black Venus also come into play. Many analyses of the Black Venus emphasize U.S. histories of race and slavery rather than British colonial ones. Given American legal interdictions against interracial marriage going back to the seventeenth century, and subsequent policies of the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras such as the "one drop rule," it is not surprising that the Black Venus has been marshalled as an emblem of more rigid racial binaries.<sup>53</sup> Baartman's significance for post-apartheid South Africa—which I explore most fully in my final chapter—offers another

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her role as a Venus, a deity whose origins and mythology are inextricably tied to ocean travel and the cultural exchanges that it fosters" (670). Indeed, geographical range is a defining characteristic of the figure's contemporary afterlife. Throughout this project, I explore how layered versions of the Black Venus across the eighteenth century collapsed the distance between England and its West Indian colonies. I also explore how Baartman, a South African figure traveling in England and France, becomes a prominent symbol for late-twentieth-century Black feminists in the U.S.

<sup>52</sup> Patricia Mohammed, "Gendering the Caribbean Picturesque," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2007), 1-27.

<sup>53</sup> This is not to suggest that race is, by any means, a stable or static concept in the U.S. See, for example, Michael A. Omi, "The Changing Meaning of Race," in *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, eds. Faith Mitchell, Neil J. Smelser, and William J. Wilson (Washington, D.C: National Academy Press, 2001), 243-63.

explanation for such sustained links between the Black Venus and pseudoscientific categories of racial difference. A palimpsestic model acknowledges these contexts while also attending to those—both geographic and historical—which operate according to different racial logics. Likewise, interpreting the Black Venus as porous and flexible exposes the limitations of studies that read her as an emblem of temporal stasis, of circular reiteration, or even linear progress—from colonial oppression to postcolonial resistance. Studies like Mohammed’s invite us to attend to the overlapping of these narratives across geographical and temporal sites, complete with their ruptures and recursions.

### ***The Black Venus and/in Palimpsestic Time***

In place of a linear model of the figure’s transformation from one period to another, I interpret the Black Venus as a densely layered palimpsest of uses where past and present sometimes align without ever being reducible to one or the other. More precisely, I read the Black Venus in “palimpsestic time,” an interpretive mode capable of reframing teleological histories of colonial modernity in ways that attend more fully to the “here *and* there,” the “then *and* now.”<sup>54</sup> Kianga Ford applies such a palimpsestic model in “Playing with Venus: Black Women Artists and the Venus Trope in Contemporary Visual Art.”<sup>55</sup> “By exploding an inapplicable diachronic model of progress in race relations,” Ford argues, figural tropes like that

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<sup>54</sup> M. Jacquie Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 190. I borrow the term “palimpsestic time” from Alexander, who builds, in part, upon Johannes Fabian’s theory of coevalness. Specifically, Fabian challenges the way traditional ethnographic writing positions the ethnographer in a dynamic future distant from the frozen past of their ostensibly less modern objects of study; see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 30.

<sup>55</sup> Kianga K. Ford, “Playing with Venus: Black Women Artists and the Venus Trope in Contemporary Visual Art,” in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her ‘Hottentot’*, ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 96-106.

of the Hottentot Venus “are fundamentally premised on an *accretive* rather than an evolutionary model. They reveal the possibilities of simultaneity between the abject slave and the well-liked co-worker.” Historical figures like the Hottentot Venus and the “heroines of the historical romance” featured in the work of African American artist Kara Walker “are not resurrected from the dead,” Ford explains, “but continue to play behind the scenes” of our mundane intimacies. Here Ford applies a similar analytic approach to my own in emphasizing the tropological usefulness of the Hottentot Venus as a vehicle to engage dominant notions of race “in a liberal climate that does not, for the most part, acknowledge the persistence of racist entrenchments.”<sup>56</sup> However, *Retracing the Black Venus* puts an expanded version of this theory into practice by asking what shared contours emerge in the layering of contemporary and eighteenth- or nineteenth-century uses of the Black Venus for ostensibly progressive social ends.

Broadly speaking, I eschew tracing a chronological narrative of progress from the Black Venus’s demeaning exploitation to her liberationist recuperation, choosing instead to read the distant eighteenth century layered visibly (if not always legibly) beneath our own moment.<sup>57</sup> On the one hand, I trace the uncertain and often recursive path along which eighteenth-century and Romantic British culture negotiated the profoundly unsettling forms of contact and exchange precipitated by British slavery and imperial enterprise. On the other hand, I ask how a palimpsestic model complicates the dynamics of contemporary archival recovery which have formed such an important locus of studies on Baartman, and which rendered Parks’s *Venus* so troubling to critics and audiences alike. Consequently, while this project follows a roughly

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<sup>56</sup> Ford, “Playing with Venus,” 98.

<sup>57</sup> Ania Loomba cautions against this Manichean dichotomy. See Ania Loomba, “Overworlding the ‘Third World,’” *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1991): 172.

chronological structure, beginning in the early eighteenth century and ending in the twenty-first, its account of the Black Venus is recursive, broken, and imbricated: Chapter One ranges in its textual objects from 1688-1800, Chapter Two from 1792-1811, Chapter Three from 1792-2015, and Chapter Four from 1996-2017. The historical span of my project notwithstanding, I do not propose to construct a comprehensive genealogy of the figure. Rather, I explore a network of Black Venus narratives in the eighteenth, early nineteenth, and twenty-first centuries to examine both how histories of race, gender, commerce, and intimacy accumulate, and also how the contemporary legacies of slavery and empire shape our engagements with the past.

We might understand this cumulative model along the lines of what Performance Studies scholar Joseph Roach calls “the deep eighteenth century,” or “the one that isn’t over yet.”<sup>58</sup> Distinct from the more common—and, to many, overly reductive—“*long* eighteenth-century,” the deep one allows for the recursions, ruptures, and continuities implicit in the logic of the palimpsest.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the model of the deep eighteenth century comprehends the connections between past and present as material and embodied rather than as abstract. According to Roach, the deep eighteenth century “stays alive among us as a repertoire of long-running performances. In fact, some of them we can't get rid of, hard as we might try: chattel slavery and colonialism for example, still exist as themselves here and there and as their consequences everywhere.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than collapse the physical and psychological violence of chattel slavery with the

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<sup>58</sup> Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>59</sup> I understand the term “deep eighteenth century” in tandem with Alexander’s term “palimpsestic time,” as well as with Ian Baucom’s notion of time as accumulation. Rather than “just an abstract measure of time endlessly and indifferently adding up,” the accumulating time Baucom theorizes—drawing heavily from Glissant and Benjamin—is specifically “a modern order of time, the time of modernity: which piles up from [the] exceptional historical catastrophe” of the Middle Passage; see Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 320.

<sup>60</sup> Roach, *It*, 3.

representational violence that so frequently marks its afterlives, a palimpsestic model allows us to discern their shared contours without occluding their differences.

I thus interpret the Black Venus's reemergence over the last thirty years as a potent example of the deep eighteenth century's ongoing repertoire of performances, wherein she survives as a living emblem of "chattel slavery and colonialism," of institutions and structures of power that "exist as themselves here and there and as their consequences everywhere." Renewed interest in histories of slavery and the neo-slave narrative as a literary form, controversy in the 1990s over the repatriation of Sarah Baartman's remains, and critical debates about archival recovery offer some explanations for the impressive output of Venus works and studies in the last thirty years, particularly at the intersection of African American and postcolonial feminist culture.<sup>61</sup> While we have not always seen it, the mutability so characteristic of the Black Venus in the eighteenth century persists in her contemporary afterlives. Many Black feminist artists and scholars use her to amplify their critiques of Black women's continued sexual objectification. Others grant her an inner life to recover the voices and humanity of women reduced to types in colonial archives. Some, like literary-historical scholar Saidiya Hartman, dramatist Suzan-Lori

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<sup>61</sup> Ana Bringas highlights the absence of slavery as a subject of focus in the writing of the Windrush generation of Caribbean authors like Selvon, Lamming, and Naipaul, who tended instead to emphasize the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Bringas also suggests that second-generation Caribbean writers were likely influenced by African American women writers in the 1980s (Toni Morrison and Alice Walker) whose fiction responded to America's culture of forgetting with explicit returns to slavery. See Ana Bringas, "A Backward Glance at the History of Slavery: Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory*," in *Commonwealth Fiction: Twenty-First Century Readings*, eds. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Alessandro Monti (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002), 135-37. See also Carla Plasa and Betty J. Ring's introduction to *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison* (London: Routledge, 1994), xiv-xv.

Parks, and poet Robin Coste Lewis, caution that these ethical efforts risk reproducing earlier forms of erasure and appropriation.

For example, when scholars and artists identify “with Baartman as an ancestral self and her treatment as representative of the negativity of modern depictions of black sexuality,” they capture a deep eighteenth century model of history in which the present piles onto the past. As Sadiya Qureshi warns, however, such well-intentioned efforts unwittingly reify Baartman’s objecthood—once curiosity, now cultural icon.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Qureshi alerts us to the fact that it is “precisely the difficulty in recovering [Baartman’s] agency that makes her amenable to employment as a cipher.”<sup>63</sup> As *Retracing the Black Venus* demonstrates, this is as true of Baartman’s instrumental politicization by abolitionists in the early nineteenth century as it is of her potent symbolism for antiracist scholars and artists today. Put differently, a deep eighteenth century approach to recovery works bidirectionally: our present bears traces of the past, true enough, but our “ability to read the past is contingent upon a present that transforms it into an image we can recognize,” or, perhaps more pointedly, an image we can *use*.<sup>64</sup> It bears noting, as I try to do throughout this project, that the kinds of complicity Qureshi raises here do not operate uniformly. As Kim Hall reminds us in *Things of Darkness*, we should confront rather than scour away the ways in which contemporary manifestations of race (and racial violence), as well as the

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<sup>62</sup> Sadiya Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus,’” *History of Science* 42.2 (2004): 250.

<sup>63</sup> Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman,” 249.

<sup>64</sup> Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, 14.



positionality of scholars within those discursive systems, shape the questions and language through which we explore their historical dimensions.<sup>65</sup>

My intention here, and in this project more broadly, is not to generalize about archival recovery or to minimize in any way the value of its methods and findings. Rather, I seek to trouble the notion that recovering women rendered in colonial archives as Black Venuses can bring closure to the gendered and racialized violence the figure has come to exemplify. Taking my cue from radical formulations of recovery by Parks, Hartman, and Lewis, I contend that recovery understood through the palimpsestic logic of the deep eighteenth century is always an opening. More precisely, it is an illumination of the tether between the past and the present, not as a teleological narrative of progress from a dark before to an enlightened now, but of an uncertain future that continuously reimagines the past to its own ends, what Felicity Nussbaum describes as “the ghostly afterimages that persist as the Enlightenment's unfinished project,” but what could be so much more.<sup>66</sup>

The scope of my project limits me to the circulation of distinct Black Venus narratives as they emerge and transform in two historical moments to the exclusion of others. It behooves me to reflect, briefly, on what happens to the Black Venus before and between the periods I trace. While beyond the purview of my study, excellent work by RaceB4Race scholars—including Kim Hall, Jennifer Morgan, Brandi K. Adams, and Ayanna Thompson, among others—demonstrates that the Medieval and Early Modern periods form the alluvial grounds from which

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<sup>65</sup> Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 260.

<sup>66</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 288, n.33.

the phenomena I trace emerge.<sup>67</sup> For example, in her chapter on staging race, Hall attends to the ways in which “blackness in the Jacobean period mediated cultural anxieties over England’s imperial expansion, particularly the creation of *Great Britain*.”<sup>68</sup> Hall’s analysis of the ways “commerce and intercourse” shape “representations of interracial desire in the early modern period” poignantly anticipates the kinds of racialized intimate commerce I examine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, while I do not examine sixteenth- and seventeenth-century materials, Jennifer Morgan’s work on the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* is central to my analysis of the intersections between intimacy, commerce, race, and gender in subsequent periods.

Given my insistence on accumulation between the past and present, it bears asking, what happens to the Black Venus in the intervening period between the early-nineteenth and the late twentieth century? As Robin Mitchell and Janel Hobson demonstrate, explicit appearances of Black and Hottentot Venuses emerge intermittently throughout nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe.<sup>70</sup> In other cases, certain characteristics of the Black Venus—threatening

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<sup>67</sup> See William Shakespeare and Kim F. Hall, *Othello, the Moor of Venice: Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Brandi K. Adams, “‘Inlaid with inkie spots of jet’: Early Modern Book History and Premodern Critical Race Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook to the History of the Book in Early Modern England*, ed. Adam Smyth, forthcoming; and Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Hall, 124.

<sup>70</sup> In addition to Baartman, Mitchell examines a young Senegalese girl named Ourika, and Jeanne Duval, as Venus Noirs. Janel Hobson references several other Venuses in the nineteenth century, including Tono Maria, a “Venus from South America,” (1822), another so-called Hottentot Venus who served as the entertainment at Parisian ball of Duchess du Barry (1829), and another reported to have performed as a “steed” on the coronation day of Queen Victoria at a fair in Hyde Park (1838). She also includes as an example Jeanne Duval as *Venus Noire* in Charles Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* (1857); see Janel Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 46-49.

sexuality and the selfish pursuit of wealth among them—emerge in other Black or so-called white female figures like that of the Jezebel and the femme fatale.<sup>71</sup> The Black Venus figure is largely overshadowed in later nineteenth-century American texts, especially sentimental romances, by the stock figure of the mulatta, who “sprung out of that century’s confluence of abolitionist efforts and gender ideologies, emerging alongside and structured by notions of ‘true womanhood’ in antebellum America.”<sup>72</sup> Dangerously seductive and tragically ill-fated by turns, the mulatta figure most tangibly embodied pressing concerns about miscegenation and racial passing in the ways that many ascribe (perhaps too forcefully) to her forerunner, the Black Venus.<sup>73</sup> If, as I argue, the Black Venus’s racial ambiguity and attendant rhetorical flexibility in British culture offer one explanation for her prevalence at the end of the eighteenth century, the less fluid models of racial difference characteristic of the late-nineteenth century may explain

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<sup>71</sup> For an American context, see Deborah White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999). White explains that “[o]ne of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was of a person governed almost entirely by libido, a Jezebel character. In every way, Jezebel was the counter-image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her. She saw no advantage in prudery, indeed domesticity paled in importance before matters of the flesh” (28-29). For a Caribbean context, see Mohammed, “Gendering a Caribbean Picturesque.” When de-coupled from visual manifestations of Blackness (most notably dark complexion), cliché literary figures like the mysterious and irresistible femme fatale become a literary shorthand for morally corrupt white womanhood in ways that sublimate its links with Black female stereotypes and thus allows them to persist unchallenged.

<sup>72</sup> JoAnn Pavletich, “Pauline Hopkins and the Death of the Tragic Mulatta,” *Callaloo* 38.3 (2015): 647.

<sup>73</sup> See Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Eve Allegra Raimon, *The Tragic Mulatta Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Shirley Samuels, ed, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

why the Black Venus figure tends to fall away in British culture during this period and to be replaced by other, more malleable, figures.

For example, post-abolition English novels charged with consolidating (especially feminine) bourgeois identity and interiority often replace the Black Venus with Orientalized English women as foils for properly self-regulating models of white womanhood. The romantic contest between Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Blanche Ingram (1847) or even between Jane Austen's Fanny Price and Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* (1814) are just two examples.<sup>74</sup> While most postcolonial readings of *Jane Eyre* (1847) draw a dichotomous comparison between its eponymous heroine and the Jamaican creole Bertha Mason, Blanche Ingram—Jane's *actual* romantic rival—is repeatedly Orientalized. Her “olive complexion,” “jetty mass of...curls,” and “Oriental eye” are physical, legible markers of her selfish and imperious demeanor and of her “meretricious” and “calculated” pursuit of Rochester.<sup>75</sup> A similar trend surfaces in later nineteenth-century visual art. Art historian Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff observes that portrait painters like Ingres began to replace the *Ethiopian Venus* with the sexually alluring harem concubine, the odalisque.<sup>76</sup> I do not go so far as to construe the seeming shift from a Black to an Orientalized Venus in linear terms, because, as Nussbaum persuasively argues in “Between ‘Oriental’ and ‘Blacks So Called,’” these terms are consistently layered in eighteenth-century

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<sup>74</sup> See Makdisi, *Making England Western*, 140-45. See also the character of Victoria in Charlotte Dacre's 1806 novel, *Zofloya, or, The Moor*.

<sup>75</sup> Charlotte Brontë and Richard J. Dunn, *Jane Eyre* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 135, 137, 159. In *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford's “lively dark eye” and “clear brown complexion” are similarly linked with her “blunted delicacy” and “corrupted, vitiated mind.” Jane Austen and Claudia L. Johnson, *Mansfield Park* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 30, 278.

<sup>76</sup> Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, “Who is the subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Negresse*,” in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes I. Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 331.

British culture. Indeed, the earliest Black Venus in this study, Aphra Behn's *Imoinda* (1688), travels from the sultan's harem of her homeland to a West Indian plantation where she meets her tragic end. By working across contexts typically separated by the demands of historical periodization, *Retracing the Black Venus* illuminates otherwise occluded continuities between different iterations of this figure as she is marshaled to express (or conceal) the profound anxieties provoked by Atlantic contact through the slave trade and British imperialism.

### ***Chapter Summaries***

Chapter One begins to redraw the Black Venus paradigm by identifying Aphra Behn's *Imoinda* (1688) and Richard Steele's *Yarico* (1711) as unrecognized precursors to the more iconic Black Venus figures of the early Romantic period. As expectant mothers who lose their children to slavery's human commerce, *Imoinda* and *Yarico* foreground the rapacious greed of slave traders and mercantilists rather than the predatory sexual desire of Black women. I trace *Imoinda* and *Yarico* through numerous adaptations over the course of the eighteenth century, marking their shifting racial identities across a startlingly wide array of genres including ethnography, the periodical essay, decorative tiles, town gossip, and, most importantly, staged drama. Extending the work of scholars like Felicity Nussbaum and Joyce Green MacDonald, I argue that whether they appeared as Black African women in aristocratic epistolary poems condemning the corrupting acquisitiveness of a rising merchant class, or as so-called white actresses in staged plays promoting an antislavery agenda, these Black Venuses persistently betray the porousness between the English domestic sphere and the colonial human commerce that sustains it.

Chapter Two builds upon this pre-history by reinterpreting the two most iconic Black Venuses of the Romantic period as similarly flexible figures adapted to confront anxieties about

how the excessive self-interest undergirding slavery and imperial expansion was infiltrating domestic intimacies to the detriment of English character on both sides of the Atlantic. Specifically, I analyze Bryan Edwards's mythologized portrait of the slave trade in *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (1794) alongside its unrecognized revision in Charles Williams's graphic satire of an English Prince proposing to the Hottentot Venus in *Neptune's Last Resource* (1811). Linking these images together is an extensive network of visual texts in which the Black Venus's symbolic functions fluctuate wildly. In some instances, she represents enslaved African women whose public status as property turned their maternal bonds of kinship into a capitalist enterprise. Bryan Edwards responds to such portrayals of victimization by transforming the Black Venus into a despotic ocean goddess embodying Atlantic commerce's tyrannical hold over West Indian planters and metropolitan Englishman alike. In other instances, the Black Venus is mobilized to depict so-called white English actresses, royal mistresses, and urban sex workers as women whose public entrepreneurship symbolically threatens the domestic virtue of the English national family. Here Charles Williams's revision of the Sable Venus capitalizes on a moment in which fierce debates over the slave trade map neatly onto domestic critiques of political tyranny. As adaptable figures of intimate commerce, the Sable and Hottentot Venuses index the corruptive excesses of the monarchy at home, planters in the West Indies, and the merchant classes benefitting from Atlantic trade.

Bridging my project's two historical clusters, Chapter Three puts a palimpsestic reading of the deep-eighteenth-century Black Venus into material practice by exploring two likeminded revisions of Stothard's *Voyage*: William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) and Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015). Bringing these texts together for the first time, I argue that while both Blake and Lewis expose the violence Stothard's image endeavors to

naturalize, both also resist the redemptive dynamics of recovery and the cathartic closure it may afford. Instead, they layer Stothard's *Voyage* over and beneath an expansive material network of Black Venuses, from household curios to book illustrations, to illuminate how Black women circulate both as enslaved captives in the Atlantic trade and as instrumental objects domesticating that trade in pro- and antislavery material culture alike. Rather than analyzing their revisions according to a linear chronology, I approach Blake and Lewis palimpsestically. More precisely, I draw upon Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*, Toni Morrison's trope of rememory, and Lisa Lowe's call for a palimpsestic engagement with the archives of Atlantic slavery to consider how Lewis's epic re forging of these archives reframed my own archival encounter as a white scholar with a Black Venus I had not expected to find. By thwarting the desire for recovery's cathartic closure, I argue that this haunting figure—like Blake and Lewis's palimpsests—illuminates the unhomely tether between the past objects of our inquiry and the present methods of our study.

Chapter Four returns to the impetus of my project, examining the protean Black Venus across five distinct theatrical productions between 1996 and 2017 of Suzan-Lori Parks's controversial play *Venus*, two of which have received little or no scholarly attention. I draw from my interviews with the directors of these productions—one at the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center in Liberty City (Miami, Florida) and one in Cape Town, South Africa—to argue that Parks's play structures a living history of Sarah Baartman's ongoing use as a palimpsestic Black Venus rather than a recovery of the real woman from within the figure. Parks shifts the burden historically placed upon Baartman as an iconic bearer of white guilt, Black injury, and post-apartheid South African aspirations back onto those who continue to make use of her toward those ends, asking what kinds of alternative histories might become possible. Parks's

confrontational methods of aligning past and present uses of Baartman discourage contemporary readers and audiences from uncritically flattening history in order to more easily govern its haunting of the present.

Ultimately, *Retracing the Black Venus* tells the circuitous and uneven story of a figure about whom it seemed impossible to discover anything that has not already been said, a figure whose contours have, for so long, seemed achingly familiar.<sup>77</sup> In truth, it does little to uncover anything new about the Venuses whom we would give anything to hear speak. While this project is not one of recovery, it does unsettle some of the silent assumptions that have kept the Black Venus in circulation and contends with the inescapable complicities of participating in those circuits. By attending to the shifting resonance of this figure across distinct historical moments, I upend established critical accounts of the Black Venus as a simple construct easily dismantled by a more progressive present. Instead, the Black Venuses in this study collectively reveal how profoundly Atlantic societies past and present have filtered their experiences of capitalist modernity through the circulating cipher of Black womanhood.

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<sup>77</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2008): 1.



## Chapter One

### **“Pliable Heroines” of the Eighteenth Century: Imoinda and Yarico’s Pre-Figuring of the Black Venus**

Prevailing critical interpretations of the Black Venus as a static stereotype of Black female licentiousness designed to bolster white female virtue by contrast cannot account for the fact that the most popular Black Venus of the eighteenth century was apparently white. I am speaking, of course, about Aphra Behn’s Imoinda, the virtuous and “beautiful *Black Venus*” whom Thomas Southerne transforms into a fair-skinned European woman in his 1695 stage adaptation of Behn’s 1688 novella, *Oroonoko, Or the Royal Slave*.<sup>1</sup> Imoinda and her beloved, the Coromantee prince Oroonoko, are sold into slavery after Oroonoko rescues her from the Sultan’s harem. The lovers reunite in Surinam but meet a tragic end when Oroonoko’s slave revolt fails. Shortly before he is executed, he murders a pregnant Imoinda to protect her and their unborn child from the horrors of slavery. An equally popular and racially “pliable heroine” frequently linked to (though rarely explored alongside) the Black Venus is Yarico.<sup>2</sup> This alternately “Indian” and “Negroe” maid, betrayed by the English merchant Inkle who sells her and their unborn child into slavery for profit, was made popular in Richard Steele’s *Spectator* 11 version of her tale. Given that their tales permeated the long eighteenth century in countless adaptations across genres of the novel, the periodical essay, the heroic epistle, and, most importantly, staged drama, it is no surprise that Imoinda and Yarico loom large in eighteenth-century studies invested in questions of race, gender, and empire. According to *The London Stage*, so-called

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<sup>1</sup> Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko: Or, the Royal Slave*, eds. Catherine Gallagher and Simon Stern (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, “Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White,” in *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152.

white Imoindas delighted audiences at least once each year for the entirety of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, so-called white women graced London stages as Yarico in George Colman Jr.'s ballad opera *Inkle and Yarico* almost two hundred times between its debut in 1787 and the end of the century. Imoinda and Yarico's tales were so often repeated, in fact, that they became cultural fables taking on lives of their own, far beyond the confines of their source texts.<sup>4</sup> However, it was their adaptability, rather than their static and incommensurable difference, that made these heroines of color so enduring. I argue, contrary to most critical assessments, that the same is true of the Black Venus figure. In this chapter, I begin to redraw the contours of the Black Venus paradigm by locating the figure's emergence in these "pliable heroines" of color, Imoinda and Yarico.

Imoinda and Yarico are, first and foremost, victims of slavery's human commerce, and their stories critique the corrupting self-interest of English traders rather than the dangerous hypersexuality of Black women. As such, they seem entirely discontinuous with accepted readings of the Black Venus, whose supposed promiscuity was used to justify the reproductive exploitation of enslaved African women in support of West Indian plantation economies.<sup>5</sup> Their apparent deployment for opposing sides of the slavery debate notwithstanding, what has most

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<sup>3</sup> W. Van Lennep et al., *The London Stage, 1660-1800: A calendar of plays, entertainments and afterpieces, together with casts, box-receipts and contemporary comment. Compiled from the playbills, newspapers and theatrical diaries of the period* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1960-1968).

<sup>4</sup> See Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 54-92. Lyndon Dominique traces the countless appearances of Imoinda in eighteenth-century culture well beyond any version of the Oroonoko text in his unparalleled study, *Imoinda's Shade: Marriage and the African Woman in Eighteenth-Century British Literature, 1759-1808* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> While I complicate this narrative in my second chapter, most scholars credit Isaac Teale and Thomas Stothard's *Sable Venus* (1793-4) with securing this stereotype. She is widely understood as a seductive goddess forging her own way across the Middle Passage, engaging in coy congress with an English sailor en route, and producing a mixed-race child whose arrival on the shores of Jamaica is met with the frenzied joy of the colonists who receive them.

obscured the continuities between Imoinda and Yarico on the one hand and the Black Venus on the other is the disproportionate discursive scope afforded them. Discussions of the Black Venus never seem to exceed the rigid frame entrenched by the notion of a pro-slavery stereotype. By contrast, scholars ascribe to Yarico and Imoinda's tales a multitude of concerns beyond the supposed character of African and Native American women or even the moral quandaries of slavery. Their tales address male inconstancy within metropolitan courtship, the blunted sensibility of the merchant classes, the allegorical ideal of the Noble Savage, and the dangers of excessive consumerism.<sup>6</sup> Expanding upon these invaluable critical studies, I argue that Imoinda and Yarico's ability to encompass a variety of racial identities—to embody and be embodied by so-called white Englishwomen—made these early Black Venuses particularly adaptable to mediating pressing concerns about the encroachment of colonial commerce upon the intimate life of English domesticity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See respectively Daniel O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities: George Colman's "Inkle and Yarico" and the Racialization of Class Relations," *Theatre Journal*, 54.3 (2002): 391; Moira Ferguson, "Inkle and Yarico: An Antislavery Reading," in *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (London: Routledge, 2016), 82; Keith Sandiford, "Inkle and Yarico: The Construction of Alterity from History to Literature," *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide* 64 (1990), 115; and Dominique, *Imoinda's Shade*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Dominique argues that the character of Imoinda has been employed from its earliest inception "not merely to expose, but also to begin to correct, something egregious about the vulgar excesses of consumption and vanity that are prevalent in the lives of contemporary English men and women." See *Imoinda's Shade*, 4. In her reading of Colman's *Inkle and Yarico*, Nandini Bhattacharya reads Yarico's liminal positioning between slave, colonial collectible, and wife as evidence that "[r]epresenting purchase as familialization masked control of slaves, wives, daughters, and commodities." She thus calls Yarico's tale a "drama wherein global exchanges in women, slaves, collectibles, and commodities still shore up Englishmen's identity." See "Family Jewels: George Colman's Inkle and Yarico and Connoisseurship," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 34 no. 2, (2001): 221, 220. Both Charlotte Sussman and Ros Ballaster have pointed out that Imoinda's body represents the ordinary form of commodification, whether the networks of exchange are those of kinship, as in Coramantien, or of mercantilist exchange, as in Surinam. See Charlotte Sussman, "The Other Problem with Women: Reproduction and Slave Culture in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," in *Oroonoko: An Authoritative Text*, ed. Joanna Lipking (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 246-55 and Ros Ballaster, "The New Hystericism: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: The Body, the Text, and the Feminist Critic," in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 283-95.

The most troubling manifestation of this encroachment which Imoinda and Yarico's tales bring to the fore is the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* which, as I discussed earlier, bound hereditary slavery in the West Indies to laws of inherited property in England. As this doctrine threatens to transform Yarico's kin into a commodity and Imoinda's maternity into a profitable enterprise, the neat binary constructions of white womanhood as virtuous and civilized against the primitive licentiousness of Black womanhood that the Black Venus stereotype is thought to reinforce begin to fray. These pliable heroines remind us that the commodification of enslaved Black women's reproductive labor positions their sexuality and exclusion from the domestic squarely within the modern machinery of Atlantic capitalism and its funding of white domestic womanhood.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, while these early Black Venus narratives may attempt to represent Indianness or Africanness, their persistent adaptation subordinates that ethnographic function to more local concerns, namely to mitigate the anxieties provoked by colonial commerce's necessarily violent formation of the English domestic sphere. Consequently, while white womanhood as a domestic ideal of private intimacy was being constructed *materially* through an economic dependence on the public commodification of Black maternity, it was being constructed *symbolically* through a disavowal of that dependence.

The inhabitation of Imoinda and Yarico by English actresses—what many have understood as a whitewashing of these heroines—exemplifies such a disavowal. When celebrity eighteenth-century actresses like Susannah Cibber or Fanny Kelly embody the suffering of victimized Black and brown women like Imoinda and Yarico on the English stage, they both overwrite and domesticate slavery's inhumane commerce into a moralizing exchange of

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<sup>8</sup> As Jennifer Morgan articulates, “people of African descent have long been positioned as both outside of the household and, as a direct result of their role as productive and reproductive commodities, constitutive of it.” See “*partus sequitur ventrem*,” *Small Axe: a Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 22.1 (2018): 12.

sentiment and sensibility. Most scholars assume that an audience's sympathetic identification with these wronged women demands an erasure of their color. Nussbaum has argued, and most scholars agree, that "since the color of complexion was an index to virtue by the eighteenth century, a black Imoinda could not easily represent a decorous and heroic femininity on stage."<sup>9</sup> Daniel O'Quinn describes a similar crisis in the staging of Yarico as a heroine of color in Colman Jr.'s opera, arguing that "normative femininity is itself beginning to be understood as incommensurable with non-white bodies."<sup>10</sup> However, their white bodies notwithstanding, the English actresses performing these roles were highly visible reminders that white, decorous and normative femininity was far from a *fait accompli*. Nussbaum herself concedes that "being a woman on stage, even a white woman on stage, bears a tincture of contamination, a smudge of blackness. Because of the prejudice against actresses and the association with prostitutes, even the purest of white women may seem slightly tainted once she appears on stage."<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum's point here reveals the symbolic contingency of whiteness relative to a conception of Blackness that exceeds inherent qualities like skin color. Here Blackness operates as a mobile category expressing proximity to a corrupting form of commerce, such as the actress's profiting from the public and commercialized display of her body. While Nussbaum's account implies that actresses blur the line between white and Black womanhood, I propose that they reveal the processes through which these categories of racialized womanhood were coming into being over the course of the century.

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<sup>9</sup> Nussbaum, "Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White," 158.

<sup>10</sup> O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 391.

<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum, "Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White," 161. Here Nussbaum is referencing (rather than uncritically reproducing) the racialized language frequently linking Blackness with the taint of public commerce.

In the opening half of this chapter, I trouble the apparent whiteness of Southerne's Imoinda by demonstrating how Behn's Black African Imoinda and her imposition into the intimate commerce of hereditary slavery remains legible beneath Thomas Southerne's white, European heroine throughout the century. More precisely, I argue that all of the play's female characters express—to varying degrees—the racial dimensions of intimate commerce in ways that suture metropolitan pursuits of advantageous marriage to the colonial doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*. In examining the celebrity actresses performing the role of Imoinda, I argue that even as they facilitate the reframing of slavery's corruptive human commerce as a vehicle for the moralizing commerce of sensibility so critical to the construction of white womanhood, they are excluded from that white female ideal by the intimate commerce of their own profession. The second half of this chapter explores similarly layered examples of racialized womanhood through numerous versions of Yarico's narrative. I trace the tale's adaptation across a wide range of genres, including Richard Ligon's travel narrative, Steele's magazine essay, a variety of epistolary poems written from Yarico's perspective, a newspaper anecdote, and finally George Colman Jr.'s comic opera. Even more than her predecessor, Imoinda, Yarico's racial identity fluctuates to accommodate shifting conceptions of England's complicity in slavery's intimate violence.

Although I tend to the variety of cultural forms in which Imoinda and Yarico appear, this chapter foregrounds staged drama as a genre which holds the Black Venus figure's competing symbolic functions in tension. Unlike poetic or narrative renderings, the living text of a staged play, the embodiment of the Black Venus by so-called white actresses, and the feedback loop between audiences, playwrights, and theatre managers enable us to see how the Black Venus mediated a vast network of public exchanges—of sentiment, of sexualized female spectacle, and

of slave-produced goods. I argue that it is precisely the triangulation of the women of color whose kinship is commodified in the marketplace, the celebrity actresses who embody them on stage, and the English theatergoing women who consume them that exposes the porousness between the formation of the bourgeois domestic sphere and the violent colonial commerce that sustains it. By redefining Imoinda and Yarico as early Black Venuses and unquestionably palimpsestic figures, I diverge from scholars who read the racial transformations of Imoinda and Yarico as modes of “cultural forgetting,” the “erasure of the African woman,” and the entirely successful obfuscations of white leisured women’s complicity in the violence of slavery and its extensive commercial circuits.<sup>12</sup> Where they see erasure, I see a long process of accumulation resulting in a haunting, fleshy figure that betrays the inextricability of white and Black womanhood, tied together by the violence of intimate commerce.

### ***Imoinda: The Beautiful Black Venus***

Originally published in 1688, Aphra Behn’s proto-novel *Oroonoko* traces the travails of its eponymous hero and his beloved Imoinda, the “Female to the noble Male; the beautiful *Black Venus*, to our young *Mars*; as charming in her Person as he, and of delicate Vertues.”<sup>13</sup> Oroonoko’s grandfather, the Sultan, claims Imoinda for his harem, but the young Prince steals her away and marries her. As punishment, the jealous patriarch sells both lovers into slavery, in which condition they reunite in Surinam. When Imoinda becomes pregnant, and Oroonoko realizes his child is doomed to bear the galling chains of slavery, he stokes a rebellion among

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ferguson, “Inkle and Yarico” and Joyce Green MacDonald, “The Disappearing African Woman: Imoinda in *Oroonoko* After Behn,” *ELH* 66 (1999): 71-86.

<sup>13</sup> Behn, Gallagher, and Stern, *Oroonoko*, 44. All subsequent citations are in the text.

other enslaved captives. When his efforts fail, Oroonoko murders Imoinda (and their unborn child) to spare them their wretched fate and is himself gruesomely tortured and executed for his insurrection. As the first depiction in English literature of Atlantic contact among three continents, Behn's *Oroonoko* inaugurates the Black Venus as a figure mediating the commercial and libidinal exchanges that crisscross the Black Atlantic (ix).

As I have already indicated, Imoinda is unquestionably not the hypersexualized and predatory "Black Venus" associated with pro-slavery stereotypes. Describing Imoinda as Venus attributes to her a classical beauty and elegance familiar to Behn's European reading public. However, Venus is an odd choice to represent "delicate Vertues" if these are, as Behn's narrator makes exceedingly clear later on, chaste virtues. After all, as the patron goddess of prostitutes, Venus not only evokes the imbrication of intimacy and commerce but also its interpolation into oceanic trade markets. Behn's claim to witnessing "an hundred *White* Men sighing after [Imoinda] and making a thousand vows at her feet" is intended as a testament to her beauty (44). However, it exposes both "the transformation of the black body into a commodity at the point of its insertion into the circuits of commercial exchange," as Mallipeddi astutely puts it, and the commodification of Black intimacy and, by extension, kinship.<sup>14</sup> Behn's claim that these "hundred White Men" were unsuccessful in their pursuit of Imoinda—as "she was too great for any, but a Prince of her own Nation to adore"—belies the material context framing their desire: the image of Imoinda as a glorious spectacle cannot be separated from the auction block where

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<sup>14</sup> Ramesh Mallipeddi, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, Sympathy: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the English Commercial Empire" in *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 26.



the beauty of enslaved African women is monetized and their maternal capacities rendered a source of speculative value (44).<sup>15</sup>

Over the last thirty years, Behn's text and Imoinda's place within it have acquired a canonicity among eighteenth-century scholars interrogating the metaphoric equation of slavery and marriage, the origins of the British antislavery movement, the gendered dimensions and "political efficacy of sympathy," and the controversies around enslaved women's reproductivity as "a central battleground in the English imperial struggle to maintain a slave culture."<sup>16</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan has deemed this critical proliferation a kind of scholarly "petting" that extends the novella's instrumentalized fetishization of its titular character.<sup>17</sup> *Imoindaism*, like its paired term *oroonokoism*, uses *virtualization*—the rhetorically strategic manipulation of a roughly rendered tropicopolitan—to impose contemporary political agendas upon Behn's distant context, to "make Behn our contemporary."<sup>18</sup> Whether Behn emerges from such a process as redemptively proto-feminist or as complicit in slavery's violent dehumanization, Aravamudan seems most critical of the way literary critics capitalize on the tropicopolitan's malleability and is quick to gesture at the irony that such scholarship invariably extends the modes of exploitative representation that it sets out to critique in the first place. Aravamudan is right to emphasize the actual inhabitants of colonized space whose agency is so often occluded by the durability of the tropes that overwrite

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<sup>15</sup> In this regard, it's important to understand Yarico and Imoinda as figures who are not enslaved when we meet them, but who we meet first and foremost through relations of intimacy (with Inkle and Oroonoko respectively). Moreover, we come to see how it is only upon their entry into the British imperial marketplace—both that of the slave trade and of the London theatre market—that they are re-signified as speculative reproductive commodities.

<sup>16</sup> Mallipeddi, 49; Sussman, "The Other Problem with Women," 214.

<sup>17</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>18</sup> Aravamudan, 29.

them and the English subjectivities to which those tropes give voice. Ramesh Mallipeddi similarly reminds us that “[i]n studies of empire, the experiences of colonized subjects ought to have priority.”<sup>19</sup>

The urgency of this work notwithstanding, I contend that we have more to learn from the link between Imoinda’s past and present virtualization; this work demands an alternative critical hermeneutic attentive to staged drama’s mechanisms of inhabitation, reception, and adaptation which have shaped a deep eighteenth century that still isn’t over.<sup>20</sup> In what follows, I consider how the embodiment of Imoinda by eighteenth-century English actresses in Southerne’s stage adaptation of Behn’s novella exposes the liminality between the actual inhabitants of colonized space and the fictional tropes that commodify and domesticate them. In so doing, I demonstrate how these actresses and the Black Venus figure they inhabit straddle the material and the imaginative manifestations of intimate commerce through which Atlantic slavery shaped the bourgeois domestic sphere.

Critics have long contended that Southerne’s whitening of Imoinda was tantamount to an erasure of the African woman in Behn’s novella, and that, given the relative obscurity of this work at the time of its publication, we must attribute Imoinda’s cultural impact to the white stage version of her character.<sup>21</sup> While Behn’s *Oroonoko* had few readers relative to Southerne’s adaptation, the popularity of the latter may well have precipitated reprints of Behn’s original,

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<sup>19</sup> Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>21</sup> For discussions of Imoinda’s whitening, see Joyce Green MacDonald, “The Disappearing African Woman: Imoinda in *Oroonoko* After Behn,” *ELH* 66 (1999): 71-86; Nussbaum, “Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White,” 152–188; and Lyndon Dominique, “Altering *Oroonoko* and Imoinda in Mid-Eighteenth Century British Drama” in *Imoinda’s Shade: Marriage and the African Woman in Eighteenth-Century British Literature, 1759-1808* (2012): 27-69.

which circulated concurrently with the play. Not only was Behn's *Oroonoko* reprinted in several anthologies of her other (usually more popular) works, it was also reprinted in *The Oxford Magazine* (1736) and, more telling still, was published serially in *The Ladies Magazine* as *History of the Royal Slave* over the course of fifteen volumes between April and November of 1753.<sup>22</sup> At two pence an issue, this bi-weekly periodical would have been far more accessible to a broader public than Behn's original octavo manuscript. The magazine also proved far less costly than a night at the theatre, where the cheapest of tickets cost a shilling (or twelve pence)—the equivalent of six issues of the magazine. Like many periodicals emerging in the eighteenth century, *The Ladies Magazine* targeted an upwardly mobile class of (especially female) readers, educating them on subjects as various as “Science, History, Trade, Mechanicks, Wit, Gallantry, Love, and News” in an effort to be “the most useful and entertaining, as well as the cheapest Work ever published.”<sup>23</sup> The variety of the magazine's content ensured that both domestic and commercial matters—local advertisements as well as stock prices—would frame readers' encounters with Behn's Black African Imoinda and her abandonment to the market. In other words, public consumption of Imoinda was not restricted to Southerne's white Europeanized version; instead, it was layered over Behn's Black Venus. Consequently, the Black Venus does not disappear as such, but rather is woven through subsequent iterations of Behn's tale (and eighteenth-century culture more broadly) as a racially flexible and palimpsestic marker of the intimate commerce that links colonial slavery with English (female) consumerism and social mobility.

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<sup>22</sup> Mary A. O'Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 123.

<sup>23</sup> O'Donnell, 123.

### *Imoinda on Southerne's Page*

This imbrication is at the heart of Southerne's split plot dramatic adaptation, which positions the tragedy of Imoinda and Oroonoko's enslavement alongside the comic exploits of the husband-hunting Welldon sisters. Within this comic subplot, Charlot and her sister Lucy escape from London, where they are out of fashion and without prospects, to pursue speculative marital possibilities among the plantation owners in British colonial Surinam. Charlot, disguised as a male cousin, seduces the plantation-owning Widow Lackitt to secure her sister Lucy's marriage to the Widow's booby son and, eventually, her own marriage to the wealthy planter, Stanmore. In the interim, Oroonoko and Imoinda's heartfelt reunion is cut short when the erstwhile Black Venus demands insurrection or death rather than witness the enslavement of her child. The comic and tragic plots intersect only briefly, when the Welldon sisters capitalize on the chaos provoked by Oroonoko's rebellion to carry out their own intimate commercial schemes and, later, when they express their sympathy for the doomed lovers. Although marriage and slavery are undoubtedly contiguous points of focus in the play, Southerne's split plot is far from a facile proto-feminist equation of slavery and marriage.<sup>24</sup> Rather, as MacDonald argues, it centers "women in a variety of relations towards money: as speculators (Charlot has persuaded Lucy to 'bring [her] Person for a Venture to the *Indies*,' (3)), as property (the enslaved Imoinda), and as successful, if unscrupulous, capitalists."<sup>25</sup> I expand upon MacDonald's formulation by demonstrating how these relations to money are both interconnected and explicitly racialized.

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<sup>24</sup> According to Laura Rosenthal, Behn's *Oroonoko* "problematizes human commodification; Southerne's seeks complex ways to justify it." Laura J. Rosenthal, "Owning Oroonoko: Behn, Southerne, and the Contingencies of Property," *Renaissance Drama*, 23 (1992): 26.

<sup>25</sup> MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 119.

According to MacDonald, Southerne feminizes “the operations of the mercantile capitalism whose fluidly evolving methods of operation in the early modern metropolis were not always legibly apparent.”<sup>26</sup> I argue that Southerne’s female characters assume the burden of making the operations of mercantile capitalism legible by both embodying and articulating the racial dimensions of intimate commerce, whether they are victims, agents, or both. Southerne’s tragic hero, Oroonoko, functions as a mouthpiece for slavery apologists who deliberately obscured these operations and their inherent violence in order to naturalize them. In pushing back against his friend Aboan’s arguments for insurrection, Oroonoko legitimizes the practice of transforming human beings into moveable chattel—“They paid our Price for us, and we are now/ Their Property”—and rehearsing the adage of the benevolent planter—“we find/ The load so light, so little to be felt,/... We ought not to complain.”<sup>27</sup> Most insidious of all, however, his speech anticipates the rhetorical sleight of hand deployed by slavery’s advocates and apologists later in the eighteenth century which represents slavery as a trade and institution operating autonomously through the natural flows of supply and demand rather than being presided over by human agents. “These men are [innocent], whom you wou’d rise against,” Oroonoko affirms. “If we are Slaves, they did not make us Slaves;/ But bought us in an honest way of trade...” (III.ii). By contrast, Imoinda rearticulates the machinery of slavery—the natural cycle of supply and demand—as a mechanization of her womb. When Aboan pressures Oroonoko to recognize that his love for Imoinda is being transformed into the means to reproduce his enslaver’s wealth—“wou'd you lye contented down,/ In the forgetfulness, and arms of Love,/ To get young

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<sup>26</sup> MacDonald, 119.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko: A Tragedy* (London: Printed for T. Johnson, Bookseller at the Hague, 1712), III.ii. All subsequent citations are in the text.

Princes for 'em?"—Oroonoko appeals to Imoinda to “save me, save me from that thought” (III.ii). Imoinda’s almost prophetic rebuke exposes the destructive effects of slavery’s commodified intimacy which the Black Venus comes to embody throughout the eighteenth century. “There is no safety from it,” she replies. “I have long/ Suffer'd it with a Mother's labouring pains;/ And can no longer. Kill me, kill me now,/ ...Dry up this Spring of Life, this pois'nous Spring,/ That swells so fast, to overwhelm us all” (III.ii).<sup>28</sup> If Imoinda’s whiteness links her more closely with Englishwomen in the audience, then they too are included in her resounding “us all.”

The enslaved Imoinda is not the only female character in Southerne’s play to register the contiguity of slavery’s intimate commerce to more domestic, metropolitan manifestations of it. In the very first scene of the play, Charlot Welldon humorously endeavors to convince her sister that Surinam is their best bet for conjugal security by assuring her that other metropolitan alternatives are impracticable: “For your part, what Trade cou’d you set up in? You’d never arrive at the Trust and Credit of a Guinea-Bawd: You wou’d have too much Business of your own, ever to mind other Peoples” (I.i). On its face, Charlot’s quip suggests that Lucy would be a lousy brothel owner because she would be too caught up pursuing her own sexual pleasure to make a neat business orchestrating the sale of other women’s sexual labor. However, the lightness with which she constructs a seamless parallel between marriage and prostitution as two sides of the same intimate coin invites further analysis.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Saree Makdisi’s discussion of the mechanized womb and its figurative linking of marriage and slavery in “Laboring at the Mill with Slaves,” in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 78-154.

<sup>29</sup> As Laura Rosenthal has demonstrated, prostitution in the eighteenth century constituted both a glaring manifestation of and a metaphor for the dangers and uncertainties commerce presented to constructions of emerging middle-class identity and subjecthood; see *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

James Peck observes that, “in what was fast becoming one of the most successful ideological maneuvers of the eighteenth century, the economic anxieties created by the inherent instability of a credit economy are resolved by creating a domestic space into which the madness of the market does not enter.”<sup>30</sup> However, as Laura Rosenthal reminds us, the treasured wife and the forsaken prostitute proved competing figures in the ideological construction of a middle-class domestic sphere entirely dependent upon the market. As the eighteenth century progressed, notions of prostitution as unregulated desire and “the embrace of pleasure” gave way to an understanding of “prostitution as the sacrifice of pleasure to business.”<sup>31</sup> The transition, Rosenthal points out, is suggestive of “the broader social transition from the equivalence between birth and worth in aristocratic ideology to the bourgeois ideological emphasis on self-construction and self-determination.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, while marriage is understood to “remove the taint of exchange from the domestic sphere,” prostitution as a metaphor for the intimate commerce undergirding marital aspirations of social mobility betrays the fallacy of such a separation.<sup>33</sup> Charlot’s sly remark zeroes in on the ways in which the “Trust and Credit” upon which English mercantile capitalism relies is imagined through the commercialized exchanges of women’s bodies.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> James Peck, “Anne Oldfield’s Lady Townly: Consumption, Credit, and the Whig Hegemony of the 1720s,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 49, no. 4, (Dec 1997): 414.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenthal, 9.

<sup>33</sup> James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>34</sup> For a fuller discussion see Kalissa Hendrickson, “‘The trust and credit of a Guinea-bawd’: Circulation, Credit, and the Bodied Economy in Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko*,” *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research*, 27.2 (2012): 35-60.

More telling still, the layered meanings of “Guinea-Bawd” in Charlot’s joke reveal the contiguity between emerging notions of white English domestic femininity and the tainting commodification of Black women’s maternity that indirectly finances it. J. Douglas Canfield glosses this term as a reference to the use of “a guinea [as] a common fee or tip for services rendered, in this instance by a madam of a brothel.”<sup>35</sup> The provenance of the Guinea coin—forged from gold mined on the Western Coast of Africa and stamped with the image of the slave fortress that was the insignia of the Royal African Company—exposes the embeddedness of slavery within English political economies of intimacy such that the British commodification of Black women’s bodies as a critical cog within its rapidly expanding credit economy can undergird a glib equation of domestic prostitution and marriage. That “Guinea-Bawd” could refer (ironically) to a Black brothel madame—like London’s “Black Harriot”<sup>36</sup> later in the century—or to a white English one “tainted” (blackened) by her trade in flesh reveals just how broadly racial signifiers could be deployed to mediate anxieties about the influence of colonial trade on the metropole.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the opposition that this formulation of the joke constructs between Lucy’s apparently excessive and fiscally unproductive sexual desire on the one hand and the calculating business acumen of the Black bawd on the other destabilizes our understanding of Black female

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<sup>35</sup> John Douglas Canfield, *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*, eds. J. Douglas Canfield and Maja-Lisa Von Sneidern (Peterborough: Broadview, 2005), 381.

<sup>36</sup> “Black Harriot” was a formerly enslaved Black Jamaican woman who operated a brothel. See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 76.

<sup>37</sup> Here I am referring back to Nussbaum’s observation that the intimate commerce of stage actresses was represented as carrying a racializing “taint” (Nussbaum, “Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White, 161).



stereotypes as static indicators of primitive sexual excess.<sup>38</sup> Instead, the Black bawd reflects the ways in which the precarity of social mobility for an emerging middle class dependent upon the market was imagined through the Black women's sexual labor that directly and indirectly made it materially possible. If Lucy's projected failure to effectively commodify her own sexuality excludes her from the kind of social mobility and domestic security to which she and her sister aspire, Charlot proves, by contrast, quite successful. One could argue that *she* fulfills the role of the Guinea-Bawd her sister could not when she facilitates the rhetorical collision of the marriage and slave markets. She remarks with some distaste to Captain Driver, both potential suitor and slave trader, "This is your market for slaves; my sister is a free woman, and must not be disposed of in public" (I.ii). She takes issue here neither with the marriage or slave market, nor their contiguity in the person of Captain Driver. Her only point of contention is that marriage here constitutes a private economy of intimacy, while slavery is a public one. Coming full circle, the image of the Black Venus (patron goddess of prostitutes) that Charlot humorously conjures in the play's opening scene thus haunts (as a taint) the romantic exchanges which make up almost the entirety of the comic subplot and exposes the ease with which racialized non-white womanhood as a legible signal of intimate commerce could be rhetorically grafted onto so-called white, socially mobile women.

Widow Lackitt embodies another telling example of how such women are marked as racially other to signal a threat to the domestic sphere they, in theory, are meant to safeguard. A stereotypically man-hungry widow, Lackitt is instantly enamored with "Welldon" (Charlot in disguise), and as the dupe of the subplot's cross-dressing and bed trick antics, she is an

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<sup>38</sup> Lucy is characterized as sexually insatiable, threatening to (further) emasculate her future husband, the widow's son Daniel.

unabashedly comic figure. However, like Charlot and Lucy, the intimate commerce driving her own marital aspirations is explicitly entangled with the intimate commerce of plantation slavery. She proposes her union with Welldon as a business transaction, “a Bargain” through which s/he can hope to acquire (and “dispose of” as s/he sees fit) “several Stocks and Plantations” (I.i). Stanmore warns Welldon against such an exchange, cautioning, “If the Widow gets you to herself, she will certainly be too hard for you: I know her of old: She has no Conscience in a Corner; a very *Jew* in a bargain, and would circumcise you to get more of you” (I.i). While most readings gloss over this moment, Lackitt’s being called “a very Jew” further demonstrates the way visual racial signifiers were used to mark and thus make legible Englishmen and women involved in corrupting economic exchange. Jews were frequently associated with shady financial dealings and, as I explore more fully later in the chapter, their differences were often rendered in racial rather than strictly religious terms.<sup>39</sup> As the scene concludes with the arrival of a ship in port—“a Trader in Slaves”—Stanmore remarks, “That’s the Commodity we deal in, you know” (I.i). The contiguity of these moments—Stanmore’s racialization of Lackitt as a sexually and financially voracious Jew and the commodification of enslaved captives upon which her fortune and marital prospects depend—does not construct a metaphoric equation between the marriage and slave markets; rather it exposes the extent to which the former depends upon the latter. Southerne’s bawdy wordplay—“commodity” was slang for vagina—only compounds the embedded imbrication of intimacy (here, both sex and reproduction) and commerce within the trade and institution of colonial slavery.

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<sup>39</sup> Kristina Bross and Kathryn Rummell make an interesting case for reading Widow Lackitt as a revision of the African caste-mistress Onahal from Behn’s novella. See Kristina Bross and Kathryn Rummell, “Cast Mistresses: The Widow Figure in *Oroonoko*” in *Troping Oroonoko from Behn to Bandele*, ed. Susan B. Iwanisziw (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 59-82.

As the subsequent scene shows, Lackitt's racializing commodification of intimacy does more than render her an object of ridicule; it relegates her to the very margins of an emerging ideal of womanhood implicitly coded as white. Lackitt arrives on the scene pestering the slave ship captain because, in her lot of six captives, there is "not a Man among 'em, all Women and Children; what can I do with 'em, Captain? Pray consider, I am a Woman my self, and can't get my own Slaves as some of my Neighbors do" (I.ii).<sup>40</sup> As Aravamudan puts it, "Lackitt recognizes that the objective of acquisitive 'getting' in a slave system is itself predicated on reproductive begetting."<sup>41</sup> And here she falls short, as her name, in true comic Restoration fashion, assures us she must. Audiences would undoubtedly appreciate the humor of the "harlot" embedded in Charlot's name or "loose" in Lucy's, but "Lackitt" does more rhetorical work. As a widow, Lackitt is the surname she acquired from her husband even as it marks her lack of a husband. In the scene of the slave market, it reinforces her lack of a phallus and thus her inability to expand her property and capital through the reproductive exploitation of the women she enslaves. Most of all, however, Lackitt's name marks her marginal femininity. Her explicit appeal to English law's sanctioning of rape for the purposes of increasing property jostles uncomfortably with her affirmation of gendered equivalence between herself and the enslaved women who make up her lot, prompting the question: to what extent do either she or the women she claims as property count *as women*?

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<sup>40</sup> In Hawkesworth's revision, these lines are delivered by an anonymous character who represents female plantation owners generally rather than the more particular character flaws of Widow Lackitt. Also, while Southerne makes explicit reference to the reproductive exploitation of enslaved women, Hawkesworth simply gestures at it. See John Hawkesworth, *Oroonoko* (London: Printed for C. Bathurst, 1759). Captain Driver's reply in Southerne's play—"Would you have me pimp for the good of the Plantation?"—recalls Charlot's taunt about the Guinea Bawd by likening the profitability of slavery's reproductive exploitation to that of prostitution (I.ii)

<sup>41</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 52.

Both her unfeminine, calculating desire to father her own enslaved property and the mutilating threat of her greed (a Jew who will circumcise you to get more of you) materialize in her monstrous and unnatural motherhood. Southerne makes multiple references to Lackitt's incestuous abuse of her son, Daniel, to which we are meant to ascribe his "boobily" and emasculated character. "I have no more manhood left in me already than there is, saving the mark, in one of my mother's old under-petticoats" (iv.i). In her tyrannous efforts to finalize his marriage with Lucy, Lackitt beats him with a rod that "becomes both a lash and a phallic symbol."<sup>42</sup> In other words, Lackitt's willing commodification of intimacy—the most extreme example of which is her invocation of *partus sequitur ventrem*—disqualifies her from an ideal of womanhood defined by maternal, domestic, private intimacy distant from the market. And that disqualification is made legible through her racialization as a Jew.

In highlighting the rhetorical elasticity of racial difference as a signifier of slavery's commercialization of intimacy across Southerne's female characters, I aim to defamiliarize the notion of a stable whiteness against which an aberrant category of Blackness is constructed. I explore instead how these gendered categories are mutually constituted by relations to property and economic exchange. In so doing, I respond to Saidiya Hartman's call to dissociate the category of "woman" from "the white middle-class female subject who norms the category," by illuminating the violent and uneven process through which that "white middle-class female who norms the category" was being constructed in the early eighteenth century. Attending to this process helps us to "understand the racialized engenderment of the black female captive in terms other than deficiency or lack in relation to normative conditions [of womanhood] and instead

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<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, "Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White," 174.

understand this production of gender in the context of very different economies of power, property, kinship, race and sexuality.”<sup>43</sup>

The contingent whiteness of Southerne’s female characters, and Imoinda above all, manifests most tellingly in the tension between the comedic ending shared by the Welldon sisters and Widow Lackitt, and the tragic demise of the virtuous and principled Imoinda. Imoinda’s noble virtue and her utter refusal to compromise the sacred bonds of kinship—even if it costs the heroine her life and her child—*should* single her out as the play’s best exemplar of the ideal, implicitly white “treasured wife.”<sup>44</sup> However, Charlot, Lucy, and Lackitt’s ultimate entry into the security of white domesticity is predicated upon Imoinda’s exclusion. “Imoinda’s white is a blackened white,” and not necessarily because she is married to a Black man, as Nussbaum suggests, but because she must function as an affective vehicle for laundering the violent intimate commerce of slavery through the moralizing intimate commerce of sensibility.<sup>45</sup> While the happy connubial ending Southerne’s Englishwomen enjoy undoubtedly depends upon slavery and the same rapacious violation of kinship that precipitates Imoinda’s tragedy, their expressions of sympathy with Oroonoko and Imoinda’s plight—however brief—absolves them both of their pecuniary approaches to marriage and of their complicity in hereditary slavery by demonstrating that both can be mitigated and domesticated by sensibility.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 99-100.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, *Models of Value*, 180.

<sup>45</sup> Nussbaum, “Black Women: White Imoinda Turns White,” 172.

<sup>46</sup> In 1789, *The Prompter* exposes the centrality of this function. It offers a detailed plot summary of the play (about a page and a half long), but it sounds more like Behn’s than Southerne’s version. The only reference to any other female characters in the play comes at the end: “Mr. Southern makes Charlotte and Lucy, and Daniel, and Mrs. Lackitt, with the two Stanmores, parties with Blandford, to pray Imoinda may be restored to [Oroonoko]; for they are no otherwise concerned in the plot” (35). In short, their only function is to demonstrate their sensibility in response to Oroonoko and Imoinda’s plight.

*Imoinda on Southerne's Stage: The Trouble with Actresses*

This laundering of intimate commerce that plays out on Southerne's stage is mirrored in the house, where the performance and consumption of sensibility produces (at least in theory) a similarly critical absolution for the increasing proportion of theatergoers implicated in slavery's commercial circuits. For MacDonald, the whitening of Imoinda proves critical to this endeavor. "In Southerne and after," she argues, "the whitening of Imoinda will...cement [the white female spectator's] discursive segregation from the arena in which slaves are traded and empires built."<sup>47</sup> A white Imoinda, she elaborates, "performs acts of cultural forgetting, organized around tropes of white womanhood and its domestic realm" specifically for "the consumption of a theatrical audience in which women of leisure were present in increasing numbers in a Britain first entering into the full scope of an imperial expansion crucially supported by Atlantic slavery."<sup>48</sup> MacDonald aptly describes here the ways in which appropriating modes of "sentimental identification" strategically "converted the violent conditions of slavery into occasions for English benevolence, [performing] what Lynn Festa calls an act of 'affective piracy' in which the liberal" playwright, actress, and theatregoer all participate in "making sentimental value of the other's plight" and "rework[ing] the violence of slavery as a resource for the [English, middling] public's moral position."<sup>49</sup> MacDonald thus sees this domestication of slavery—wherein the English female spectator's "capacity to feel matters more than what [she] may feel about slaves"—as dependent upon "the *employment of white womanhood*" as an

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<sup>47</sup> MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> MacDonald, 121.

<sup>49</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 52; Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2-3.

established category.<sup>50</sup> I argue, by contrast, that it is precisely sensibility's domestication of slavery that constructs white womanhood as a category to mitigate an emerging middle class's unique complicity in slavery's violent intimate commerce.

As I indicated in my introduction, sensibility became a way of simultaneously recognizing and sanitizing the reality that “the very economic processes which permitted the bourgeoisie to displace the aristocracy ha[d] rendered the middle classes complicit with a system that extracts class privilege from the sufferings of a vast order of nonfranchised others,” most notably, enslaved Africans.<sup>51</sup> The need to absolve and validate a rising class of (especially female) theatregoers explains why the overwhelming emphasis in reviews of Southerne's play rests on the quantity of tears the actress playing Imoinda is able to provoke across the boxes, pit, and galleries.<sup>52</sup> Englishwomen's public displays of sensibility in response to slavery effectively create the distance between private domesticity and the corrupting forces of the market that come to define “white womanhood” throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth.

Sentimental value, in the space of the theatre, takes on material dimensions in excess of the abstract. I argue that it is precisely the commercialization of sensibility in response to representations of slavery—the economic circuits of its performance and consumption within the theatre—that render white Englishwomen's “segregation from the arena in which slaves are

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<sup>50</sup> MacDonald, “The Disappearing African Woman,” 76, 78 (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 232.

<sup>52</sup> According to James Peck, a “performance that galvanizes a public invites a dual analysis: first, as a symptom of the anxieties that trouble that public; second (and not unrelated), as an articulation of its social interests. For the theatre historian, it is a hermeneutic opportunity—a concentrated, immensely overdetermined figure that must not simply be praised as the pinnacle achievement of one of “The Great Ones” but must be accounted for by reference to the signifying chains and material conflicts that render the performance so valuable.” James Peck, “Anne Oldfield's Lady Townly,” 399-400.

traded and empires built” an impossibility. After all, the very same actresses whose embodiment of enslaved women like Imoinda precipitated the cleansing tears of female spectators were themselves highly visible and controversial emblems of intimate commerce: throughout the period, they capitalized on the marketability of intimacy for consumption by, among others, the socially mobile Englishwomen who went to see them perform. Their insinuation into public economies of intimacy, as professional women performers embodying enslaved women, positioned them outside of “white womanhood” even as they helped to construct it. In spite of the wealth of scholarship on Southerne’s *Oroonoko*, few studies make more than passing mention of the actresses who brought the play to life, and whose own celebrity frequently eclipsed that of the characters they performed.<sup>53</sup> Because the signifying chains of their own public personas were intimately intertwined with the plays about slavery in which they appeared and the roles of enslaved women they performed, these actresses became a unique conduit through which a theatergoing public could confront anxieties about both the domestic and colonial ramifications of commercialized intimacy.

The theatre’s transmutation of corrupting commerce into moralizing commerce would begin before a single word of Southerne’s text was uttered: the prologue to *Oroonoko*, written by John Dryden, frames the ensuing dramatic tale with an affirmation of the actress’s role in

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<sup>53</sup> Exceptions include Nussbaum, “Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White” and “Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity” in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, eds. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 148-68; and Dominique, “Altering *Oroonoko*.” MacDonald’s excellent illumination of the ways Southerne’s female characters are linked with money—as capitalists or property—does not extend to the role of the actress in this scheme. In the text of the play, “Lucy can pretend to be someone she is not, and Charlot can even ‘change’ genders, but Imoinda and the child she carries can only be property.” See MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*, 122. However, on stage, Imoinda—whether performed by Jane Rogers, George Ann Bellamy, or Susannah Cibber—transforms herself into a form of property by pretending to be someone she is not.



exchanging moral instruction for the wages that supported her performance and provocation of sensibility:

If you will kindly but supply their Wages:  
Which you with ease may furnish, by retrenching  
Your Superfluities of Wine and Wenching.  
Who'd grudge to spare from Riot and hard Drinking,  
To lay it out on means to mend his thinking?  
To follow such Advice you shou'd have leisure.  
Since what refines your Sense, refines your Pleasure.

The prologue's linking of wealth (you with ease may furnish) and consumptive excess (wine and wenching) playfully indicts aristocratic dissipation and proposes modes of reformist self-regulation—both economic (retrenching) and intimate (seeking the refinement of sensibility)—that would gain substantial traction as the century progressed. Even as these conflated images of aristocratic excess became a frequent foil for middle-class moderation decades later, they also became a potent figure for concerns about the middling classes' newly acquired wealth and its ties to the degenerating excesses of imperial trade.<sup>54</sup> However tongue-in-cheek, Dryden's prologue makes clear that audiences are paying actresses not only for the entertainment they provide, but for their ability to refine economic and consumptive excess into sensibility.

Although actresses may have helped to legitimize the social mobility of the newly moneyed by facilitating their performances of genteel feeling, the public self-commodification propelling their own social mobility often relegated these women to the margins of polite society. Scholars like Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody have linked the rise of celebrity female

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<sup>54</sup> My second chapter most fully examines the *Black Venus*'s deployment as an emblem of such excesses.

actresses in the eighteenth century with their commodification and exchange of intimacy within the space of the theatre.<sup>55</sup> Actresses playing Imoinda (and Yarico after her) capitalized on an “‘interiority effect,’ the theatricalized intimacy that produced a simulacrum of complexity and depth” as a commodity which they, “as businesswomen, transacted with audiences and traded upon. By the end of the century this form of moveable property had been reduced to fetishized property, to the actress herself as a product, who turned that self-commodification into a position from which to mobilize her rights as a woman.”<sup>56</sup> Through these means, many actresses achieved such influence beyond the theatre that their public personas bled into and even overshadowed the roles they inhabited. Joseph Roach relates a telling example in Charles Lamb’s frustration at the inevitable palimpsests produced by the performances of celebrity actresses. Lamb goes so far as to suggest that Shakespeare’s plays should only be read (not staged) “because he believed the vicarious experience of distinctively acted roles spuriously substituted for real communion with the characters created by the Bard: ‘We speak of Lady Macbeth,’ Lamb complained, ‘while in reality we are thinking of Mrs. S.’ (BD, 14:67).”<sup>57</sup> Their star power notwithstanding, few actresses were able to escape the taint of their profession. After all, in constructing their public personas, actresses “openly, even ostentatiously displayed and circulated [details of their private lives] in the emergent public sphere” at precisely the moment that white womanhood was

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<sup>55</sup> See Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, “Introduction: The Singularity of Theatrical Celebrity” in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, eds. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 1-14 and Joseph Roach, “Public Intimacy: The Prior History of ‘It’” in the same volume, 16-30. See also Nussbaum, “Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity.”

<sup>56</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 45.

<sup>57</sup> Roach, *It*, 147.

emerging as an idealized emblem of domestic privacy guarded against the vagaries of a credit-driven market.<sup>58</sup>

Many newly-moneyed celebrity actresses became targets of derision because of the class porousness that their profession's implicit blending of character and performer facilitated. Those who emerged from humble origins to play aristocratic ladies on stage often carried their characters' trappings of wealth and status with them beyond the theatre and into the Town, whether through the clothes they wore, the manners they affected, or the circles in which they moved. Nell Gwyn and Dorothy Jordan's acting success paved the way for their entry into the most elite circles as mistresses of royalty—Charles II and Prince William Henry respectively—but both were frequently scandalized in the press for the transactional character of these affairs.<sup>59</sup> In one curious example, *The Female Tatler's* Mrs. Crackenthorpe, the self-proclaimed “woman who knows everything,” singles out Jane Rogers, the first actress to perform Imoinda, as emblematic of the distasteful presumption of such actresses who “do their utmost off the stage to appear the persons they represent on it, and sometimes out-do ‘em in dress and extravagant living.”<sup>60</sup> Rogers played Imoinda twelve times between the play's debut in 1695 and 1717. Targeting women readers in particular, this spin-off of Richard Steele's *The Tatler* modeled middling class manners through its commentary on London news and gossip. In launching its critique, *The Female Tatler* repeatedly refers to Rogers not by her name, but by the victimized

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<sup>58</sup> Nussbaum, “Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity,” 150. Encouraging spectators to invade their privacy and actually performing a version of that privacy on stage,” Nussbaum explains, “the early actresses manipulated privacy into a construction of an imagined [and marketable] offstage personality” (150).

<sup>59</sup> I discuss Dorothy Jordan's consequent representation as a Black Venus at length in my second chapter.

<sup>60</sup> Mrs. Crackenthorpe, *The Female Tatler*, no.6 (London: B. Bragge, 20 July 1709). As Rosenthal reminds us, when actresses exposed “class identity itself as conditional and performative,” they mounted a public challenge to established regimes of birth and worth, but simultaneously destabilized the budding legitimacy of a middling class and ideal of white womanhood so dependent on such performances (“Entertaining Women” 167).

heroine she plays: “Imoinda, the actress at Drury Lane.” Mrs. Crackenthorpe mockingly announces, “*Having put off her London-House, and residing all the Summer at her country Seat, would when she comes to Town, Board in some Fashionable Street, with a reputable Virtuous Family.*” The announcement undermines the class legitimacy afforded by Rogers’s financial success—she “*expects a first Floor, furnish’d after the newest manner*”—by exposing its dependence on a fickle theatre market that has left many other women in her profession destitute—“*poor Souls, many of ‘em want a Dinner.*”<sup>61</sup> And, whether intentionally or not, by referring to Rogers as “Imoinda, the actress,” *The Female Tatler* intertwines the public performer with the enslaved woman whose abandonment to the market materially and imaginatively constructs the very notion of white womanhood from which, Mrs. Crackenthorpe implies, Rogers ought to be excluded.

By projecting the identity of an enslaved female character onto a woman whose presumptuous social mobility she ridicules, the voice of *The Female Tatler* collapses the dramatic differences between the commodification of Rogers and Imoinda’s bodies and intimate lives. In so doing, she implies that “these two bodies – the virtual body of the role and the real body of the actress – were not easily separated into discrete entities.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Jane Rogers herself had capitalized on this doubling: when maligned for her infamous affair with actor Robert Wilks, “she ventured out upon the stage’s apron,” not as Imoinda, but as herself, “to protest her virtue,” vowing that she would “*Study to live the Character I play.*”<sup>63</sup> The porousness between actress and character has unique significance for Imoinda in a way that does not register with

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<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Crackenthorpe, *The Female Tatler*, no.5 (London: B. Bragge, 18 July 1709).

<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum, “Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity,” 150.

<sup>63</sup> Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, 45.

other iconic heroines like Lady Macbeth. Rogers may have drawn upon the currency of Imoinda's virtue to resolve doubts about her own, but, as Mrs. Crackenthorpe reveals, the actress and the character are most meaningfully linked by their shared implication in public forms of intimate commerce that exclude them from the emerging domestic ideal of white womanhood they simultaneously help to construct through the commodification of their intimate lives. Thus, when we examine the resounding success of Southerne's *Oroonoko* and the iconic status of its victimized heroine, we must recognize that, for eighteenth-century audiences, Imoinda was inseparable from the London actresses who embodied her. And, as a result, Imoinda becomes as much a figure of the actress's commodified intimacy as she does a figure of slavery's.<sup>64</sup>

This palimpsestic layering of actress and enslaved heroine as emblems of intimate commerce is particularly striking in the circumstances surrounding Susannah Maria Cibber's mid-century performances of Imoinda. Decades after Rogers made her debut in the role, beloved actress and singer Susanna Cibber performed Imoinda in Southerne's *Oroonoko*—at Covent Garden (1742 and 1751) and at Drury Lane (1755, 1756, and 1757). Her first performance of the virtuous heroine took place, however, in the shadow of a highly publicized private scandal. When Susannah married Theophilus Cibber—heir to the Cibber theatre empire—in 1734, it was clear that her career would benefit. Indeed, her father-in-law, Colley Cibber was not only a famous actor in his own right, as well as poet laureate; he was also the theatre manager at Drury Lane and took it upon himself to train Susannah as a tragic actress. After years of accumulating debt, her husband, Theophilus Cibber, sought to mend his finances by prostituting Susannah to a wealthy lodger, John Sloper. Theophilus even filed a lawsuit against Sloper for cuckolding him,

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<sup>64</sup> Lisa Freeman confirms that the “fictional persona created by a playwright often had to compete with the persona or public reputation of the actor or actress taking that part.” Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 18.

resulting in a graphically detailed and widely publicized trial. Susannah ran off with Sloper and hid from the public eye in Dublin until the scandal died down, reinventing herself upon return to London in 1742 as a woman victimized by a cruel and greedy husband. This was the same year she took on the role of Imoinda. As London audiences shed ample tears for the tragic actress's heartfelt portrayal of Southerne's heroine, Susannah Cibber's body rendered her own commodified and violated sexuality inextricable from that of the enslaved woman she inhabited.

Even when Cibber performs Imoinda in Hawkesworth's revised *Oroonoko* (1759), which deliberately excises the comic subplot about commercially transgressive Englishwomen, the porousness between character and actress ensures that the Cibber scandal haunts the more squarely colonial (and, according to some, antislavery) tragedy. Again, Cibber's body itself stands in for the metropolitan dimensions of commodified female sexuality which link the London theatre with the colonial plantations it staged. Similar palimpsests were produced by actresses who played both Imoinda and one of the Welldon sisters in different productions of the play. Celebrity actress George Ann Bellamy played Charlot Welldon in 1771 after having played Imoinda eight times between 1748 and 1759. Elizabeth Inchbald played Lucy Welldon in 1785 before taking on the role of Imoinda later that year.<sup>65</sup> The layering of roles and actresses undoubtedly influenced the impact of Southerne's *Oroonoko* on eighteenth-century audiences in ways that are simply not available through analysis of the text alone.<sup>66</sup> Thus, while Aravamudan illuminates the distinction between "the more private commodification of eligible Englishwomen" and the "public context of the sale of slaves," he does not account for the ways

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<sup>65</sup> *The London Stage Database*, Mattie Burkert, et al, <https://londonstagedatabase.uoregon.edu/>.

<sup>66</sup> As another example, Mrs. Verbruggen, who played Charlot, was married to Mr. Verbruggen, who played Oroonoko. See Maximilliam E. Novak and David S. Rhodes, introduction to *Oroonoko* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), xviii.

in which actresses' public commodification of their private lives occupy a liminal position linking these modes of gendered insertion into circuits of commerce.<sup>67</sup> And this liminal position is marked in visual terms as Blackness—or dubious whiteness.

Despite her embodiment by a so-called white actress, the instability of Imoinda's whiteness in the text of Southerne's play is only magnified (rather than resolved) on stage because the actresses inhabiting her are themselves racialized for their transgressions into the market. The taint of the market so inimical to emerging notions of middling white womanhood reconfigures the visible whiteness of the eighteenth-century actresses as artificial complexion. Much as it did in Southerne's quip about the Guinea-Bawd, Blackness—even when concealed by white complexion—becomes a legible marker of commodified female intimacy. Southerne's text generally destabilizes assumptions about white complexion as an indicator of virtue, linking it instead with falseness. Specifically, Oroonoko inverts the value ascribed to the capacity of white skin to blush, reconfiguring it as evidence of falseness and corruption: "let the guilty blush: The white man that betray'd me: honest black Disdains to change its colour" (I.ii).<sup>68</sup> On stage, Oroonoko's Blackness would itself be counterfeit through the use of burnt cork blacking makeup, yet the whiteness of Imoinda's complexion—or, rather that of the actress—was also

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<sup>67</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 54.

<sup>68</sup> Here Oroonoko anticipates the way Equiano's description of his captors' white complexions defamiliarizes the equation of whiteness with goodness: "I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair." Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, ed. Brycchan Carey (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39. Later in the play, the complexion of the villainous Governor is linked with the violent excess of both his greed and his lust for Imoinda: "Luxurious, passionate, and amorous:/ Such a Complexion, and made bold by power,/ To countenance all he is prone to do;/ Will know no bounds, no law against his Lusts:/ If, in a fit of his Intemperance,/ With a strong hand, he should resolve to seize,/ And force my Royal Mistress from your Arms" (III.ii). Note also that in the opening scene of Hawkesworth's *Oroonoko*, the planters refer to Imoinda as a "mongrel succubus" and a "fair slave" who is "not of their complexion" (I.i).

presumed artificial and burdened with “the tincture of contamination,” the “smudge of blackness” it concealed.<sup>69</sup>

Lyndon Dominique presents a striking anonymous satire of an actress whose performance of Imoinda “suggests that she deliberately employs whiteness as a duplicitous disguise”:

Since ‘Vertue’ is stereotypically associated with purity and whiteness, the speaker’s insinuation that Imoinda ‘sells her Virtue, and complexion buys’ implies that the actress playing the role is known for exchanging one form of licit whiteness (‘Vertue’) for an illicit, deceptive one (‘complexion’). In short, the speaker accuses this actress of deliberately assuming the popular role of Southerne’s white African Imoinda to present herself in the ‘innocence,’ ‘tender air,’ and ‘chaste’ demeanor associated with this role, thereby cosmetically masking her alarming offstage reputation for sexual profligacy.<sup>70</sup>

The satire alludes to a Mrs. B—as the actress guilty of cosmetically masking her scandalous personal life.<sup>71</sup> Dominique speculates that, as Elizabeth Barry frequently played the roles of virginal young girls, the satire is referencing her. However, the only actresses to perform Imoinda in a major London theatre by 1707 were Jane Rogers and Anne Oldfield. Moreover, Mrs. Barry was in her 50s in 1707 and had, for some time, been playing older motherly figures

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<sup>69</sup> Nussbaum, “Black Women: Why Imoinda Turns White,” 161. In his chapter on skin, Joseph Roach argues that the star tragic actress of the late eighteenth century, Sarah Siddons bore “the burden of racialized whiteness,” pointing to a kind of obsessive attention to her skin: “Even in scenes of anger and passion,” Roach explains, “Mrs. Siddons kept the pallid complexion that prompted George III to chide her for using a white base makeup, which she professed not to need and denied having used” (*It* 164). The implication that Siddons’s whiteness (even if solely a matter of degree) is cosmetic rather than genuine recalls the anonymous satire to which Dominique draws our attention at the beginning of *Imoinda’s Shade*, and which I discuss in a moment.

<sup>70</sup> Dominique, *Imoinda’s Shade*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> The satire more likely refers to Jane Rogers, given her own public affirmation of using the virtue of her character to remedy her personal moral shortcomings.



as well as powerful, racialized women like Cleopatra in *All for Love* (1704) and Roxana in *Rival Queens* (1706). It was not uncommon at the time for actresses to be represented as having played iconic roles even if they had not.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the misidentification of Mrs. Barry—who, Dominique points out, was maligned as a mercenary prostitute—as Southerne’s heroine reiterates *The Female Tatler*’s equation of Imoinda with professional actresses generally as women compromised by the public commodification of their bodies and private lives. When layered onto the play’s central tragedy—the loss of the virtuous Imoinda and her unborn child to the inhumane business of slavery—these dexterous manipulations of whiteness and Blackness reveal the deep entanglement of slavery’s circuits of intimate commerce with domestic notions of white womanhood.

The commodification of actresses’ bodies and intimate lives extends well beyond the theater market: the consumer objects they inspire, and their very likenesses are implicated in the same imperial and domestic commercial circuits as those commodities produced by the enslaved women they inhabit. Of the many celebrity actresses to take the stage as Imoinda, Anne Oldfield performed the role more than twelve times between 1707 and 1720. According to James Peck, Oldfield was “singularly gifted with the theatrical use of dress,” and as an “enormously fashion-conscious woman who adorned herself with the latest imported goods,” she was an eminent trendsetter. Peck argues that, in the role of Lady Townley from George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode*, Oldfield “performed an image of femininity that supported the commercial regime—both by creating the desire for the consumer goods that supported overseas trade and by positioning

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<sup>72</sup> For specific examples of actresses mistakenly depicted in the role of Imoinda, see Kalman A. Burnim and Philip H. Highfill, *John Bell, Patron of British Theatrical Portraiture: A Catalog of the Theatrical Portraits in His Editions of Bell's Shakespeare and Bell's British Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 171.

the consuming woman as a psychic displacement of the potentially enervating anxiety that the Whigs felt about the credit upon which their wealth depended.” Key to the displacement, however, was the “image of a consuming woman who might be safely confined to a domestic sphere.”<sup>73</sup> As a public woman and “commodified consumer,” Anne Oldfield was an embodied reminder of how porous and inchoate that domestic sphere really was.<sup>74</sup>

Nowhere is this more evident than in the actress’s performance of Imoinda. Unlike Lady Townley, whose eventual settlement within a properly female domesticity may have displaced unease about the market’s instability, Oldfield’s embodiment of Imoinda likely condensed Whig anxiety about the market’s alienating influences; the vast discrepancies in their agency notwithstanding, Imoinda’s physical and affective commodification are intimately intertwined with the actress’s own. Moreover, there is no domestic sphere for the character of Imoinda to occupy, at least not as a subject. She is an enslaved laborer producing goods for consumption in the English home, and she is a mother whose child is destined to augment the wealth of her English enslavers. When Dominique observes that “female audiences were drawn to the theater as much to see what these known stars were wearing and how beautiful they looked performing Imoinda than out of a need to see each actress’s portrayal of African slavery in Surinam,” he reminds us that it is, in part, Imoinda’s exclusion from the domestic sphere that helps construct this domain in the first place and grants Southerne’s English female characters and spectators entry to it.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Peck, “Anne Oldfield’s Lady Townly,” 415.

<sup>74</sup> The enticing fashions she and other actresses sported, both in and out of character, provoked a market demand that transcended social classes: “Celebrity attached itself to clothing and costume and thus could be transplanted from one rank to another, and from the theater to the town” (Nussbaum, *Rival Queens* 58).

<sup>75</sup> Dominique, *Imoinda’s Shade*, 54.

In addition to influencing fashions, actresses' bodies and intimate lives circulated in their memoirs, portraits, playbills, magazine reviews, satirical prints, newspaper gossip, and other material artefacts.<sup>76</sup> As Nussbaum puts it, “[w]omen players were literally commodified as admirers eagerly bought up trinkets and memorabilia imprinted with star actresses dressed as their favorite characters.”<sup>77</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century, images of actresses in their most iconic roles, including Mrs. Hartley as Imoinda (1779), were printed onto Delftware ceramic tiles to adorn fireplaces using the same technology that would facilitate the mass reproduction and domestication of Wedgwood's famous abolitionist image of the kneeling enslaved man (and later woman).<sup>78</sup> In this curious bit of memorabilia, the English actress and the enslaved woman she inhabits intertwine as emblems of intimate commerce both inimical to and constitutive of the English ideal of white womanhood to form an ornament of English domestic space. These manufactured tiles linked the English household and the colonial plantation in even more explicit ways: pieces not kept for domestic consumption were exported to other parts of the empire, including Barbados and “the ‘King’s plantations,’ ...either the West Indies or colonial

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<sup>76</sup> See Aparna Gollapudi, “Selling Celebrity: Actor’s Portraits in Bell’s Shakespeare and Bell’s British Theatre,” *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Winter, 2012): 54-81. Roach says of Sarah Siddons, “the actress had created such an unforgettable afterimage in [the role of Lady Macbeth] that for decades memorabilia-collecting fans could buy a Wedgwood chess set designed by John Flaxman with her gesticulating Lady Macbeth used as the model for the figures of the queens, both white and black (BD, 14:67)” (*It* 147).

<sup>77</sup> Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, 57.

<sup>78</sup> As Hans van Lemmen explains, “John Sadler began to print decorations on Josiah Wedgwood’s creamware pottery” in 1761. Hans van Lemmen, “From Over-glaze to Under-glaze: British Transfer-printed Tiles 1756–1854,” *Journal of the Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society*, vol. 23 (2017): 2. Josslyn Stiner explains that Sadler’s methods represent broader revolutions in mass printing, enabling him to print on 100 tiles in an hour, as opposed to 30 minutes per hand-painted tile. See Josslyn K. Stiner, *Piecing It Together: The Introduction of Delftware Tiles to North America and their Enduring Legacy in Charleston, South Carolina*, (M.S. thesis, Clemson University, 2010), 34.

America.”<sup>79</sup> This delftware tile also illustrates Imoinda’s diffusion over the course of the eighteenth century as a racially flexible and palimpsestic Black Venus by recalling Behn’s ekphrastic domestication of the Black Imoinda’s “japanned skin” which transmuted her into a form of Oriental chinoiserie, a curio “that adorned the mantelpieces and cabinets of the leisured classes.”<sup>80</sup>

Actresses weren’t the only professional women to capitalize on their stage personas; sex workers did too. Laura Rosenthal reminds us that “eighteenth-century culture continued to associate actresses with prostitutes” not least because “the eighteenth-century stage found its home in the broad spectrum of commercial entertainments in London’s urban culture which commodified ‘vice’ and ‘virtue’ in the same marketplace.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the commodification of actresses within the theatre found its explicitly sexualized corollary just outside of it in the surrounding neighborhood of Covent Garden. In the same print market through which actress’s memoirs and portraits circulated, so too did *Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies*, a brothel guide advertising sex workers with detailed physical descriptions and sexual calling cards. Some of these sex workers even impersonated the most popular actresses of the day, assuming the names “Frances Abington” and “Miss Sarah Siddons,” the latter self-styled as a “good-natured piece of luxury.” Since Siddons, the actress, was known for her unalterably (almost unnaturally) white complexion, “[a]ssociating her by proxy with prostitution, as *Harris’s List* does, ironically

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<sup>79</sup> Stiner, *Piecing It Together*, 36. See also van Lemmen, “From Over-glaze to Under-glaze,” 2 and Rhoda Edwards, *London Potters circa 1570-1710* (Staffordshire, UK: George Street Press, 1974), 25.

<sup>80</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 41. This provides another way to understand Aravamudan’s notion of Oroonoko’s domestication as a form of petting through the practice or *oroonokoism*. See also Chi-ming Yang, “Asia out of Place: The Aesthetics of Incorruptibility in Behn’s Oroonoko,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2009): 235–253.

<sup>81</sup> Rosenthal, “Entertaining Women,” 159.

intensifies her trading on that whiteness.”<sup>82</sup> While Roach’s analysis of whiteness here is framed by the chapter’s literal attention to “Skin,” my aim is to pick apart the figurative instability which prevents a whitened Imoinda from being quite “white” and which registers the commodified intimacy of female stage performances as a “taint” or “tarnish.” Part of my contention here is that Blackness (or even a suspect whiteness) does not strictly represent primitivity or sexual excess, but also registers visually in racial terms the troubling intersection of private intimacy and public exchange.

The haunting legacy of this symbolic practice is evident in Victorian models of racialized womanhood in bourgeois English society. Ann McClintock explains that “women who worked publicly and visibly for money were stationed on the threshold between the white and black races.”<sup>83</sup> Most visible and threatening of all were sex workers who not only “transgressed the middle-class boundary between private and public, paid work and unpaid work,” but who profited from their own commercialized sexuality. Because the Victorian period marks an increasing ossification of racial difference due to the rise of racist pseudoscience, attention to the lasting influence of intimate commerce in shaping racialized notions of gender has been fairly limited. Given that the contingency of whiteness upon relative distance from intimate commerce persists even at a moment when the lines of racial difference seem so firmly drawn makes the need to put critical pressure on the whiteness of English actresses, themselves so commonly linked with sex workers, that much more urgent.

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<sup>82</sup> Roach, *It*, 164-65.

<sup>83</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 56.

### *Yarico: Indian/African Maid*

Alongside Imoinda, the alternately Indian and African Yarico also proliferated throughout eighteenth-century culture as a woman of color victimized by Atlantic slavery. Even though Yarico's life on the English stage didn't begin until the end of the century, London audiences may very well have perceived Imoinda, Yarico, and the actresses who embodied them as interrelated figures of intimate commerce who sutured colonial slavery to the English domestic sphere. A 1791 portrait of Elizabeth Satchell Kemble by De Wilde illustrates this point, depicting the actress in the role of Imoinda, a role she never actually played.<sup>84</sup> Kemble was famous, however, for being the first actress to portray Yarico in George Colman Jr.'s comic opera, *Inkle and Yarico*. By the time Kemble debuted this role at the Haymarket theatre in 1787, Yarico's story had appeared in a travel narrative, a periodical essay, several poems, conduct books<sup>85</sup>, and newspaper gossip. Frank Felsenstein's compendium of Yarico tales, *English Trader, Indian Maid* (1999), highlights the "exceptional plasticity of the story as popular anecdote" and identifies sixty discrete versions published between 1711 and 1810.<sup>86</sup> The tale endures numerous alterations over the course of the century, not least of which is the racial identity of its heroine. At its core, the story of *Inkle and Yarico* follows an English merchant who falls in love with an Indian/African maid, but who ultimately sells her into slavery to secure a

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<sup>84</sup> See Kalman A. Burnim and Philip H. Highfill, *John Bell, Patron of British Theatrical Portraiture: A Catalog of the Theatrical Portraits in His Editions of Bell's Shakespeare and Bell's British Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 171. The Miss Kemble who performed Imoinda at Drury Lane was Frances Kemble, though Elizabeth Satchell Kemble *would* go on to become the face of Yarico in Colman Jr.'s adaptation.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Hugh Blair, *The Classic; Or, Summary of Mental Improvement and Moral Entertainment ... in a Variety of the Most Approved Histories, Anecdotes, Allegories, Tales, Visions, Etc., Selected from the Best Classical Writers, to Which Is Prefixed, an Essay on Pronunciation or Delivery* (London: Hodson, 1801), 28-31.

<sup>86</sup> Frank Felsenstein, *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 2. Felsenstein builds largely upon Lawrence Marsden Price's *Inkle and Yarico Album* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937).

profit. For some scholars, like Keith Sandiford, Yarico's tale rehearses an ideological conflict between Old World corruption and the Golden Age of the Noble Savage. Reading multiple iterations of the tale as indicative of the way private histories become public myths, Sandiford argues that generations of English audiences consistently experience the tale as a conflict between "Inkle's civilized cynicism and materialistic motivations" and "Yarico's simplicity and innocence."<sup>87</sup> Undoubtedly, many did. However, these assessments occlude Yarico's rhetorical flexibility across versions of the tale by fixing her in a mythic past she repeatedly traverses.

Daniel O'Quinn and Nandini Bhattacharya attend more closely to Yarico's instability in their readings of Colman Jr.'s comic opera, arguing that her uneven assimilation into metropolitan notions of femininity foregrounds the shifting imbrication of race, gender, class, and empire which play out across versions of the tale. In "Mercantile Deformities," O'Quinn argues that Yarico's sexual betrayal and the numerous sentimental responses to it were critical to "the consolidation of metropolitan femininity."<sup>88</sup> He suggests that Steele's framing of Inkle & Yarico's affair within "the conventions of metropolitan courtship" effectively subsumes Yarico's racial otherness in "the constitution of gender normativity." O'Quinn assumes, in other words, that Yarico's racial difference is rendered incidental to the story's primary commitment in the *Spectator*—a critique of male inconstancy rather than of the slave trade. By contrast, he contends that when Yarico's story is staged in Colman's opera, "this subsumption of racial difference into normative femininity is put into crisis not only because the theatre demands an embodiment of this contradiction but also because normative femininity is itself beginning to be understood as

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<sup>87</sup> Keith A. Sandiford, "Inkle and Yarico: the Construction of Alterity from History to Literature," *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide*, 64 (1990): 116.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 390.

incommensurable with non-white bodies.”<sup>89</sup> O’Quinn’s analysis of both Steele and Colman Jr.’s adaptations proceeds from what I have suggested is a mistaken assumption that a stable and unchallenged category of white metropolitan womanhood exists at either end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, as with *Imoinda*, I argue that it is precisely Yarico’s racial liminality and her inhabitability by so-called white Englishwomen that unsettles the category as a haunting reminder of the violent means through which it was constructed.

Bhattacharya addresses more directly the way in which Yarico’s doubling as commodity and would-be consumer is deployed in Colman Jr.’s opera to domesticate the intrusive commerce of Atlantic slavery. In “Family Jewels,” she argues that “relying on...the familial exchange of affect and women provided a meliorating device” that could “rescue the west from self-loathing for its traffic with the non-Western or the slave.”<sup>90</sup> By focusing primarily on the ways in which Colman Jr.’s opera reifies *patriarchal* power through the commodification of wives and slaves alike, Bhattacharya overlooks the role that *women* play as consumers of Yarico’s narrative. Neither O’Quinn nor Bhattacharya address at any length the role that Yarico’s performative inhabitability plays in mediating categories of racialized colonial and metropolitan womanhood. In the remainder of this chapter, I address this omission by analyzing several variations of Yarico’s narrative—beginning with Ligon’s 1657 travel narrative and ending with Colman Jr.’s 1787 opera—to demonstrate how Yarico’s racial flexibility and layering onto so-called white Englishwomen reflects an anxiety throughout the century with Atlantic slavery’s inextricable intrusion into—and construction of—middling domesticity.

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<sup>89</sup> O’Quinn, 391.

<sup>90</sup> Bhattacharya, “Family Jewels,” 221.



### *Yarico Abroad: Richard Ligon's Travel Account*

Yarico's first appearance in Richard Ligon's *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (1657) betrays the porousness between empirical and figurative dimensions of gendered racial discourse and, in so doing, alerts us to the instability of their deployment in metropolitan culture. Like many such travel accounts, Ligon's *History* constructs an ethnographic hierarchy of the island's inhabitants, beginning with enslaved Africans, then Indians, and, finally, a white master class. Each group is described according to physical appearance, temperament, and intellectual and moral capacity. Yarico's story concludes the *History's* characterization of Barbados's Indians, who, Ligon explains, "are very active men, and apt to learn anything sooner than Negroes...[T]heir women have very small breasts, and have more of the shape of the Europeans than the Negroes."<sup>91</sup> Ligon introduces Yarico with a similar physical description: "We had an *Indian* woman, a slave in the house, who was of excellent shape and colour, for it was a pure bright bay; small breasts, with nipples of a porphyry colour, this woman would not be wooed by any means to wear clothes" (106). He concludes his ethnographic study of Yarico with an account of her deft management of the physical challenges of childbirth, which he interprets as clear evidence of her sturdiness.

In "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," Jennifer Morgan identifies Ligon's account as consistent with other representations of Black and brown womanhood which "relied on mutually constitutive ideologies of race and gender to affirm Europe's legitimate access to African labor"

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Ligon and Karen O. Kupperman, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 106. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

and thus laid the “discursive groundwork on which the ‘theft of bodies’ could be justified.”<sup>92</sup> In this case, Yarico’s capacity to take childbirth in stride—without pain—and immediately return to work is emblematic of a broader theme in representations of African and Native American women, where labor as childbearing and work become synonymous and naturalized as the purview of plantocratic control.<sup>93</sup> Were her story to end here, we could easily read Yarico’s presence as alleged ethnographic evidence of an entire race’s primitivity and appropriate subordination within the island’s racial hierarchy. However, Ligon’s account takes a rather anecdotal—even allegorical—turn, as he describes her encounter with a shipwrecked Englishman whom she saves from certain death, with whom she falls in love, and by whom she is ultimately betrayed: “[T]he [English] youth, when he came ashore in the *Barbadoes*, forgot the kindness of the poor maid, that had ventured her life for his safety, and sold her for a slave, who was as free born as he: and so poor *Yarico* for her love, lost her liberty” (107).

Although the transition between Yarico’s identification as “an *Indian* woman, a slave,” an “*Indian* maid,” “a poor maid,” and finally, “poor *Yarico*” plays out in less than a page, it tracks a meaningful shift between her role as an ethnographic specimen of racial difference and as an allegorized individual female subject victimized by mercantilist greed. This shift illuminates a tension in the porousness between discursive registers through which representations of Black and brown women reach an English reading public. While Morgan rightfully attributes stereotypes of Black (and white) womanhood to travel narratives like Ligon’s, she simultaneously argues that the empirical hierarchies of racial difference they

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<sup>92</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 54.1 (1997): 169.

<sup>93</sup> Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder,’” 168.

ostensibly reinforce are always already inseparable from the figurative burdens they bear in constructing those categories in the first place. As the reputed origin of Yarico's tale in English culture, Richard Ligon's travel narrative exemplifies how, even in an ostensibly ethnographic text, the boundary separating empirical and figurative representations of racial and gender difference blurs in ways that invite more flexible (and less literal) interpretations of racialized womanhood in English imaginative culture. This helps to explain, in part, why Yarico's initially reddish complexion becomes increasingly "jetty" as the century progresses and her tale becomes a more explicit vehicle for engaging with the Atlantic trade's enslavement of Black Africans. Moreover, Richard Steele's version of Yarico's tale, which cites Ligon as its source, reveals that what was most rhetorically resonant in 1711 London was Yarico's figurative flexibility as a *modern* victim of intimate commerce rather than as a Noble Savage plucked heartlessly from an Edenic paradise.

### ***Yarico in London: Richard Steele's The Spectator***

Published in the eleventh *Spectator* on March 13, 1711, Sir Richard Steele's "Inkle and Yarico" expands the kernel of Ligon's anecdote, interpolating it into a lesson about distinctly metropolitan middling sensibility. The frame for Yarico's tale is a drawing room debate over the relative constancy of the sexes. The well-respected hostess, Arietta, graciously listens while an obnoxious visitor whom we know only as a "common-place talker" regales her and our narrator, Mr. Spectator, with a misogynistic interpretation of *The Ephesian Matron* as evidence of women's infidelity.<sup>94</sup> Arietta undermines the validity of his example by pointing out the

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<sup>94</sup> Petronius's "The Ephesian Matron" tells the story of a widow whose reputed fidelity is marked by her intention to starve herself to death at her husband's tomb. She is soon seduced by a soldier guarding bodies that have been crucified (to prevent families from reclaiming them). To save the soldier from punishment, the widow offers up her husband's corpse as a replacement, thus exposing the shallowness of her fidelity. For an excellent reading of this

proclivity of slighted men to malign a whole sex for the crimes of individual women. Arietta offers, as a counterpoint, the story of Inkle and Yarico. Although she cites the very page number of Ligon's *History* from which she derives her own authoritative example, her telling expands the travel narrative's brief paragraph considerably and with three critical additions. Firstly, she elaborates on Inkle's character, contextualizing his greed as a consequence of his upbringing. Second, her retelling relishes in the details of Inkle and Yarico's romantic sojourn, rebranding Yarico as an emblem of maternal and domestic care as well as a potential consumer of English leisure. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Steele introduces a new plot detail designed to magnify Inkle's heartless villainy. When Yarico pleads with her erstwhile beloved not to sell her into slavery for the sake of Inkle's child whom she bears, he responds only by raising his price. With a circulation of between sixty and eighty-thousand readers at the time of the story's publication, Steele's *Spectator* made Yarico a household name, and her tale a national allegory.<sup>95</sup> What precisely Yarico's victimization allegorized about the English nation has been a matter of debate.

Most critical engagements with Steele's adaptation interpret the drawing room frame as evidence that its most salient critiques are domestic in nature, targeting male inconstancy and mercantilist greed rather than the slave trade.<sup>96</sup> David Brewer, who remarks on "the startling

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tale in "Inkle and Yarico" as reflective of an antifeminist classical tradition in the eighteenth century, see Nicole Horejsi, "'A Counterpart to the Ephesian Matron': Steele's 'Inkle and Yarico' and a Feminist Critique of the Classics," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 39.2 (2006): 201-226.

<sup>95</sup> Sandiford, "Inkle and Yarico," 116. Sandiford does not cite his source for this estimate, but Donald F. Bond estimates that three thousand copies were printed daily, and countless of these were read by many individuals, given the popular custom of reading them in coffee houses, etc. See Donald F. Bond, "The First Printing of the 'Spectator,'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 47, no. 3, (1950): 164-177.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, David A. Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character, 1726-1825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 64; Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 82; and Ramesh Mallipeddi, "Yarico's Complaint: The Female Slave in the Eighteenth-Century Public Sphere" in *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 51-83.

absence of slavery as an institution in almost every version of the story,” prompts Ramesh Mallipeddi to argue that “metropolitan accounts of Yarico’s tragedy” like Steele’s “remove [her] from the historical institutions of plantation slavery and from slave culture,” instead sentimentalizing her through “a narrative structure in which the victim (Yarico), perpetrator (Inkle), and cause (mercantilist greed) are readily identifiable, allowing Mr. Spectator and readers of the *Spectator*...to take a melancholy interest in the female victim.”<sup>97</sup> These arguments seem consistent with the *Spectator*’s broader mission to refine the manners and sensibility of an emerging metropolitan middle class consisting of merchants, tradesmen, and especially women. As *The Spectator* No. 10 proclaims, “there are none to whom this paper will be more useful than to the female world.”<sup>98</sup>

However, to suggest that the world of *The Spectator* and its readers was utterly detached from the distant crimes of colonial slavery is to overstate the case and to overlook how “melancholy interest” in Yarico both legitimizes and absolves a middling class tied to colonial trade. Steele’s own inheritance of a Barbados sugar plantation—including two-hundred enslaved Africans—from his first wife, a Caribbean heiress, may have prompted his interest in Yarico’s tale in the first place.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the magazine insinuated itself into the domestication of slave-produced goods by linking their modes of consumption. As Barker-Benfield puts it, “In 1711, *The Spectator* attached itself to the new appetite for tea, [no doubt taken with sugar,] its authors asking that their journal be ‘served up’ every morning, ‘looked upon as a part of the tea

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<sup>97</sup> Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character*, 64 and Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 19.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph Addison, “Spectator No.10,” *The Open Anthology of Literature in English* (12 March 1711): <https://virginia-anthology.org/spectator-10-12-march-1711-addison/>.

<sup>99</sup> See Rae Blanchard, “Richard Steele’s West Indian Plantation,” *Modern Philology*, 39.3 (1942): 281-285.

equipage.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, the colonial site of dangerously unrestrained commercialism does not, as Brycchan Carey suggests, exist at *such* a “considerable spatial or temporal distance from the London salon in which it is told,” nor are English “social virtues...threatened [only] at the margins of the European world.”<sup>101</sup> Rather, Steele’s adaptation of Yarico’s tale betrays metropolitan London’s entanglement with the plantation economies in which the capitalist logic of *partus sequitur ventrem* legitimizes Inkle’s abandonment of his kin to the market. Much like Southerne’s *Oroonoko*, Steele’s “Inkle and Yarico” conjures the spectre of hereditary slavery as an extreme manifestation of the failure to separate the market from the home while simultaneously modeling sensibility as a means to launder middle-class complicity in the violations of slavery’s intimate commerce.

The more urgent battle of the sexes to play out in Steele’s allegory is that which pits Yarico’s female domesticity against Inkle’s male, mercantilist self-interest. Steele’s elaboration upon Inkle’s character alerts readers to the fact that his predisposition to prioritize money above all else derives specifically from his father: he was the “third son of an eminent citizen, who had taken particular care to instill into his mind an early love of gain, by making him a perfect master of numbers, and consequently giving him a quick view of loss and advantage, and preventing the natural impulses of his passions, by prepossession towards his interests.”<sup>102</sup> When Inkle’s ship, in distress, seeks harbor and provisions on the American mainland, and his fellow shipmates are

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<sup>100</sup> G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xxiii.

<sup>101</sup> Brycchan Carey, “‘Accounts of Savage Nations’: *The Spectator* and the Americas in *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses*,” ed. Donald J. Newman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 134.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Steele, “Inkle and Yarico” in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 87. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

attacked by “the natives,” Yarico comes to his aid. As the tale unfolds, and the two become lovers, Yarico also fills the absence of affectionate maternal influence which may otherwise have nurtured in Inkle the sympathetic and *natural* impulses of his passions. For all the critical emphasis on how Yarico’s daily adornments—“beautiful belles, bugles, and bredes”—bespeak her exalted rank, or the way their origin as gifts from other lovers debars her from English standards of feminine virtue, relatively little attention has been given to the overwhelmingly maternal nature of Yarico’s care for Inkle or the domestic character of her cave. In this private space, which Yarico “richly adorned with all the spotted skins of beasts, and most party-coloured feathers of fowls, which that world afforded,” she sustains Inkle with “a delicious repasts of fruits,” and, like a good mother, understands that “[h]er part was to watch and hold him in her arms” to ensure his safety (87-88). Whatever the allegory may have been in Ligon’s original account, in Steele’s version, Yarico’s selfless nurturing of Inkle within the private bower of her cave reflects “an impulse toward domestication figured as innately female” and, as such, operates as a belated lesson in the virtues of motherhood as they *should* shape English national character.<sup>103</sup>

As a result, the private, exotic bower Yarico carefully constructs grafts onto English domestic space through the same process which later renders Yarico both a commodity in the Atlantic slave trade as well as a potential consumer of English metropolitan leisure. Wanting a common language through which to communicate, Inkle and Yarico’s intimate exchange takes

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<sup>103</sup> Kathryn Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 2016), 144. Shevelow agrees that Yarico is a paragon of female self-sacrifice and domesticity, but where she sees Yarico as a “virtuous and domestic English middle-class wife whose husband’s needs and comfort are her primary study,” I emphasize the maternal nature of Yarico’s care as filling an absence in Inkle’s upbringing (144). I contend that the apparent absence of such influence in his youth plays no small part in his callous decision to sell both his beloved and his child into slavery. As I will elaborate later, Yarico’s motherly tenderness becomes a figure for the intertwined intergenerational harm of self-interest and hereditary slavery.

material form. Yarico's gifts, detailed above, are immediately realized while Inkle's are speculative: he "communicate[s] to his mistress, how happy he should be to have her in his country, where she should be clothed in such silks as his waistcoat was made of, and be carried in houses drawn by horses, without being exposed to wind or weather" (88). Whereas the Yarico of Ligon's anecdote "cannot be wooed into wearing clothes," in Steele's and subsequent adaptations, Inkle's affirmations of intimate feeling are predicated on the refashioning of Yarico into a socially mobile woman of the town. What prompts Yarico's rapid transformation from would-be-wife into a reproductive commodity is none other than Inkle's movement from the domestic privacy of Yarico's cave to the public space of the market on the coast of Barbados:

To be short, Mr. *Thomas Inkle*, now coming into *English* territories, began seriously to reflect upon his loss of time, and to weigh with himself how many days interest of his money he had lost during his stay with *Yarico*...Upon which considerations, the prudent and frugal young man sold *Yarico* to a *Barbadian* merchant; notwithstanding that the poor girl, to incline him to commiserate her condition, told him that she was with child by him: But he only made use of that information, to rise in his demands upon the purchaser. (88)

Here Inkle's violation registers not only as an act of greed and betrayal, but specifically intimate commerce. Steele's implicit reference to the practice of *partus sequitur ventrem* marks his most critical addition to Ligon's tale. Through it, Yarico's erstwhile domestic, maternal influence metamorphoses into the commodification of her maternity. It is telling, moreover, that this transmutation is prompted by Inkle's entry into "English territories," which effectively conflates colonial and national space in ways that suture the distant site of Yarico's commodification as a chattel to the metropolitan site of her consumption as a grievable subject. What fastens Yarico to



the metropole, therefore, is not strictly her gendered assimilability as a betrayed lover, but her embodiment of the intimate commerce that bridges Atlantic slavery with the sugared tea that washes it down in Arietta's drawing room.

Much as audiences at Covent Garden and Drury Lane cried cleansing tears over Imoinda's fate, the metropolitan frame of Steele's adaptation posits sensibility as both the tasteful and absolving response to Yarico's tale. Prior to Arietta's telling, the common-place talker's tasteless affectation, his determination "to shine more than ordinary in a Talkative way," reflected the inward lack of sensibility that could produce such an ungenerous mischaracterization of female fidelity (83).<sup>104</sup> By contrast, at the sorrowful conclusion of Arietta's tale, the Spectator models for his middling readers the demonstrations of sensibility necessary for both affirming their virtue and domesticating the violent commodification of human kinship foundational to the domestic sphere they inhabit: "I was so touched with this story," the Spectator relates, "that I left the Room with Tears in my Eyes; which a Woman of Arietta's good Sense, did, I am sure, take for greater Applause, than any Compliments I could make her" (88). For O'Quinn, this conclusion suggests that English notions of white normative femininity are so stable that they can accommodate, without disruption, the absorption of Yarico's racial difference.<sup>105</sup> The fact that this difference emerges most through the exotic character of her dress may signal its susceptibility to alteration. Unlike Ligon's explicit description of Yarico's reddish-brown skin, Steele makes at best an indirect reference to Yarico's color by noting its contrast with Inkle's. As with Imoinda, however, Yarico's racial ambiguity

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<sup>104</sup> Sandiford too observes how the Spectator "undercuts the Talker's credibility and calls his judgment and motives into question by ridiculing his style and the rhetorical ornaments he flaunts to embellish his performance." See Sandiford, "Inkle and Yarico," 119.

<sup>105</sup> O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 391.

may just as readily signal the porous boundaries of a white feminine ideal coming into being alongside a dramatic shift in class structure. Diverging from O'Quinn, I contend that Yarico's dual configurations as both commodity and consumer, and as both a vehicle for her middling readers' demonstrations of sensibility and herself an emblem of domestic virtue, extends the function Imoinda served before her in helping to constitute—rather than reinforce—white normative femininity.

### *Ventriloquizing Yarico in Verse*

Steele's essay prompted numerous poetic adaptations retelling, expanding, or extending Yarico's tale. Many took the form of the heroic epistle, positioning Yarico to confront her beloved betrayer in her own words. Critical accounts of these poems frequently contend that they, like Steele's essay, collectively sidestep direct critiques of slavery as an institution, focusing instead on the more squarely domestic ills for which Yarico's colonial travail can function as a metaphor. However, there are two major threads linking these adaptations that betray a greater concern than established interpretations allow about the threat that slavery's intimate commerce poses to the nation. Firstly, accounts of Yarico's (and her cave's) adornments, and speculations about her as a potential metropolitan consumer become more elaborate, linking her more closely with fashionable and upwardly mobile women in London. Third-person accounts like Steele's give way to heroic epistles in which English women, like Frances Seymour, ventriloquize Yarico's subjectivity, modeling her inhabitability as a woman caught in capitalist modernity's violent construction of a private sphere rather than as a Noble Savage. Simultaneously, as Yarico's racial identity becomes more explicitly African, poetic adaptations voice a more pressing indictment of hereditary slavery as a primal crime of imperial

expansion to which England itself is inextricably tied. Through Yarico, these ostensibly discrete sites of intimate commerce—the domestic and the colonial—layer onto one another, such that the consuming Englishwoman and the commodified African woman become one palimpsestic figure.

Frances Seymour, the Countess of Hertford, is the first author to deliver the tale of Inkle and Yarico from the perspective of the aggrieved heroine. Published in *The New Miscellany* in 1725, Seymour's first verse rendition, "The Story of Inkle and Yarico, Taken out of the Eleventh *Spectator*," adapts Steele's third-person tale to heroic couplets while largely reproducing its portrayal of courtship as a kind of intimate exchange.<sup>106</sup> Yarico—sometimes a "negroe" and sometimes an "Indian" maid—adorns her person and bower with "the portable commodities of the colonized" while Inkle promises her the processed, commercialized luxuries of the metropole.<sup>107</sup> When Inkle's betrayal transforms Yarico from a would-be consumer into commodity, the poem's narrating perspective shifts to the first person so that Yarico herself implores Inkle not to condemn her and the child they share to slavery, echoing her forebear Imoinda in pleading for death instead. "If the remembrance of our former love,/ And all thy plighted vows want force to move,/ Yet for the helpless infant's sake I bear,/ Listen, with pity, to my just despair./ Ah! Let me not in slavery remain, Doom'd all my life to drag a servile chain" (91-96). As Moira Ferguson reminds us, "the message of Imoinda's conduct—African and/or Indian women care for their offspring as much as European women—is reconfirmed at a critical time when the pro-slavery lobby is persistently broadcasting the so-called nonhuman status of

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<sup>106</sup> Frances Seymour, "The Story of Inkle and Yarico, Taken out of the Eleventh *Spectator*" in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 89-94. Subsequent citations are in the text.

<sup>107</sup> Felsenstein, *English Trader*, 9.

Africans.”<sup>108</sup> The bridge of maternal domesticity which Yarico’s plea forges between her and her white metropolitan readers is magnified by the fact that it reaches those readers in a voice that is neither fully Yarico’s nor Seymour’s, but a combination of the two.<sup>109</sup> Having established earlier in the poem that Yarico and Inkle’s expressions of “mutual love” were non-verbal, taking instead the form of Yarico’s domestic care and Inkle’s promise of domestic leisure, Seymour’s occupation of Yarico’s subjectivity requires her to inhabit imaginatively the grossest violation of that domestic sphere by economic self-interest in order to voice it in English.

Seymour’s second verse adaptation, “An Epistle from Yarico to Inkle, after He Had Sold Her for a Slave” (~1725)<sup>110</sup>, abandons the third-person narrator (presumably Seymour herself) to give fuller voice to Yarico as she more forcefully condemns the “sordid love of gain” and “cursed avarice” that poisoned the natural pull of Inkle’s familial bonds (23, 29). “Though spoken ‘through’ a European author,” Ferguson observes, “such a depiction in white women’s texts of a black female’s oral narrative was unprecedented.” The epistle extends the tale to depict Yarico’s suffering in its aftermath—including the death of her child—and introduces a “hoary Christian Priest” who guides Yarico away from suicide and “heralds the upcoming man of

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<sup>108</sup> Moira Ferguson, “Inkle and Yarico: An Antislavery Reading,” 80.

<sup>109</sup> Although author and readership here diverge from Steele, insofar as Seymour was an aristocrat and the reach of her poems less extensive than that of *The Spectator*, her two poetic adaptations of Yarico’s tale initiate significant alterations that carry through subsequent versions. Lynn Festa productively questions whether “sentimental ventriloquism” and the “attribution of ‘depth’ and ‘selfhood’” to a subaltern figure are actually restorative. “The projection of subjectivity and personality onto the native may in fact, as Rey Chow has argued, avoid ‘the genuine problem of the native’s status as object by providing *something* that is more manageable and comforting—namely, a phantom history in which natives appear as our equals and our images, in our shapes and in our forms.” Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire*, 13.

<sup>110</sup> Frances Seymour, “An Epistle from Yarico to Inkle, after He Had Sold Her for a Slave” in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 95-98. Subsequent citations are in the text.

feeling.”<sup>111</sup> Ferguson interprets the added conversion narrative as evidence that Seymour centers English female virtue and vigilance rather than any particular critique of the institution of slavery. For Ferguson, Seymour’s invocation of Yarico’s tale would register with contemporary readers as an apt metaphor for “the dangers that lie in wait for unsuspecting [English] women who take men at face value.” Her adaptation served as a “sentimentally rendered yet simple caution—women must beware of male chicanery in the guise of love.”<sup>112</sup> While Inkle’s misogynistic infidelity is undoubtedly a central object of critique in Seymour’s adaptations, the systemic threat reflected in Inkle’s mercantilist greed seems even more troubling.

The elevated form of the heroic epistle may effectively convey “aristocratic revulsion at go-getter mercantilist values” provoked by a rising middle class, but, as Price points out, Seymour does not explicitly identify Inkle as English.<sup>113</sup> He is saved by a “*European* vessel” of “country-men and friends” (68, 72). Price sees this as an intentional omission, suggesting that a “direct admission of his nationality would have been painful to the poetic countess and her readers.”<sup>114</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Yarico’s sale is executed on the coast of Barbados, the first and most profitable English sugar colony in the West Indies. If nothing else, the omission of Inkle’s nationality reveals that even an aristocrat ready to disparage the upstart merchant class Inkle represents recognizes the substantial threat that his violation poses to domestic values and thus the social health of the nation. “[M]ale, middle-class values, outside of a... feminized context” and without the feminized cheque of sensibility lead to “commercial

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<sup>111</sup> Moira Ferguson, “Inkle and Yarico: An Antislavery Reading,” 81-82.

<sup>112</sup> Ferguson, 81.

<sup>113</sup> Ferguson, 85.

<sup>114</sup> Price, *Inkle and Yarico Album*, 18.

corruption.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, while Yarico may well have been an effective vehicle for expressing the particular dangers English women faced—inconstant men who would woo them with promises of love and gifts only to jilt them—or the social ills of mercantilist self-interest more broadly, Seymour’s ventriloquizing of the Indian/African Yarico to articulate her concerns about the soul of the English nation imbricates colonial slavery and English domesticity in ways that demand more critical attention.

Although this imbrication becomes increasingly more pronounced in subsequent verse adaptations of Yarico’s tale, scholars maintain that the institution of slavery remains marginal to these poems’ narrower domestic concerns. For example, David Brewer interprets Inkle’s selling of Yarico and their unborn child in these poems “as an instance of individual cruelty and ingratitude.”<sup>116</sup> Mallipeddi agrees, suggesting that “neither Yarico nor the poetic voice of these poems ever achieves awareness of the broader sociopolitical contexts attendant on her fate.”<sup>117</sup> Contrary to these assessments, however, the spectre of slavery and the violation of *partus sequitur ventrem* become ever more central to Yarico poems by Stephen Duck and Edward Jerningham, among others. For example, Yarico’s initial portrayal as an “Indian maid” is almost completely overwritten by her transformation into a Black African one, suggesting that her tale resonates more forcefully as an example of Black Atlantic slavery than as an isolated instance of personal betrayal. Stephen Duck’s 1736 adaptation<sup>118</sup>—which renames its lovers Avaro and

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<sup>115</sup> Ferguson, “Inkle and Yarico: An Antislavery Reading,” 82-83.

<sup>116</sup> Brewer, *Afterlife of Character*, 64.

<sup>117</sup> Mallipeddi, *Spectacular Suffering*, 69.

<sup>118</sup> Stephen Duck, “Avaro and Amanda: A Poem in Four Canto’s, Taken from ‘The Spectator,’ vol. I, No. XI” in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 126-40. Subsequent citations are in the text.

Amanda—describes its version of Yarico as a Black Venus bearing a “downy head” and “jetty breast” (176, 184).<sup>119</sup> Her betrayal prompts a trenchant critique, not of personal ingratitude, but of the inhumanity of hereditary slavery and the capitalist logic undergirding it:

Yet, if my *kindness* can't thy pity move  
Pity the *fruits* of our unhappy *love*:  
O let the infant, in my pregnant womb,  
Excite thee to revoke my threaten'd doom;  
Think how the future slave, in climes remote,  
Shall curse the treach'rous sire, that him begot. (577-82)

Amanda's (Yarico's) indictment reaches beyond the immediacy of her own and her child's fate and projects to a future in which Avaro's (Inkle's) enslaved descendants curse him for the treachery of abandoning his kin to the market. In this light, characterizations of Inkle's crime as the isolated act of a rogue merchant become tenuous; for it is the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, an extension of English property law, which condemns generations of the Englishman's kin to slavery.

Another epistle from Yarico to Inkle authored anonymously in 1736 echoes these sentiments, reframing the tale it adapts within a trenchant critique of *partus sequitur ventrem* as a primal crime that curses all of Inkle's future endeavors and, by extension, those of the nation that produced him.<sup>120</sup> This iteration of Yarico directly laments their unborn child's fate to “groan

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<sup>119</sup> Duck's poem shares several striking resemblances to Teale's *Sable Venus, An Ode*. Like Teale's ode, we may see in Duck's heroic couplets and classical references an effort to locate this Black goddess—and the crimes to which she is subject—in a mythologized past even as they speak forcefully to preoccupations of his present.

<sup>120</sup> Anonymous, “Yarico to Inkle: An Epistle” in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 110-124. Subsequent citations are in the text.

beneath their chains” (1). Her ironic reference to the “dear load [she] bear[s]” betrays the violation that transforms the cherished intimacy of motherhood into the profitable engine of dealers in flesh (45). Before she curses Inkle, foretelling his fate to walk the earth spurned and alone like the wandering Jew, she layers hereditary slavery over English practices of inheritance to imply that the one poisons the other: “Behold the gift a father’s love prepares! / ... This is the portion destin’d to be thine, / Thou heir to all the wrongs that now are mine” (51-54)! These wrongs, she implies, are not Inkle’s alone; instead, *all* Englishmen and women are culpable, and future generations must bear the burden of his crime through the haunting compulsion to retell Yarico’s tale. Her imprecation, it turns out, is a prophecy:

But the rememb’rance of my wrongs shall live,  
Your treachery whole ages shall survive,  
People, unborn, shall my sad tale relate  
And curse your cruelty, and weep my fate. (181-84)

Far from the unknowing victim of the tale’s earlier iterations, this Yarico expresses an unprecedented understanding of the slave trade’s economic dimensions as well as its reach.

Although most accounts of Yarico’s transformation suggest that her Africanization (as in her splitting into Wowski) further distances her from metropolitan Englishwomen, the opposite is true: the commodification of her maternity increasingly marks the English domestic sphere and the consumer culture that constitutes it. In the anonymous “Story of Inkle and Yarico, from the Eleventh *Spectator*” from the *London Magazine* 3 (May 1734)<sup>121</sup>, Inkle promises the “negro maid” Yarico, “I’ll gems provide, and silks of curious art, / With gifts expressive of my grateful

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<sup>121</sup> Anonymous, “Story of Inkle and Yarico, from the Eleventh *Spectator*” in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 102-07. Subsequent citations are in the text.



heart:/ Thou in a house by horses drawn shalt ride,/ With me, thy faithful lover, by thy side:/ The female train shalt round with envy gaze,/ Wonder, and silent sigh unwilling praise” (94-99). This scene in which a “female train” of implicitly white metropolitan Englishwomen crowd around Yarico—a newly minted consumer of English leisure—quickly gives way to one in which Barbadian “planters thick’ning on the key appear,/ To purchase negro slaves,” and Inkle “by cursed avarice sway’d” transforms Yarico into an object of Atlantic consumption (124-26). The violent collision of these scenes recalls the dynamics by which Imoinda’s exclusion from white domesticity materially constructs that sphere and enables the play’s English female characters to claim it as their own.

Edward Jerningham’s 1766 “Yarico to Inkle: An Epistle” marks an even more explicit shift in the representation of Yarico as a consuming agent—rather than a victimized commodity—in the gyre of England’s imperial commerce.<sup>122</sup> This poem links Yarico with Imoinda’s prophetic indictment of hereditary slavery even as it projects onto her the excessive consumerist impulses driving her commodification. In an alteration unique to this adaptation, Jerningham makes Yarico—rather than Inkle—the source of speculation about the luxuries that await her in England:

I hop’d alas to breathe thy native air,  
And vie in splendor with the British fair  
Ascend the speedy car enchas’d with gold,  
With robes of silk this pearl-deck’d form infold:  
Bid on the jetty hand the diamond glow,

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<sup>122</sup> Edward Jerningham, “Yarico to Inkle: An Epistle” in *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World: an Inkle and Yarico Reader*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 155-62. Subsequent citations are in the text.

And chosen rubies sparkle from my brows. (83-88)

Not only does Jerningham ventriloquize “through his heroine a desire for those very aspects of European mercantilism the poem denounces elsewhere,” but the added lucre he incorporates cries imperial excess when compared with Inkle’s more modest and domesticated promises of silk and a closed coach.<sup>123</sup> This attachment of extravagant wealth to a soon-to-be enslaved African woman anticipates the jewel-encrusted chariot on which Isaac Teale’s Sable Venus rolls regally across the Atlantic in an obscene recasting of the Middle Passage. Yarico’s representation as a consumer of imperial excess jars with her imminent transformation into an imperial commodity and her subsequent invocation of Southerne’s virtuous Imoinda.

As I discussed earlier, Imoinda forces Oroonoko to confront slavery’s systematic transformation of their beloved child into a source of wealth for their captors: “There is no safety from it,” she proclaimed. “I have long/ Suffer'd it with a Mother's labouring pains;/ And can no longer. Kill me, kill me now,/ ...Dry up this Spring of Life, this pois'nous Spring,/ That swells so fast, to overwhelm us all” (III.ii). In a striking echo, Jerningham’s Yarico laments that her lover should become her enslaver: “My future child—to swell his impious store/ All, all mankind for this will rise thy foe...Lo! Every hope is poison'd in its bloom/ And horrors watch around this guilty womb” (146-47, 157-58). The Yarico who once dreamed she would “vie in splendor with the British fair” now emerges as the poisoned source of English extravagance. The prophetic tone through which both Imoinda and Yarico lament the commodification of their wombs may signal the allegorical force that made these stories so enduring in a century that saw both the peak of the Atlantic slave trade and the consolidation of a middle-class domestic ideal rooted in moralizing commerce and self-regulation.

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<sup>123</sup> Felsenstein, *English Trader*, 17.

It bears noting, however, that neither Imoinda's warning that hereditary slavery "will overwhelm us all" nor Yarico's proclamation that "all, all mankind for this will rise [Inkle's] foe" register as calls for the abolition of slavery or even of the slave trade; neither do any of the poetic adaptations I examine above. This does not mean, however, that these representations can be reduced to discourses on individual acts of ingratitude or misogyny that evade slavery altogether. Much like Yarico's tale did in Arietta's drawing room, these poems implicitly demand sensibility as a mechanism of exculpation from slavery's most deplorable crimes. The tasteful demonstration of such sensibility—as modeled by Mr. Spectator—proved particularly important as a litmus test of class legitimacy for those whose fortunes and influence were entangled with the violent forms of imperial exchange to which both Imoinda and Yarico were subject. Like Imoinda, Yarico's racial indeterminacy and her inhabitability by so-called white Englishwomen made her uniquely adaptable to expressing and negotiating the domestic intrusion of imperial excess in ways that were both flexible and culturally legible to English readers and audiences.

### *Yarico in Town Gossip*

We find a striking example of social climbers who fail this litmus test in a humorous anecdote published in *The General Evening Post* in January 1772.<sup>124</sup> It mocks a gauche, newly-moneyed dinner party hostess at Sutton House in Hackney who listens to the story of Inkle & Yarico—remarkably new to her—narrated in verse by a Hebrew broker "in the character of a poor Negro man." "The Jew, we may suppose, did ample justice to its poetic beauties, for she

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<sup>124</sup> *General Evening Post*, 9 January 1772. I am indebted to Roxann Wheeler's excellent essay for alerting me to this bizarre and rich bit of (likely apocryphal) gossip. See "Sounding Black-Ish: West Indian Pidgin in London Performance and Print," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 51.1 (2017): 63-88.

melted at the sufferings of her countrywoman Yarico.” A hilarious scene ensues when the utterly absorbed hostess bites unthinkingly into a piping-hot apple dumpling, which she then spits out along with her false teeth. This climactic bit of slapstick is made all the more humorous given the affected grandeur of the lady it humiliates. Forcing some of her guests to stand for want of sufficient seating, we are told “the sovereign lady of the mansion chose to lie...her listless length extended on a sofa; a loose robe of ruby coloured silk, trimmed with gold and silver orrice, adorned her person, and all Golconda blazed upon her head, with *affectatious sickly mien*.” On its surface, the lady’s exotic attire implies that she is hosting a masquerade party of some kind, which, Roxann Wheeler suggests, also explains why the Hebrew broker appears “in the character of a poor negro man.” Given the topical references of some masquerade costumes, Wheeler interprets the date of the anecdote, 1772, as suggestive that “the broker’s costume and performance pertained to the months-long preamble to and deliberation of the Somerset Case,” which sought to determine the legality of permitting slavery on English soil.<sup>125</sup> However, when we consider the increasing association of masquerades with “imported corruption, the dangerous breach of national boundaries, [and] contamination from without,” we can better account for the multiple layers of racialization this anecdote deploys in staging a broader class critique amidst heightened anxiety around the threat that imperial trade, speculation, and excess posed to the welfare of the nation.<sup>126</sup>

Part of the anecdote’s comic effect derives from the fact that the hostess and Hebrew broker’s costuming as generalized racial others—a luxuriously ornamented Oriental woman and

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<sup>125</sup> Wheeler, “Sounding Black-Ish,” 69.

<sup>126</sup> See Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 7.

a “poor negro man” respectively—reinforces the ways in which their contaminating relations to money already mark them as non-white. In this regard, the Hackney hostess and the Hebrew broker’s costumes fail to abide by the rules of ironic inversion which, Terry Castle argues in her study of eighteenth-century masquerade, was a defining characteristic of such occasional attire: “[O]ne was obliged to impersonate a being opposite, in some essential feature, to oneself.”<sup>127</sup> Women might dress as men, aristocrats as servants, and so on. If masquerades dramatized the dangers of permeable class boundaries, this masquerade marks two figures whose conspicuous social mobility constitutes a threat to the nation from without and within simultaneously. In 1772, England was struggling through a credit crisis, which according to public opinion, was precipitated by the unscrupulous dealings of East India Company directors as well as brokers (Hebrew and otherwise), stockjobbers, and their ilk.<sup>128</sup> More than ever, outward displays of ostentatious wealth like that of our hostess signaled the moral, social, and public financial decline brought about by the speculation that brokers facilitated and the rapid social climbing it enabled.<sup>129</sup>

Consequently, the so-called white, English Sutton House hostess becomes an exemplary case of how new money and bad taste could be marked racially. Recalling the imperial excess about which Jerningham’s Yarico fantasized, this hostess’s distinctly East Indian luxury marks not only her lack of decorum and taste, but also the vitiating influence of excessive imperial

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<sup>127</sup> Castle, 5.

<sup>128</sup> See H.V. Bowen, “‘The Pests of Human Society’: Stockbrokers, Jobbers and Speculators in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *History*, 78.252 (1993): 38-53. According to Bowen, “East India Company stock prices, which had maintained an upward trend since 1766, suffered a spectacular crash in May 1769, which some contemporaries likened to the bursting of the South Sea Bubble in 1720. All this took place during a period of domestic and colonial political turmoil, and it contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of widespread and continuing economic crisis” (38-39).

<sup>129</sup> See especially Bowen, “‘The Pests of Human Society,’” 39, 46.

wealth as an illegitimate motor of social mobility. While the anecdote's narrator makes no explicit mention of it, many former employees of the East India Company lived in this area, and it was common for those who returned from their service to be maligned as Nabobs, Englishmen corrupted by "ill-gotten affluence, a ravenous appetite for extravagance, and aspirations to rise into elite spheres of power and influence."<sup>130</sup> That she is Orientalized may suggest some connection with the Company as a source of her wealth. It may also reflect a broader application of Orientalist tropes as legible symbols of the degenerating effects—both social and constitutional—of luxury, accounting for her "affectatious and sickly mien" and her false teeth. Given the increasing reliance on English domestic space to protect women and children—and thus national virtue—against the vagaries of the market, this hostess's moral and bodily degradation by material excess raises the spectre of an England ready to issue forth countless new Inkles.

Similarly, the Hebrew broker is already racialized as a Jew, which I maintain has more to do with the tarnish of his presumed financial activities than his religious differences. We need only recall how Widow Lackitt's characterization as a Jew marked her involvement in intimate commerce as a form of racial exclusion from emerging models of womanhood coded as white. Since the wealthy suburb of Hackney was "one of the most prosperous of all mercantile residential communities" after mid-century, the Hebrew broker was most likely a well-to-do merchant rather than a member of a marginalized underclass of urban fences or moneylenders like Dickens's Fagin of the next century.<sup>131</sup> He, or one of his ilk, may very well have supplied

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<sup>130</sup> Christina Smylitopoulos, "Portrait of a Nabob: Graphic Satire, Portraiture, and the Anglo-Indian in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Racar / Société pour Promouvoir la Publication en Histoire de l'Art au Canada, Département d'Histoire* (Université Laval, 2012): 11.

<sup>131</sup> Bowen, "The Pests of Human Society," 77-78.

the hostess with the Golconda diamonds that blaze across her head. In his 1875 *Sketch of Anglo-Jewish History*, James Picciotto suggests that, early in the eighteenth century, Jews “had already acquired an important position in British commerce...[T]hey had got into their hands Barbadoes and Jamaica...and that by their foreign relations they regulated the course of the Exchanges.” He also references eighteenth-century pamphlets explicitly ascribing to Jews a disproportionate and insidious influence within imperial circuits of trade, including one which states that “the Jews, by their corrupted charms and secret intrigues, though they have no manner of right to live here, do boldly presume not only to engross the principal part of our trade, but are now admitted, as some say, to shares in the East Indian, African, Hudson's Bay, and Hamburg Society.”<sup>132</sup> In other words, the Hebrew Broker of the *Post*'s anecdote operates as a racialized emblem for a people whose economic entry to the leisured class is inseparable in the popular imagination from the intrusion of foreign luxury into English domestic space through imperial circuits of commerce.

What, though, are we to make of the story's designation of Yarico as the hostess's “countrywoman”? To begin with, this alignment seems paradoxical because the hostess is clearly a consumer of imperial excess rather than a victim of its predatory greed. While the hostess's performance of sentimental identification with the injured Yarico demonstrates her fulfillment of the socially and class-mandated response to the tale, I propose that her *racial* alignment with Yarico marks the vulgar performativity of that sensibility and the hostess's concomitant exclusion from white, polite femininity.<sup>133</sup> After all, readers of the anecdote have already been

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<sup>132</sup> James Picciotto, *Sketches of Anglo-Jewish History* (London: Trübner, 1875), 71. See also Frank Felsenstein, *Anti-semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660-1830*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 201.

<sup>133</sup> To begin with, the phrase “her countrywoman” could position Yarico as Black African, Amerindian, East Indian, or even English, depending on whose perspective we think it reflects. By the time of this anecdote's publication, verse adaptations of Yarico's tale had transformed her completely from an “Indian maid” to a “Negro maid,” so it seems unlikely that its narrator would confuse the West Indian site of Yarico's tale with the East Indian site of the

primed to see the hostess and the Hebrew broker as incapable of genuine sentiment precisely because those finer feelings are assumed to be blunted by their corruptive relations to money. As Barker-Benfield observes, “the culture of sensibility [insisted] on a tasteful relationship with the goods and services supplied by ‘bourgeois consumerism,’” and women caught up in outward displays of fashion constituted a type which “affected ‘feeling’ as fashion” and were “absorbed in the urban consumer pleasures moralists warned could lead women to a disgraceful end.”<sup>134</sup> The Hebrew broker is, of course, implicated in the hostess’s bad performance, having precipitated her response through his own “ample justice to [the tale’s] poetic beauties.” In other words, the layering of Yarico’s Blackness—and, implicitly, slavery—on these already racialized figures exposes the Hackney hostess and the Hebrew broker as joined emblems of an inauthentic and opportunistic sensibility that excludes them from the emerging middle-class for whom the moralizing exchange of genuine sensibility secures both class legitimacy and whiteness. This rhetoric of exclusion circulates as part and parcel of Yarico’s tale; the anecdote of the hostess’s gaffe assumes the portability of the figure it frames, reaching every corner of London as choice fodder “at half the tea-tables of the *two Chelseas*, Kensington, the Gravel-pits, Hammersmith, Mile-End, and Turnham-green.”

The hostess’s likeness to Jerningham’s Yarico—doubled as a victim of slavery’s excess and an agent of its corruptive force—is illuminating for reasons that extend well beyond the

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hostess’s imperial wealth. On the other hand, the narrator may be implying that the *hostess* identified Yarico as her countrywoman, displaying an ignorance indicated elsewhere in the suggestion that Yarico’s story was new to her.

<sup>134</sup> Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 204, 202. Mary Wollstonecraft would scathingly critique such false sensibility in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* at the close of the century: “These pretty nothings, these caricatures of the real beauty of sensibility, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and over-stretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action.” Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1796), 8.



anecdote's punchline. To begin with, it refutes the notion that Yarico's racial indeterminacy is incidental or that her racial difference is subsumable under a broader category of womanhood. In identifying Yarico as her countrywoman, rather than simply as a fellow *woman* with whose plight she sympathizes, the anecdote reveals how Yarico's unstable racial identity could be manipulated to confront and mitigate anxieties about the embeddedness of imperial commerce within emerging models of metropolitan domesticity. As public debates over the moral and economic exigencies of the slave trade and its abolition gain traction and visibility toward the close of the century, the reliance on sentimental discourse to push back against the market's intrusion into private life also creates a false dichotomy between feeling as the province of human agency and commercial capitalism as an autonomous mechanism beyond human control. Jerningham's Yarico and the anecdote's Hackney hostess anticipate a representational shift I explore more fully in my second chapter, wherein the Black Venus becomes less a victim of that machine than an embodiment of its tyranny. As early Black Venuses, Imoinda and Yarico's identification of their wombs as mechanistic, their commodified reproduction as a poisoned spring whose threat is almost prophetically apocalyptic, anticipates this shift. George Colman Jr's ballad opera *Inkle and Yarico* navigates it by splitting Yarico into two different female figures of color—the revenant “Indian maid” and her caricatured blackface servant Wowski.

### ***Yarico on Stage: George Colman Jr's Inkle & Yarico***

First staged at the Haymarket theatre in August of 1787, Colman Jr's ballad opera *Inkle and Yarico* would go on to be one of the most popular staged plays at the end of the century, seeing 164 performances in London alone and prompting a number of engravings and satirical

prints.<sup>135</sup> Colman's stage adaptation of Yarico's tale follows the general contours of its antecedents but, through a critical revision and expanded character list, transforms a tragic parable into a sentimental comedy of mistaken identity reminiscent of Southerne's comic subplot. Inkle heads for Jamaica with plans to meet his betrothed, the properly English Narcissa, and her father, Sir Christopher Curry, who is the colonial Governor. When Inkle shipwrecks, he ventures out with his comical servant Trudge, taking in his exotic surroundings as a sequential collection of monetizable things and people. Inkle and Trudge stumble upon a cave where they discover two sleeping maids—Yarico and her maidservant Wowski. Here, the standard romantic sojourn between Englishman and Indian/African maid bifurcates: Inkle pairs with the (once again) Native American Yarico and Trudge with the Black African Wowski.

Retreading the path of the established tale, Inkle, recalling his lost time and financial interest, schemes to get rid of Yarico by selling her into slavery so that he may capitalize on an advantageous marriage to Narcissa. However, in true comic fashion, Inkle exposes his heartlessness to none other than his future father-in-law when he tries to sell Yarico to Sir Christopher Curry, whom he mistakes for a slave trader. Curry upbraids him, laments his toxic paternal upbringing which O'Quinn aptly characterizes as a "mercantile deformity," Inkle repents, and he and Yarico marry. This all proves convenient for Narcissa who has, in the interim, fallen in love with the martial Captain Campley. In addition to his orchestration of Inkle's novel repentance, Colman makes one other critical revision: he erases Yarico's pregnancy and, with it, the spectre of hereditary slavery that had haunted the tale throughout the century. In concluding my analysis of the eighteenth century's two most iconic early Black

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<sup>135</sup> See Nandini Bhattacharya, Mita Choudhury, Frank Felsenstein, and Jean Marsden, "Colman's *Inkle and Yarico*": Four Critical Perspectives," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP: 2014), 691.

Venuses, I read this stage adaptation of Yarico's tale through these critical revisions. In doing so, I demonstrate how the encroaching abolition of the slave trade brought both the exigency of hereditary slavery and its intrusion into domestic intimacy perilously close to home. As with Southerne's *Oroonoko*, the dramatic adaptation of Yarico's tale is a living and embodied text that sutures anxieties about slavery's influence more forcefully onto metropolitan bodies and spaces than any textual iteration could.

Critical debates about whether or not Colman's *Inkle and Yarico* promotes an antislavery agenda mischaracterizes the central focus of arguments about slavery at the close of the century: rather than attacking or defending the institution itself—which would not be abolished in Britain's colonies for half a century—debates centered on the slave trade. Thus, while “the establishment of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the publication of Clarkson's *A Summary View of the Slave Trade and of the Possible Consequences of Its Abolition*, and the initiation of the parliamentary campaign against slavery by William Pitt and William Wilberforce” form a crucial historical backdrop for Colman's opera, it is equally important to attend to the ways in which these developments focalized the critical role that the reproductive exploitation of enslaved African women played in the maintenance of plantation economies and their expansive networks of commerce.<sup>136</sup> Sasha Turner's illuminating study, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica*, reveals that in the last decade of the eighteenth century, which saw a “significant growth in total number of imported Africans,” the “demand for younger females within their childbearing years increased not only because individual planters diverted their focus towards reproduction, but also because new governmental

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<sup>136</sup> O'Quinn, “Mercantile Deformities,” 391.

trading regulations provided tax relief on the importation of females below age twenty-five.”<sup>137</sup> Even abolitionists like Wilberforce deemed the control of enslaved women’s reproductivity critical to their aims to “end colonial dependence on an immoral and inhuman trade” without “jeopardizing British colonial goals or the fortunes of its investors.”<sup>138</sup> The erasure of Yarico’s pregnancy from the play, therefore, evades the troubling reality that both proponents and critics of the slave trade deemed hereditary slavery necessary (at least for the time being).

While it was not part of Colman’s original script, the opera’s ultimate investment in a reformable Inkle and a comedic conclusion to Yarico’s story reflects a similarly calculated response to the growing sense of complicity among an English theatergoing public that would make his sale of Yarico on stage unpalatable if not unrepresentable.<sup>139</sup> From the very opening scene, Colman exaggerates to the point of absurdity Inkle’s all-consuming obsession with money, augmenting his position as a rogue trader whom Haymarket audiences could easily disavow. Proceeding through the wilderness like “an abacus with legs,” Inkle measures every matter to come before him—the land beneath his feet, the natives undoubtedly lurking in the

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<sup>137</sup> Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 52, 51. Turner demonstrates the twisted means through which many plantation owners domesticated this commodification of kinship by offering material incentives—“indulgences”—to enslaved women for the “living children” they birthed, rewarding them with money, access to better and more food, “medals of honour,” in sum, a degree of mobility within their enslaved community (108).

<sup>138</sup> Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 4. “If for slaveholders black motherhood symbolized hereditary slavery,” Turner explains, then “for abolitionists it symbolized the conduit through which a free laboring population could be propagated. Abolitionists thus reified early colonial practices that aligned black women’s procreative abilities to reproducing a working population suitable for building and sustaining the British imperial enterprise. Whether in slavery or antislavery rhetoric, black women’s bodies and their lives were defined by their ability to propagate workers for the colonial economy” (42).

<sup>139</sup> The sugar boycotts, which gained popularity only a few years after Colman’s play debuted, demonstrate broad public awareness, especially among middling women, that English domestic spaces had been infiltrated by the violence of slavery. See, for example, Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833* (Stanford University Press, 2000); Julie Holcomb, “Blood-Stained Sugar: Gender, Commerce and the British Slave-Trade Debates,” *Slavery & Abolition*. 35:4. (2014): 611-628; and Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: British Women and Consumer Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.

environs, even his fiancée—according to algebraic calculations of profit.<sup>140</sup> The unabashed self-interest motivating his engagement to Narcissa, “a table of interest from beginning to end,” would undoubtedly have provoked sneers in the house<sup>141</sup>, but, at a historical moment in which England is progressively aware of and “increasingly uncomfortable with its image as a mercantile, imperialist nation,” Inkle’s rhetorical usefulness as a rogue scapegoat for capitalism’s degradation of intimate bonds diminishes.<sup>142</sup>

After all, Inkle’s greed was inculcated not in the West Indies, but on Threadneedle Street, in the financial center of London:

Even so my father tutored me from my infancy, bending my tender mind, like a young sapling, to his will. Interest was the grand prop round which he twined my pliant green affections, taught me in childhood to repeat old sayings—all tending to his own fixed principles—and the first sentence that I ever lisped was ‘Charity begins at home’ .... As I grew up, he’d prove? and by example: were I in want, I might e’en starve for what the world cared for their neighbours; why then should I care for the world? Men now lived for themselves. These were his doctrines. Then, sir, what would you say should I, in spite of habit, precept, education, fly in my father’s face and spurn his counsels? (III.iii)

While this passage laying out the “mercantile deformity” of Inkle’s upbringing has been much remarked upon, hardly any attention has been given to the fact that Inkle’s white, English bride-

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<sup>140</sup> Joyce Green MacDonald, “Miscegenation As Consolation in George Colman’s Inkle and Yarico” in *Women and Others: Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Empire*, eds. Celia R. Daileader, Rhoda E. Johnson, and Amilcar Shabazz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 32.

<sup>141</sup> George Colman Jr, *Inkle and Yarico: An Opera, in Three Acts* (London, 1787), I.i. All subsequent citations are in the text.

<sup>142</sup> Jean Marsden, “Performing the West Indies: Comedy, Feeling, and British Identity,” *Comparative Drama*. 42.1 (2008): 75. Yarico’s excised pregnancy is not, perhaps, a casualty of Colman’s “sanitized sentimentality” so much as a manifestation of sentimentality stretched to its logical limits. See Bhattacharya, “Family Jewels,” 221.

to-be Narcissa is also “under [Inkle’s] father’s care,” receiving her “polite English education” in Threadneedle Street (I.i). In other words, the failed domesticity of Inkle’s upbringing, which licensed his grossest violation of intimate bonds for nearly a century, is already infiltrating the realm of white, English womanhood believed to be insulated from its corruptive influence. By transforming a well-worn tragic allegory into a newly popular comedic one, Colman’s revised ending mitigates a prevailing anxiety that “rather than a nation defined by its benevolence, Britain might actually be a nation of Inkles,...a nation whose dedication to commerce has corrupted its moral fiber.”<sup>143</sup> If Colman had not registered the stakes of Inkle’s reformation for allegorizing that of the nation, it was brought home to him when Jack Bannister, the lead actor playing Inkle, refused to perform the role mere weeks before the opera’s debut without an amended conclusion in which his character repents.<sup>144</sup> Theatrical reviews of *Inkle and Yarico* in the *Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser* confirm the exigency of Colman’s revised ending, asserting that if some are perturbed by “the violence done to the record, by making Inkle turn penitent, ...it was in judicious deference to the predominant generosity of mind, that marks a British audience, that he is made to acknowledge the baseness of attending solely to self-interest, and becomes a convert to that virtue of sentiment.”<sup>145</sup> By invoking the public’s keen memory of Steele’s original tale, however, these reviews simultaneously reveal that this new and

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<sup>143</sup> Marsden, “Performing the West Indies,” 82-83.

<sup>144</sup> Bannister was primarily a comic actor used to playing heroic or humorous roles. He was uncomfortable with the thought of playing the heartless Inkle. According to Bannister’s biographer, John Adolphus, Bannister objected to Inkle selling Yarico at the end of the story and Colman agreed to revise the end of the opera: [T]he thought of Inkle’s repentance, which brings the piece to a satisfactory, if an awkward conclusion, was suggested by [Bannister]. “But after all,” said Colman, “what are we to do with Inkle?” “Oh!” said Bannister, “let him repent.” John Adolphus, *Memoirs of John Bannister, Comedian* (London: Bentley, 1839). See also Jeremy F. Bagster-Collins, *George Colman the Younger, 1762–1836* (Morningside Heights, New York: King’s Crown Press, 1946), 31-32 and Felsenstein, *English Trader*, 24.

<sup>145</sup> “Theatrical Intelligence,” *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* (London, 6 August 1787).

exculpatory ending can overwrite but never erase the crime of *partus sequitur ventrem* embedded in the culture and economy of the nation.

It is in this light that we should read Inkle's linked renunciation of past mercantile principles and championing of a domestic intimacy free from the influence of interest:

Ill founded precept too long has steel'd my breast—but still 'tis vulnerable—this trial was too much. –Nature 'gainst Habit combating within me, has penetrated to my heart; a heart, I own, long callous to the feelings of sensibility; but now it bleeds, and bleeds for my poor Yarico, Oh, let me clasp her to it while 'tis glowing, and mingle tears of love and penitence. (III.iii)<sup>146</sup>

No longer an outcast doomed to walk the earth a cursed wretch, Inkle's display of sentiment and his "re-definition of marriage as a site of conjugal devotion rather than economic affiliation" secures his incorporation back into the bosom of the English nation at the same moment that it draws a more direct link between colonial and domestic forms of intimate commerce than seen in previous iterations of the tale.<sup>147</sup> Van Kooy and Cox suggest that Inkle's selling of Yarico "would have been a dangerous circumstance to represent before an English Audience" because "it would have forced [them] to choose between the sentiment embodied in the marriage plot and the ideology of slavery needed to support the economic base of the Caribbean empire."<sup>148</sup>

However, Inkle's repentance requires marriage to Yarico rather than a reconciliation with

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<sup>146</sup> Inkle's repentant tears—rather than Yarico's suffering alone—prove critical to the opera's exculpatory function as the generously minded British audience obligingly share in Inkle's display of that virtue of sentiment: "The tears and applause it drew from a crowded audience are the best proofs of its merits." See "Theatrical Intelligence," *Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser*, 6 August 1787).

<sup>147</sup> O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 409. As I will elaborate later on, it is notable that the critique of this approach to marriage—for love rather than money—comes from a working-class character, Patty. See O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 407.

<sup>148</sup> Dana Van Kooy and Jeffrey N. Cox, "Melodramatic Slaves," *Modern Drama*. 55.4 (2012): 463-64.

Narcissa. For her part, Narcissa marries Captain Campley, who, though he professes to be “all for love” rather than money, still stands to acquire Sir Christopher Curry’s fortune, itself inseparable from the plantation economy over which he presides as governor of Barbados (II.i). Consequently, Yarico’s rapid transit from valuable commodity to treasured wife reveals that the sentiment embodied in the opera’s various marriage plots serves as a channel for domesticating the economic-intimate dynamics of slavery, an institution needed not only to support “the economic base of a Caribbean empire,” but the very domestic spaces of metropolitan marriage itself.<sup>149</sup>

In the climactic scene where Inkle tries to sell Yarico to Sir Christopher Curry, Yarico’s representation as an object of material and sentimental exchange stages a critical shift in the economic and moral framing of slavery. O’Quinn reads Curry’s moral authority as evidence of a transition from an imperialism characterized by coercive mercantilism to one defined by territorial military intervention. From a slightly different angle, this scene depicts a shift from mercantile to free market notions of trade filtered explicitly through the domesticating mechanism of sensibility. In either configuration, Inkle represents the past and Curry the future. In her early manifestations, Yarico was a victim of British mercantile rapaciousness embodied by an individual, unincorporated merchant whose toxic greed registered as a deformity of English principles. Prior to his conversion, Colman’s Inkle fits this venal role to a tee and Sir Christopher Curry is the English man of feeling to point it out: he describes Inkle with contempt as a man “in whose breast the mean passion of avarice smothers the smallest spark of affection or humanity”

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<sup>149</sup> Samuel Arnold’s music for the opera recycled familiar and popular tunes such as “O say, bonny lass” and “Belle Catherine,” in essence domesticating colonial themes by layering onto them popular metropolitan tunes. See Joice Waterhouse Gibson, “A Musical and Cultural Analysis of *Inkle and Yarico* from England to America, 1787–1844” (University of Colorado at Boulder, PhD Dissertation, 2011), 76-78 and Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660–1900*, vol. III: *Late Eighteenth Century Drama, 1750–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 192.



(III.iii). When Inkle blame his father's early training, the governor responds, "Oh, curse such principles, principles which destroy all confidence between man and man, principles which none but a *rogue* could instil and none but a *rogue* could imbibe" (III.iii emphasis added). The self-serving mercantilist ethic of accumulation Inkle embodies is already being supplanted by the logic of sensibility undergirding free trade as a socially and nationally beneficial, moralizing, and ultimately domesticated form of capitalism and wealth generation. And Sir Christopher Curry represents this future by forwarding a paternal liberalism that sutures sensibility to the free market, including the market in slaves.

In what is arguably one of the play's most notable speeches, Curry professes:

[T]hough I witness this custom every day, I can't help thinking the only excuse for buying our fellow creatures is to rescue 'em from the hands of those who are unfeeling enough to bring them to market.... Let Englishmen blush at such practices. Men who so fully feel the blessings of liberty are doubly cruel in depriving the helpless of their freedom. (III.iii.)

Jean Marsden rightfully observes that while Inkle "must engage in a process of abasement and repentance, ...the Governor's participation in the same market is glossed over by both the playwright and his audience."<sup>150</sup> This is, I suggest, because as models of free trade supplant mercantilism, they demand a new scapegoat for the most egregious violations of capitalism. Consequently, as the nineteenth century approaches, the rogue individual merchant is replaced by a vision of Atlantic trade as an autonomous machine subjecting but not subject to human

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<sup>150</sup> Marsden, "Performing the West Indies," 76.

agents.<sup>151</sup> The implication of Sir Christopher Curry's much lauded proclamation here is that offering humane treatment to the enslaved is the *only* intervention available to him in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful system. He must "witness this custom every day" as a reluctant participant if not an innocent bystander. However, it is the act of *buying* his "fellow creatures," rather than their treatment after the fact, that transforms the self-interested commerce of "those who are unfeeling enough to bring them to market" into a benevolent commerce presided over by men of feeling. It is no accident that Curry should articulate this exculpatory logic, since, as the "Governor of Barbados, [he] is the official representative of British authority in *Inkle and Yarico*, ... at once the designated mouthpiece for English values of liberty and the overseer of a colony whose plantations enable England to be both prosperous and free."<sup>152</sup>

The governor's whitewashing<sup>153</sup> of English commercial reliance on the slave trade sees its parallel in his literal and figurative whitewashing of Yarico. Many have attributed Yarico's splitting into the proximately other Native American and the distantly other Black African Wowski to biological racism's concretizing of racial categories, but doing so imposes an ethnographic stability on the figurative significance of these women of color that does not exist as such.<sup>154</sup> When Inkle first proposes to sell Yarico to him, Curry's response draws a clear distinction between two kinds of enslaveable women: "Oho a slave! Faith now I think on't, my

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<sup>151</sup> We're reminded of Oroonoko's strange apology for slavery—"they did not make us slaves"—which Imoinda shreds by centering the catastrophic dimensions of hereditary slavery's capitalist logic. Here that female plea has been erased or whitewashed.

<sup>152</sup> Marsden, "Performing the West Indies," 86.

<sup>153</sup> In using this term, I aim to undermine its implicit association of whiteness with purity. In fact, I suggest that it betrays the extent to which whiteness itself depends upon symbolic efforts to sanitize the crimes required to construct it.

<sup>154</sup> For other possible explanations of Yarico's "Americanization" in Colman's opera, see Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 141 and Bhattacharya, "Family Jewels," 208-10.

daughter may want an attendant or two extraordinary, and as you say she's a delicate girl, above the common run, and none of your thick-lipped, flat-nosed, squabby, dumpling dowdies" (III.iii). The implicit distinction here between the delicate Yarico and the caricatured Wowski has multiple effects. First, it reiterates the class-dependent Noble Savage impulse of Behn's *Oroonoko* a century earlier, in which she suggested that 'common' Africans were suited for slavery whereas the exceptional Royal Slave was not. Second, the suggestion that an enslaved woman like Yarico would serve as "an attendant" or domestic servant smooths her transition into British domestic space where she will ultimately settle as a wife. However, while Curry's remarks augment the separation between fairer (more noble) enslaved women and more monstrous and primitive ones on the surface, they occlude the reality that fairer skin and more delicate features did nothing to protect enslaved women from sexual exploitation or the commodification of their children, just as the paternal liberalism underpinning the governor's justification for buying slaves so heartlessly thrust upon the market does nothing to restore their humanity or freedom. If anything, the entry of these women into the private spaces of their enslavers' homes intensified the threat of their sexual exploitation and increased the likelihood of their bearing children who would, according to the fundamental laws of English property, belong to their enslaving fathers as chattel to be sold rather than kin who might inherit.

While Yarico becomes a middle-class wife of sorts and an emblem of feminine sensibility, the erasure of her pregnancy and the displacement of her Blackness onto Wowski betray the extent to which her character embodies the troubling proximity of middling domestic motherhood to the hereditary enslavement and reproductive exploitation of African women near the close of the century. Ultimately, Yarico is merely relocated from one market to another, from the public exchange of slaves—wherein she is a sexualized object of desire—to the public

exchange of sentiment—where, as “a conduit of emotion,” she can excuse Curry and audiences alike of their complicity in an admittedly heartless, but ultimately unstoppable trade.<sup>155</sup> Thus, while Bhattacharya interprets the opera’s comedic ending as one in which Colman Jr’s characters “treasure Yarico for what she might symbolize, and not for what she can fetch,” these apparently competing systems of value become inseparable in the space of the theatre, where Yarico’s value rests in her ability to provoke the cleansing sensibility—Sir Christopher Curry’s, Inkle’s, and the audience’s—that absolves a consumerist society dependent on the commodification of women like her. In other words, as with Imoinda, Yarico’s symbolic value and her market value are simply two sides of the same guinea. If the doubling of Yarico as colonial commodity and potential British consumer brought slavery’s intimate commerce troublingly closer to English readers of her epistles, Yarico’s (and Wowski’s) embodiment by English actresses on the London stage brings it closer still. Consequently, the crisis of staging Yarico emerges not strictly because “normative femininity is itself beginning to be understood as incommensurable with non-white bodies,” but because of growing evidence that normative femininity is financed by non-white bodies.<sup>156</sup>

As with Imoinda, ample evidence suggests that the character roles within *Inkle and Yarico* were frequently grafted onto the actors and actresses who performed them. While Jack Bannister feared the way Inkle’s gross violation of intimacy might tarnish public perception of him off-stage, Parsons’s performance of Sir Christopher Curry imbued him with the kind of feeling dignity that the character allegorized for the nation as a whole. According to the *Public Advertiser*, he “did ample justice to the generous-minded governor, and seems to feel a glow in

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<sup>155</sup> O’Quinn, “Mercantile Deformities,” 401.

<sup>156</sup> O’Quinn, 391.

uttering the expressions apportioned to him.” This porousness between role and actor becomes somewhat more complicated for the actresses playing Yarico and Wowski; it not only destabilizes Wowski’s Blackness and Yarico’s relative whiteness, but also exposes the contingent whiteness of the actresses themselves. When the same reviewer reflects that “Mrs. Kemble was, indeed, Poor Yarico; and as one test of her excellence, we beheld it *visibly* operated on the feelings of many,” he reflects Yarico’s domestication in the body of the English actress and the insertion of both women into the public exchange of sentiment.<sup>157</sup> In “Race and Profit in the English Theatre,” Julie Carlson suggests that this domestication—marked racially—is critical to the opera’s exculpatory project: Elizabeth Satchell Kemble’s “poignant representation of suffering femininity,” she argues, “obscured both her ethnicity (in contrast to that of Wowski) and the broader issue of British complicity in the systematic enslavement of others.”<sup>158</sup> Warm reflections by William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb on moving performances of Yarico suggest that this was not entirely the case. For Hazlitt, actress Fanny Kelly’s “tones, and looks, and piercing sighs” emanate from the body of a “sunburnt Indian maid.”<sup>159</sup> Lamb describes the intensity of Kelly’s affect as “everywhere African, fervid, glowing.”<sup>160</sup> While Wowski is set apart from Yarico through the use of blackface makeup and stage pidgin which make her a comic figure, her

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<sup>157</sup> “Theatrical Intelligence, Haymarket,” *Public Advertiser* (London 6 Aug. 1787).

<sup>158</sup> Julia A. Carlson, “Race and Profit in the English Theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, eds. Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 181. Citing O’Quinn’s *Mercantile Deformities* as her source, Carlson mistakenly identifies the actress as Sarah Kemble, possibly thinking of Sarah Siddons (née Kemble), Elizabeth Kemble’s sister-in-law. Siddons was possibly the most famous tragic actress of the late eighteenth century, and while she did perform the role of Imoinda, she never performed as Yarico.

<sup>159</sup> William Hazlitt, qtd. in Felsenstein, *English Trader*, 33.

<sup>160</sup> Charles Lamb, qtd. in Felsenstein, *English Trader*, 34.

layering onto the actresses who perform her and vice versa troubles rather than solidifies racial difference.

Wowski's description in Colman's text and in subsequent representations of her in visual culture as corpulent (and even, sometimes, monstrous) jars with the English actress's body whose only mark of difference is conveyed through obviously artificial blackface makeup.<sup>161</sup> Wowski's character thus becomes the most striking example of the portability of Blackness as a flexible signifier at the heart of the ballad opera's obsessive attention to complexion, an attention not lost on its critics:

Trudge's remark that the naked Indians "are in *black buff*, like *Adam* in *mourning*," is a whimsical combination:—his reply also to the Barbadoes merchant,—“that if his heart could change places with his head, he would look black in the face,” is a strong retort.—In the comic part of the dialogue, we cannot forbear observing, that there is too much said about the complexion of the Indians;—the wit is too much in the *shade*—and the joke is—the *black joke!*—”<sup>162</sup>

As the reviewer playfully deploys the same puns on complexion it critiques, their reference to “the black joke”—a vulgar and widely familiar reference to women's genitalia—links Black and white women's sexual availability in the body of the actress, particularly the actress playing Wowski. In other words, any ethnographic difference Wowski may embody on the page is persistently interrupted in the space of the theatre.

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<sup>161</sup> For some, the effect was indeed disagreeable: “we never saw upon any stage so dreadful a figure as Miss George.” See “The Play-House, Hay-Market,” *World and Fashionable Advertiser* (London 6 Aug. 1787).

<sup>162</sup> “Theatrical Intelligence, Hay-market,” *Morning Herald* (London 6 Aug. 1787).

Some have read Colman's play with complexion generously as an implication that "racial difference should be viewed as no more than skin deep," such as when, in later performances, the actor playing Trudge would literally wipe off Wowski's black makeup.<sup>163</sup> Others have suggested that its gestures at the theatrical artifice of blacking makeup sidesteps discomfort with staging miscegenation.<sup>164</sup> In either case, it seems fair to say that the opera invests in the capacity of race to signify something other than fixed ethnographic difference. We can observe this in the shifting accounts of how Yarico and Wowski's racial difference registers on stage across different performances. The reviewer in the *Morning Herald* identifies Wowski's Blackness as inappropriate given her presumed identity as a Native American. They advise that "Wowski's face to be not so jetty, and to agree in colour with her hands; she ought to be an American tawny, and not an African black."<sup>165</sup> Elizabeth Inchbald, the actress and dramatist famous for identifying Colman's *Inkle and Yarico* as abolitionist *avant la lettre*, levied the opposite critique in suggesting that Yarico was not African *enough*, "[a]s slaves are imported from Africa, and never from America."<sup>166</sup> She was not alone. As Jenna Gibbs recounts, actress Fanny Kelly "took on the part of Yarico explicitly out of sympathy for the 'ill used African' and took pains to 'carefully put on a Brown-Sherry complexion' so as to be 'excessively African.'"<sup>167</sup> Perhaps most importantly, and most frequently overlooked, *Inkle and Yarico*'s preoccupation with the

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<sup>163</sup> Felsenstein, *English Trader*," 20-21.

<sup>164</sup> O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 405-06. See also MacDonald, "Miscegenation As Consolation," 25-43 and Nussbaum, *Limits of the Human*, 191-92 and 244-47.

<sup>165</sup> "Theatrical Intelligence, Hay-market," *Morning Herald* (London 6 Aug. 1787).

<sup>166</sup> Elizabeth Inchbald, *The British Theatre; or A Collection of Plays which are acted at the Theatres Royal Drury Lane, Covent Garden and Haymarket*, vol. 20 (London, 1808), 4.

<sup>167</sup> Jenna M. Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 3.

portability of Blackness as a signifier also highlights the contingency of whiteness as a category of femininity grounded in far more than skin color alone.

Like Southerne's *Oroonoko*, Colman's *Inkle and Yarico* challenges the stability of white skin as a marker of virtue, not only by singling out for ridicule slave traders whose white skin belies their "black hearts," but also by exposing women's counterfeit claims to the kinds of virtue whiteness is supposed to signal.<sup>168</sup> The contingency of whiteness on class and proper sensibility forms the center of the oft-remarked-upon debate between Trudge and Narcissa's servant Patty in the opening scene of Act III. Trudge has just confessed to his master's "keep[ing] a girl," and when Patty asks whether she is "fair or brown," she replies with horror to learn that Yarico is "quite dark" (III.i):

PATTY: Faugh, I wouldn't let [a Black-a-moor] kiss me for all the world! He'd make my face all smutty.

TRUDGE: Zounds, you are might nice all of a sudden! But I'd have you to know, Madame Patty, that black-a-moor ladies, as you call'em, are some of the very few whose complexions never rub off! 'Sbud, if they did, Wows and I should have changed faces by this time. (III.i)

Trudge's comic reply plays on the artifice of Wowski's blackface makeup, but it also presents Patty's whiteness as a misplaced effort to put on airs. In calling her "Madame Patty" and remarking that she is "might nice all of a sudden," he exposes the performativity of the virtuous and tasteful refinement motivating her disapproval. We cannot help recalling, either, that

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<sup>168</sup> Oroonoko had proclaimed "let the guilty blush: The white man that betray'd me: honest black Disdains to change its colour" (I.ii).



Trudge's reference to Wowski in Act I as "a nice little plump bit" drew on the alternative, if somewhat antiquated, meaning of "nice" as wanton or lascivious.<sup>169</sup>

However, Patty is not only excluded from white femininity strictly because she is working-class. In the song that follows her dialogue with Trudge, she compares love to hunting and concludes that matches should be pursued with money—and not strictly the heart—in mind. Her very use of a hunting metaphor links her with Inkle, who, in one of his most vicious speeches to Yarico, similarly articulates the superiority of whiteness as an expression of the pursuit of interest: "My countrymen and yours differ as much in minds as in complexion... We Christians, Girl, hunt money... 'tis money which brings us ease, plenty command, power, every thing; and, of course, happiness. You are the bar to my attaining this" (III.iii). In other words, Patty's exclusion from genuine whiteness derives also from her lack of sensibility and her espousal of Inkle's outdated model of domesticity as an economic rather than a sentimental affair. Like the Sutton House hostess of the *General Evening Post's* anecdote, Patty's claim to whiteness comes across as performative and aspirational in the same way as Trudge's aping the affectation of high society in the lobby of a London theatre (indeed one moment follows the other) signals class as similarly performative. Despite her moral goodness, Wowski's buffoonish performance of gentility (at the urging of her social aspiring beaux Trudge) expresses the same aversion to social climbing and its assumed relation to tasteless and sexually suspect excess which marked the Sutton House Hostess as racially other. Ultimately, protecting whiteness falls to women, not men, through their consignment to a domestic sphere distinct from the market. And, while this may not apply to Patty's character as a working-class woman, it would certainly

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<sup>169</sup> "nice, adj. and adv." OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2020, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/126732](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/126732). Accessed 5 December 2020.

register (however subtly) as a critique of the social mobility of the actress playing her, or any other female character for that matter. Trudge's concluding pronouncement—"Pshaw! These girls are so plaguy proud of their white and red!" has long been interpreted as a reference to sex workers' use of makeup (III.i).<sup>170</sup> However, the opera's prologue reminds us that actresses also don their white and red: "*Our* ladies lay by rouge, and black their faces."<sup>171</sup> Remembering that stage actresses were frequently linked with sex workers, we observe once again how the taint of the market so inimical to emerging notions of middling white womanhood reconfigures the visible "whiteness" of the eighteenth-century actress as artificial complexion.

Correspondingly, if Wowski's stage Blackness marks her sexual promiscuity, it also marks that of the actresses who inhabited that role, including, in particular, Mrs. Margaret Martyr and Mrs. Bland whom, Iwanisziw explains, "suffered the social reprobation attendant upon scandalous extra marital liaisons" and, consequently, "lasted much longer in the role, their reputations and unusual features serving to enhance their portrayal of the sexually compromised Wowski."<sup>172</sup> Wowski, not unlike Imoinda in the *Female Tatler*, becomes almost synonymous with "actress"—a sexually compromised figure of conspicuous social mobility—revealing again the extent to which Black womanhood, as a signifier of women's breach into the market, could be grafted onto so-called white English women. Given the extent to which the opera's women of color were grafted onto the so-called white women who embodied them, we should reconsider the notion that "by emphasizing the artifice of racial performance in the case of Wowski, the

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<sup>170</sup> See, for example O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities," 406.

<sup>171</sup> Colman Jr., "Prologue to *Inkle and Yarico*, 1789," qtd. in Felsenstein, *English Trader*, 173.

<sup>172</sup> Susan B. Iwanisziw, "The Shameful Allure of Sycorax and Wowski: Dramatic Precursors of Sartje, the Hottentot Venus," *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research*, Denver vol. 16, iss. 2, (Winter 2001): 13.

opera is able to suture over the question of race in the representation of Yarico.”<sup>173</sup> The whitening of Yarico through her embodiment by beloved English actresses like Elizabeth Kemble—whom, we may remember, was mistakenly memorialized as having played Imoinda—also works the other way to highlight the suspect whiteness of the actress. As with Imoinda, then, Yarico never reinforces white or Black womanhood as fixed categories; rather she is a palimpsest of their accumulating layers.

*Inkle and Yarico* raises the troubling spectre of Blackness as haunting white metropolitan femininity, but, in an extension of Sir Christopher Curry’s sentimental amelioration of a dehumanizing market, it also repurposes Blackness—and Black skin in particular—as a signifier of consumable goods whose domestication has the capacity to sanitize the intimate commerce of slavery. Indeed, Colman’s play on race goes hand in hand with his play on modes of consumption. Mere moments after Trudge calls the natives “black as a peppercorn,” Inkle muses about “how much they might fetch at the West Indian markets” (I.i). By comically domesticating flesh as commodity, Trudge’s comparison simultaneously exposes and laughs away the English consumption of human flesh in slavery. This moment is one of several that plays on the notion of cannibalism—a primitive and savagely violent form of consumption frequently associated in European travel narratives with Black Caribs—by humorously transforming it into a local form of consumerism: In the opening scene of the play, when Inkle and Trudge are about to enter Yarico’s cave, Trudge says of the natives, “I’m told they take off heads like hats, and hang ‘em on pegs, in their parlours” (I.i). Human flesh here is not simply consumed, it is literally inserted into the space of English leisured domesticity—the parlour. As with all versions of the tale since Steele, the adornment of Yarico’s domestic cave here presents an opportunity to display colonial

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<sup>173</sup> O’Quinn, “Mercantile Deformities,” 401.

spoils ready for incorporation into a metropolitan consumerist economy, and Inkle readily and reliably articulates their value as such: "These ornaments would be worth something in England...This cave rather bears the pleasing face of a profitable adventure" (I.iii). Trudge executes another reversal, responding, "All that enter here appear to have had their skins stripped over their ears, and ours will be kept for curiosities" (I.iii). Most notably, Trudge compares Yarico's complexion to the color of a "Wedgewood teapot."<sup>174</sup> Much like the japanning of Imoinda's skin, Yarico's transmutation into commodity within the English household registers her domestication as a way of overwriting that the exploitation of women like her funds the very formation of bourgeois leisure and wealth that constitute the English home they come to inhabit. As MacDonald observes, Trudge also uses "the same adjective to describe his black love Wowski as one of Colman's planters uses to describe a heavily laden ship full of trade goods bearing down on Bridgetown's harbor. The word is 'tight.'" For both Yarico and Wowski, "race as it is marked by color enters the marketplace without any of the 'Indignity' ascribed to the awful necessity of buying slaves."<sup>175</sup>

Given Yarico's prolific presence in the eighteenth century, it is telling that Wowski has had something of a more robust afterlife, particularly in visual culture of the Romantic period. Whereas Jerningham's poem and the *Evening Post's* anecdote render their racialized heroines as both victims and embodiments of imperial commerce's corruptive excess, the opera's invention of Wowski operates as a more pointed rhetorical defense against the intrusion of that excess into middle-class domesticity and its formation of whiteness. One explanation has to do with Yarico's long history. Much as Imoinda's whitening could never fully occlude the stain of hereditary

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<sup>174</sup> For an excellent discussion of this comparison, see Bhattacharya, "Family Jewels," 208.

<sup>175</sup> MacDonald, "Miscegenation As Consolation," 36.

slavery, Inkle's betrayal of Yarico and their child to the gaping maw of Atlantic slavery is so indelibly marked on the eighteenth-century popular imagination that it invariably seeps through the "sanitized sentimentality" that would erase it from the record.<sup>176</sup> One chilling example emerges in a strange echo of Southerne's play, when Oroonoko, shortly before his, Imoinda's, and their unborn child's death, says, "Methinks I see the babe with infant hands/ Pleading for life and begging to be born" (iv.ii). When Inkle begins to wring his hands over selling Yarico, his rendering of her as a child (because of her simplicity, no doubt) recalls the child he abandoned to the market for almost a century: "Poor Yarico!...I dare not wound such innocence. Simplicity is like a smiling babe; which to the ruffian that would murder it, stretching its little naked, helpless arms, pleads, speechless, its own cause" (III. ii). Despite the happy ending of Colman's popular opera, the familiarity of the original tale, and its more unsparing outcome, was a given. A reviewer from the *Public Advertiser* frames the stage adaptation as "renew[ing] in remembrance a story that but few have not, *if they have read at all.*"<sup>177</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The Black Venus figure that emerges during the heated slavery debates of the 1790s becomes both an embodiment of slavery's excesses and a tyrannical agent of its preservation. We saw early signs of this Black Venus in poems that represented Yarico as desirous of English consumer goods, but she appears more explicitly in characters like Wowski, whose thick lips and bodily excess—as "dumpling dowdies"—become an embodied receptacle of the excessive greed propelling the slave trade. I explore this iteration of the Black Venus in my next chapter. Late-

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<sup>176</sup> Bhattacharya, "Family Jewels," 221.

<sup>177</sup> "Theatrical Intelligence, Haymarket," *Public Advertiser* (London 6 Aug. 1787).

eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century satirical visual culture is rife with images of corpulent and devouring Black women, frequently in the form of a bed trick.<sup>178</sup> While these representations may indicate fears of miscegenation or white men's unnatural desire for Black women, I propose that they develop from the early eighteenth-century Black Venuses explored in this chapter and are another expression of slavery's excesses intruding into domestic space. The Black Venus, I argue, is the haunting reminder, the excess that survives Inkle's repentance and casts doubt on the logic of feminine sensibility guiding "good" commerce. The nagging contradiction bursts forth through the staged adaptations of both Imoinda's and Yarico's tales.

As early Black Venuses, Imoinda and Yarico are marked throughout the eighteenth century by a racial flexibility and inhabitability that made them critical vehicles for navigating the shifting degrees to which imperial commerce—and hereditary slavery's sacrifice of kinship to profit—were leaching into and constructing a category of white, English domesticity. Thus, while Wowski's legacy demonstrates the increasingly stereotyped representations of Black womanhood, the continuous revision of these tales and their dense layering remind us of the knotted provenance of such figures. As I demonstrate in my next chapter, the deployment of the Black Venus figure to reflect on the shifting status of English womanhood persists into the nineteenth century, including even the most stereotyped figure of all—Sarah Baartman.

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<sup>178</sup> A bed trick was a popular comedic trope in which two people are in bed together, with one or both of them believing they are in bed with someone else. Bed tricks featuring white men who wake up horrified to find themselves in bed with caricatured Black women were particularly popular in Georgian graphic satire.

## Chapter Two

### **Figures of Excess: The Sable and Hottentot Venus in Early Romantic Visual Culture**

In 1811, an unlikely couple graced the printshop windows of Georgian London in Charles Williams's graphic satire, *Neptune's Last Resource* (see fig. 1). The print depicts the profligate naval officer, Prince William Henry, dressed as Neptune and wooing an empowered Sarah Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus. Although the Prince had drawn public ridicule as a notorious advocate of slavery, and although Baartman's exhibition as a sideshow in London had provoked heated debate about whether she was being enslaved on English soil, *Neptune's Last Resource* is not a commentary on slavery, at least not exclusively. Nor is it strictly a jibe at the prince's widely publicized failures to secure a financially advantageous marriage. Above all, Williams's depiction of Baartman in a fine gown refusing the marriage proposal of an English prince reveals that the image is not the straightforward rendering of Baartman as an ethnographic specimen of African primitivity and uncontrolled sexuality so often attributed to representations of her. Its failure to cohere with established interpretations of the Black Venus accounts for the conspicuous absence of *Neptune's Last Resource* in the vast wealth of scholarship on Baartman.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Critical studies of Baartman almost always reference the Romantic-era satirical prints which depict her nearly nude, in profile, and in clad in indigenous dress. Although these images circulated at the same time as *Neptune's Last Resource*—one of the most famous, “Love and Beauty,” produced by Williams himself—*Neptune's Last Resource* receives remarkably little attention. (“Love and Beauty” depicts Baartman in a manner more typical of the period. She stands in profile, wearing a bodysuit matching the color of her skin, adorned with beads and body paint. Perched atop her voluptuous rear end is the figure of cupid, aiming an arrow at the viewer.) Studies that do reference *Neptune's Last Resource* try to force it into established interpretations of the Hottentot Venus—“Even the rudest barbarian, it was suggested, could see through the clumsy advances of the Duke of Clarence”—but doing so flattens the other kinds of signifying work Baartman and other Black Venus figures performed in the early nineteenth-century British imagination. See Bernth Lindfors, *Early African Entertainments Abroad: From the Hottentot Venus to Africa's First Olympians* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 61.

The apparent aberration of Williams's image also explains why no scholar to date has noted its striking resemblance to its far more iconic precursor, Thomas Stothard's now-canonical image, *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (1794), which circulated throughout the Atlantic world in Jamaican planter-politician Bryan Edwards's *The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (see fig. 2). As I indicated earlier, Stothard's image has been interpreted somewhat narrowly as a salacious romance between a British sailor disguised as Neptune and an always-consenting Black goddess. However, Williams's caricatured version recodes the *romantic* exchange of the Sable Venus image with a more explicitly *financial* one: in the midst of his marriage proposal, the prince-as-Neptune tries to wrench large bags of money from Baartman's hands. By linking Williams and Stothard's images together, this chapter traces a wider circuit of visual texts which redefine the Black Venus of the early Romantic period as an embodied site where seemingly divergent discourses about slavery, marriage, gender, commerce, and political governance intersect.

As fleshy figures—both abstract and acutely corporeal—the Sable and Hottentot Venuses fit neatly within the period's widespread practice of deploying racist tropes as legible signifiers of excess in order to navigate a profoundly unstable time in British domestic and imperial history. As Suvir Kaul explains, luxury “was often a shorthand for an *excess* of trade—for the unsettling effects the riches generated by commerce were having on the class assumptions and social behavior of those traditionally excluded from consideration as consumers in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Britain.”<sup>2</sup> Layering racial stereotypes onto so-called white, English subjects proved a useful tactic for marking those whose perceived excesses

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<sup>2</sup> Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 143 (emphasis added).



muddled those boundaries as un-English and thus threatening to national character.<sup>3</sup> We need only recall, for example, how the *General Evening Post* deployed Oriental visual cues to mark the newly moneyed Sutton House hostess's "ravenous appetite for extravagance, and aspirations to rise into elite spheres of power and influence."<sup>4</sup> As the eighteenth century came to a close, this racialized discourse of excess proved astoundingly adaptable to a wide range of social and political positions, particularly in heated debates about natural rights prompted by the American and French Revolutions. The Age of Revolution gave rise to a liberal, political radicalism which mounted an assault on hereditary aristocratic governance and traditional class boundaries, both in terms of political representation as well as in the theatre of public sentiment.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1790s, conservative supporters of the old regime and liberal radicals alike employed Oriental tropes to delegitimize their political antagonists in the popular press. More precisely, they represented their foes as corrupted by intersecting forms of excess—sexual, consumptive, and political—which, the logic held, made both their opponents and the debauched Eastern despots with whom they were rhetorically aligned incapable of just governance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Those among radical camps, like Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine, linked the ruling class's excessive luxury, sexual indulgence, and political tyranny with Oriental despotism to challenge the aristocracy's capacity for rational governance. For example, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft compares the enclosure of expansive landed estates to the "idle pomp" and "indolence of Eastern [Asian] grandeur." See Mary Wollstonecraft and Sylvana Tomaselli, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men; with a Vindication of the Rights of Woman; and Hints* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 60. As Makdisi notes, "in addition to serving the radical cause as the imaginary locus of so-called traditional culture or feudal despotism, the Orient also served as the imaginary locus of the worst excesses of plebian dangerous enthusiasm or the mob." See *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 207.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Smylitopoulos, "Portrait of a Nabob: Graphic Satire, Portraiture, and the Anglo-Indian in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Racar / Société pour Promouvoir la Publication en Histoire de l'Art au Canada, Département d'Histoire, Université Laval* (2012): 11.

<sup>5</sup> See especially, Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 230-235.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) and Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Given the logic of visibility inherent in the notion of *conspicuous* wealth—old or new—it should hardly be surprising that critiques of consumptive excess were relayed through recognizable racial tropes, particularly in visual culture. What is surprising, however, is that so few scholars have accounted for the same kind of rhetorical plasticity in Black female tropes that they observe in Oriental ones. For example, Catherine Molineux productively explains that the common practice in eighteenth-century portraiture of depicting Black servant children as exotic emblems of wealth and status also served to highlight the glaring absence of the sitters' white children.<sup>7</sup> Here, Molineux argues, Black bodies visibly marked the ways in which conspicuous consumption compromised the natural, domestic virtue of white, English motherhood. Molineux does not extend this same structure of signification to Black women, however, whom she reads primarily as emblems of sexual deviancy. The previous chapter complicated this well-worn association by demonstrating how the Black Venus's embodiment of intimate commerce explicitly bound English domesticity to the violent excesses of hereditary slavery. Whereas Imoinda and Yarico were largely victims of such excess, this chapter shows how The Sable and Hottentot Venuses emerge as embodied agents of it. Much as luxury was a rhetorical shorthand for the destabilizing effects of excess trade on traditional social and political boundaries, I argue that the Black Venus was a visual shorthand for the way slavery's intimate commerce was changing the face of English national character by exposing the porous boundaries between the upper and lower classes, the metropole and the colonies, and Black and white womanhood.

This chapter begins by reexamining the Sable Venus texts as direct responses to antislavery assaults against West India merchants and planters in the popular press. Specifically,

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Molineux, "Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London," *ELH* vol. 72, no. 2 (Summer, 2005): 501.

I identify the Sable Venus as an instrumental vehicle through which Bryan Edwards displaces responsibility for slavery's unnatural excesses onto the tyranny of the market in a bid to establish his own patriotic Englishness as well as that of his fellow West Indian planters. Through the Sable Venus, Edwards casts those most dispossessed by Atlantic commerce—enslaved Black women—into figurative agents of its dispossession. In the latter portion of the chapter, I examine a series of interconnected graphic satires to explore how the Hottentot Venus and her analog Wowski are deployed to critique the excesses of the Crown as both domestic and imperial, intimate and economic.

### ***Bryan Edwards's History***

#### ***The (Un)English Excesses of Slavery***

William Grainger's engraving of Thomas Stothard's painting, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, was first published in Bryan Edwards's influential *History* to illustrate its sister poem, Isaac Teale's *Sable Venus, An Ode. Voyage* depicts an African woman in the style of Botticelli's Venus as she traverses the Atlantic on a lavishly adorned shell, surrounded by playful ocean creatures and cherubs. Hovering in the air, Cupid directs his arrow at a lustful Neptune who disguises himself as "The Captain of a man of war," wielding the Union Jack in place of a trident.<sup>8</sup> For her part, the Sable Venus holds the reigns of her marine car and appears in control of both the voyage and the romantic encounters that punctuate it. Most scholars cite Edwards's preface to the Sable Venus ode and image in arguing that he included them as a playful

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<sup>8</sup> Isaac Teale, *The Sable Venus: An Ode. Inscribed to Bryan Edwards, Esq.* (Kingston, Jamaica 1765), stanza 17. All subsequent citations are in the text.

condemnation of concubinage between the “sable and saffron beauties” and “white men of all ranks and conditions” who were their paramours in the West Indies.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, many suggest that the light tone of Edwards’s preface colludes with the paired texts to recode the horrors of the Middle Passage, particularly its sexual violations, as a mythical romance between ocean deities.<sup>10</sup> The Sable Venus texts are thus understood to participate in a broader discursive tradition of sanitizing narratives of slavery and colonial conquest.

In studies of eighteenth-century imperial culture, for example, the Sable Venus’s seduction of Neptune and the poet-narrator has been read as a paradigmatic example of *anti-conquest* drawing upon Mary Louise Pratt’s term for a strategic method by which the colonizer absolves himself of the violence of conquest by rhetorically reversing actual relations of power to cast himself as the victim.<sup>11</sup> As I will demonstrate, the Sable Venus ode draws upon the conventions of courtly love to naturalize such a reversal. However, beneath its thin neoclassical veneer, the ode’s transport of the Sable Venus, along with the precious wares on and among which she rides, figure her as a commodity among others en route from Angola to Jamaica,

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<sup>9</sup> Bryan Edwards, *The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies: In Two Volumes* (London: John Stockdale, 1794), 2:31. All subsequent citations are in the text. See, for example, Rosalie Smith McCrea, “Dis-Ordering the World in the Eighteenth Century: *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*: Connoisseurship and the Trivialising of Slavery” in *Beyond the Blood, the Beach and the Banana: New Perspectives in Caribbean Studies*, ed. Sandra Courtman (Jamaica, 2004): 275-97 and Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780- 1865* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Barbara Bush, “‘Sable Venus,’ ‘She Devil,’ or ‘Drudge’? British Slavery and the ‘Fabulous Fiction’ of Black Women’s Identities c. 1650-1838,” *Women’s History Review* 9, (December 2000): 761-89; Alexander S. Gourlay, “‘Art Delivered’: Stothard’s the *Sable Venus* and Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.4 (2008): 529-50; and Shirley A. Tate, “Looking at the Sable-Saffron Venus: Iconography, Affect and (Post)Colonial Hygiene” in *Black Women’s Bodies and the Nation: Race, Gender and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17-46.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7-9. See also Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 46-57 and Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153-59.

where her shell-throne will transform into an auction block and her mythic romance will dissolve into sexual violence licensed by the capitalist logic of chattel slavery. While I draw upon foundational studies of this figure, which have emphasized its stereotyping of Black women as licentious and sexually available, I expand their scope by reexamining the Sable Venus ode and its accompanying image in more detailed alignment with the central vehicle for their circulation—Bryan Edwards’s *History*. Consequently, I pay less attention to the original sentiments motivating Teale’s composition of the ode in 1765 or Stothard’s potentially subversive interpretation of it in his image than I do to the complex motivations informing Edwards’s seemingly bizarre inclusion of the ode and image in his *History* beginning in 1793 and 94 respectively.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to existing scholarship on the Sable Venus texts, Bryan Edwards was not an unvarnished advocate of either the slave trade or chattel slavery itself. He was, instead, a rhetorically skilled slavery apologist whose alleged “proslavery tome” frequently decries the institution it simultaneously claims is necessary.<sup>13</sup> As such, Edwards’s use of the Sable Venus is far more nuanced and strategically situated in this influential document—an authoritative text on both sides of the slavery debate in parliament—than we have yet realized. Specifically, Edwards capitalizes on the flexibility of this figure in the Sable Venus ode and image to shift responsibility for slavery’s “transformation of kin into commodity” away from West Indian

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<sup>12</sup> First published in 1765, “Sable Venus, an Ode” likely constituted a pedagogic exercise wherein Teale, Edwards’s tutor, was tasked with containing the young man’s taboo theme of interracial sex and rendering it more palatable to an English sensibility. By “bizarre,” I mean out of place. As I will explain shortly, the ode both does and does not operate as an illustrative example of the chapter it concludes, and the image (one of few in the compendious two-volume tome) seems temporally out of place in a text so intent on establishing its up-to-the moment relevance.

<sup>13</sup> Mia Bagneris, for example, calls the *History* an “unequivocally colonialist, pro-slavery examination of British involvement in the islands.” See *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018): 145.

planters and onto metropolitan English men and women.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, I diverge from scholars who interpret the Sable Venus texts as a salacious diversion from the *History*'s dry figures. Instead, I argue that the Sable Venus texts are tactical vehicles of displacement meant to contain the central tension running through the *History* as a whole: on the one hand, Edwards was eager to demonstrate the commercial exigencies of the slave trade to the nation and empire; on the other hand, he was desperate to refute the characterization of West Indian planters as un-English in the excessive cruelty, sexual desire, and pursuit of luxury believed to be inherent in the plantation economy and social milieu of West Indian colonial life.

It is useful, therefore, to think about Edwards's *History* as participating in debates about slavery and abolition at multiple rhetorical levels. On one level, it serves a very particular and practical purpose of providing empirical evidence of the overwhelming benefits of West Indian slavery to the English nation and empire in order to influence parliamentary legislation in favor of the West India lobby.<sup>15</sup> For example, Edwards supports claims by merchants and planters in the House of Commons that "the sugar colonies, *and the commerce thereon dependant [sic]*, have become the most considerable source of navigation and national wealth out of the limits of the mother country; and that no part of the national property can be more beneficially employed for the public, nor are any interests better entitled to the protection of the legislature, than theirs" (2:371 emphasis added). Edwards goes out of his way to specify the *public* value of the sugar

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, "*partus sequitur ventrem*," *Small Axe: a Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 22.1 (2018): 11.

<sup>15</sup> The Preface to vol. 1 of the first edition (1793) establishes Edwards's unique expertise, and insists that any reliable account of the West Indies must come from empirical observation: "because, having resided many years in the countries of which I write, I presume to think that I am somewhat better qualified to judge of the influence of climate and situation, on the disposition, temper, and intellects of their inhabitants, than many of those writers, who, without the same advantage, have undertaken to compile systems, and establish conclusions, on this subject. I conceive that, unless an author has had the benefit of *actual experience and personal observation*, neither genius nor industry can at all times enable him to guard against the mistakes and misinterpretations of prejudiced, ignorant, or interested men; to whose authority he submits" (my emphasis, 1:vii).

colonies to contest assumptions that West Indian planters are themselves in disproportionate possession of the wealth generated by slavery. “West Indians,” he assures his readers, “are not remarkable (with very few exceptions) either for their gigantic opulence, or an ostentatious display of it. They do not emerge rapidly from poverty and insignificance into *conspicuous* notice” (2:456 emphasis added). Edwards’s qualification here signals the second rhetorical aim of his *History*, which scholars of the Sable Venus texts have almost entirely overlooked.

In addition to its extensive empirical evidence, the *History* also mounts a direct intervention into the sphere of public opinion, specifically in response to the proliferation of antislavery texts in the 1780s and 90s, which identified West Indian planters as embodiments of a variety of excesses—sexual, consumptive, and commercial—believed to be threatening the nation at home.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Edwards rejects this popular characterization in the opening pages of his *History*, where, on behalf of “all inhabitants of the British West Indies,” he expresses “a just sense of indignation at the malignant and unmerited aspersions which are daily and hourly thrown upon the planters, for supposed improper and inhuman treatment of their African labourers” (2:xvii). However, it would be incorrect to characterize Edwards as an ameliorationist who believes that Africans are suited for enslavement as long as it is benevolently managed. For as much as Edwards promotes the wealth and influence generated by the slave trade and the sugar colonies, he also, repeatedly, condemns slavery as an inherently immoral institution which affronts English sensibility and is ultimately at odds with England’s love of liberty.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In this arena, Edwards anticipated the sentiment of Cruikshank’s *John Bull Taking a Clear View of the Negro Slavery Question!!* (1826), which Kay Dian Kriz has suggested expressed skepticism “about the excessive production of images, about the misuse of images, about the power of printed images to delude a public that is unable, because of the geography of the empire, to see for itself.” See *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>17</sup> While England’s “love of liberty” in the period often refers to its *own* political liberty—republicanism as opposed to absolutism—which is not necessarily incompatible with chattel slavery, Edwards’s repeated deployment of the

His chapter on “Negroes in a state of slavery” opens with the following lament on the institution’s inhumanity:

The progress of my work has now brought me to the contemplation of human nature in its most debased and abject state;—to the *sad prospect* of 450,000 *reasonable beings* ... in a state of barbarity and slavery; of whom...great numbers assuredly, have been torn from their native country and *dearest connections*, by means which no good mind can reflect upon but with *sentiments of disgust, commiseration, and sorrow*. (2:33 emphasis added)

By deploying the language of sensibility—so frequently harnessed by his abolitionist opponents—to emphatically demonstrate his moral aversion to the institution of slavery, Edwards performs the feeling English subject and contests the public image of West Indian slaveholders as heartless degenerates. At times, Edwards’s quantitative accounts of the enslaved as chattel appear in jarring proximity to his sympathetic laments for them as fellow men. After a detailed accounting of “Negroes imported” and “Negroes exported,” Edwards bemoans that “the miserable people” should “thus [be] condemned to perpetual exile and servitude...‘The day,’ says Homer, ‘which makes a man a slave,’ takes away half his worth” (2:68).<sup>18</sup> In order to reconcile his condemnation of slavery in principle with his persistent rejection of the slave trade’s abolition, Edwards labors to absolve himself of any accountability for its moral turpitude: he asserts early on that “nothing is more certain than that the Slave Trade may be very wicked, and the planters in general very innocent” (2:34).

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language of sensibility and fellow feeling suggest that he is condemning the institution of Atlantic slavery on more humanitarian grounds.

<sup>18</sup> See also Edwards’s anecdote about Coromantee character: “One cannot surely but lament, that a people thus naturally emulous and intrepid” should have their spirits “broken down by the yoke of slavery” (84). Or, shortly thereafter, “So degrading is the nature of slavery, that fortitude of mind is lost as free agency is restrained” (2:93).



In one particularly effective rhetorical gambit, Edwards forcefully shrinks the distance between his metropolitan detractors and the trade they so vociferously denounce by demonstrating how inextricably the lives (and pockets) of *all* English men and women were tied to the fate of an Atlantic commercial system with slavery at its center. For example, Edwards impresses upon his readers how fundamentally “the naval power of Great Britain,” and thus the sovereignty of the nation, was “dependent on colonial commerce” (2:375). He argues that Britain’s commercial operation in the Atlantic “maintains a merchant navy on which the maritime strength of the kingdom so greatly depends, that we should *cease to be a nation without it*” (2:375 emphasis added). By cleverly demonstrating how merchant capitalists and other participants in the slave trade were essential to the security of the nation, Edwards worked to reaffirm the patriotic Englishness of West Indian colonists at a time when “the popular prejudice against slavery” had left “no room for the slave trader in [England’s] imagined community.”<sup>19</sup> This would have been an especially compelling argument at the time of the *History*’s publication in 1793 and again in 1794, when, as Suvir Kaul reminds us, “the fervor of British antislavery activism was dampened by the general political reaction to what were seen as the dangers and *excesses* of the Jacobins, who had taken power after the revolution in France.”<sup>20</sup> Not only would Britain’s subsequent war with France make Edwards’s assurance of British naval dominance that much more compelling, but Edwards could capitalize on the symbolic association of the antislavery movement with the violent excesses of radical republicanism to counter claims of West Indian excess. The threat of French invasion from without and of popular rebellion from

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<sup>19</sup> Robin Blackburn, “Debates on Slavery, Capitalism and Race: Old and New” in *Feminism, Capitalism, and Critique: Essays in Honor of Nancy Fraser*, eds. Banu Bargu, Chiara Bottici (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 45.

<sup>20</sup> Kaul, *Poems of Nation*, 265 (emphasis added).

within the nation were not the only points of instability Edwards exploited in making his case, however.

He also took advantage of anxiety surrounding the increasing influence of the commercial market more broadly on national political and social realities by casting West Indian planters and metropolitan Englishmen alike as subject to its whims. As Robin Blackburn argues, “[b]oth conservatives and radicals distrusted the market and wished to ‘protect society’ from its ravages. The distancing effect of market relations had allowed for the rise of slavery in an overseas sphere of injustice ‘beyond the line.’”<sup>21</sup> In his rhetorical efforts to bring this “line” closer to home, Edwards extends both the West Indian slaveholders’ innocence and the burden of their complicity back onto the metropolitan public that, according to Edwards, unfairly stigmatizes them. He does so by suggesting that any property-owning Briton might suddenly find himself in possession of slaves and thus implicated in the market of Atlantic slavery, for such are the vagaries of property ownership:

Much the greatest part of the present inhabitants of the British West Indies came into possession of their plantations by inheritance or accident. Many persons there are, in Great Britain itself, who, amidst the continual fluctuation of human affairs, and the changes incident to property, find themselves possessed of estates in the West Indies which they have never seen, and invested with powers over their fellow creatures there, which, however extensively odious, they have never abused. (2:34)

Here Edwards nimbly recasts slavery as a largely passive form of property ownership. By suggesting that persons in Britain may “find themselves possessed” of their “fellow creatures” without any intent or effort, Edwards seeks to elide the human agency that leads both absentee

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<sup>21</sup> Blackburn, “Debates on Slavery, Capitalism and Race,” 45-46.

and West Indian planters like himself to claim enslaved Africans as their rightful property. In doing so, Edwards argues that however unjust slavery may be, West Indian planters and slaveholders are merely reluctant participants in an institution and commercial system over whose excesses they have little control.

Instead, Edwards argues, the moral crimes of slavery are, by turns, the fault of the state, which deems people property; of mercenary British creditors who uproot enslaved Africans from their plantation homes and sell them to satisfy debts; of greedy traders who maximize profit by transporting more Africans than their ships can accommodate; and most of all, the Atlantic commercial market itself. In other words, Edwards suggests, if slavery is inhumane and un-English, so too is the commercial market that sustains and expands it, and, under the sanction of state power, brings its excesses to England's home shores and ruptures bonds of kinship in its name. For example, Edwards defends planters against accusations that they are responsible for the horrific means by which Africans are transported to the colonies, arguing that "they are entirely innocent and ignorant of the manner in which the slave trade is conducted, (having no other concern therein than becoming purchasers of what *British acts of parliament have made objects of sale*)" (2:335 emphasis added).

Despite his claims to ignorance, Edwards narrates an account of the Middle Passage under *normal* conditions as a pleasure cruise worthy of the obscene Sable Venus ode: enslaved Africans are provided with ample and varied meals, physical mobility, the opportunity to play games and smoke pipes at their leisure, vigorous attention to hygiene, and great care (including boarding in the captain's quarters) in the event of illness (2:327-30). Here Edwards fashions an image of the enslaved as consumers of leisure rather than as captives suffering an excruciating violation of their humanity in their reduction to chattel. While he does concede that some

avaricious traders board more Africans than they can safely quarter, Edwards suggests that such instances are uncommon and not reflective of the planters who purchase their human cargo. In fact, unscrupulous slave traders become a convenient rhetorical receptacle for slavery's excesses because they exemplify a broader example of how morality and human feeling are corrupted by the unmitigated pursuit of profit. Even as Edwards himself calculates the deaths precipitated by such detestable self-interest in percentages lost, he absolves himself of participation in this mercenary practice by declaiming it as "a destruction of the human species on which it is impossible to reflect without indignation and horror" (2:331). Here Edwards demonstrates the same tactical deployment of sensibility by which many English men and women before him had mitigated their complicity in slavery's human commerce.

In his most morally outraged indictment of economic self-interest, Edwards vehemently denounces a statute by which creditors may capture and sell the enslaved to satisfy the debts of their enslavers:

This grievance, so remorseless and *tyrannical* in its principal [and] dreadful in its effects...was an act procured by, and passed for the benefit of British creditors; and I *blush* to add, that its motives and origin have sanctified the measure even in the opinion of men who are among the loudest of the declaimers against slavery and the slave trade. Thus the odious severity of the Roman law, which declared sentient beings to be *inter res*, is revived and perpetuated in a country that pretends to Christianity! (2:183 emphases added)

Edwards condemns English hypocrisy here in a rhetorically strategic performance of righteous sensibility that flips the ethical script of Christian abolitionist discourse by suggesting that those with humanitarian pretensions to abolishing the slave trade think more to their pockets than to the

people they would emancipate. It is primarily on this basis that Edwards sought to undermine the moral high-ground of abolition's proponents—particularly those involved in the sugar boycotts and abstention campaigns—by suggesting that many were liberal advocates of free trade whose actual goal was to dissolve the West Indian sugar monopoly so that they could pursue their fortunes in East India sugar and/or obtain the commodity at the cheapest possible price. As despicable as Edwards's claims to powerlessness in the face of an indomitable system of commerce are, he does cast an unflattering light on some of the economic motivations for the abolition of slavery.<sup>22</sup>

Edwards drives this point home by imagining for the reader a sentimental depiction of the ways in which such economic self-interest corrupts English sensibility:

In a few years a good Negro gets comfortably established, has built himself a house, obtained a wife, and begins to see a young family rising about him. His provision-ground, the creation of his own industry, and the staff of his existence, affords him not only support, but the means also of adding something to the mere necessities of life. In this situation, he is seized on by the sheriff's officer, forcibly separated from his wife and children, dragged to public auction, purchased by a stranger. (2:141)

Resorting once again to the language of sensibility, Edwards presents his reader with clear evidence that tyrannical, excessive self-interest in England—specifically the operations of credit and debt—penetrates the domestic sphere and destroys intimate bonds in the West Indies, rather

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<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, debates over the consumption of sugar and its ties to slavery reflect (and deflect attention away from) a broader shift in Britain's imperial strategy. As Makdisi reminds us, "critique of the slave trade was carried out by the advocates of a form of imperial power tied to the emergent middle class," particularly that of imperial governance and economic control over the East Indies, "rather than the residual landed gentry and their West Indian plantations...The critique of the slave trade was in other words tied inevitably to a *domestic*, English, process of cultural and political realignment, the 'great transformation' described by Polanyi." See *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 134-35.

than the other way around. Jennifer Morgan's work is useful here for exposing both Edwards's awareness of and his refusal to claim responsibility for slavery's violent logic of racial capitalism. The necessity of exploiting enslaved women's reproductive potential in order to maintain a slave economy is implicit throughout Edwards's *History*; but here he *explicitly* displaces the resulting rupture of family bonds—"the transformation of kin into property" back onto metropolitan forms of economic excess and intrusion.<sup>23</sup> In three short sentences, he imagines for the reader an industrious young family of enslaved Africans whose domestic contentment is brutally torn asunder to satisfy a debt. Not only is such a practice at odds with a nation boasting Christian morality, Edwards proclaims, "[i]t is *injurious to the national character*; it is disgraceful to humanity" (2:142). In other words, as Edwards coopts the language of sentiment, he reverses accusations against West Indians whose excessive greed was said to threaten the national character by locating the origin of such dehumanizing avarice in English rather than colonial law.<sup>24</sup>

The discontinuity between Edwards's characterizations of enslaved Africans as valuable chattel—reducible to numbers, imports and exports—and the characterization of them as "reasonable beings"—capable of anguish precipitated by a trade that tears them from their "dearest connections"—seems irreconcilable unless we take seriously his claim that West Indian planters are powerless to halt such a powerful and lucrative trade (2:33). Edwards supports this position in response to those properly sensible Englishmen advocating for the abolition of the trade, saying to his readers, "Behold then an excess of 38,000 of these miserable people (the

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5

<sup>24</sup> Edwards thus inverted the antislavery message and widespread popular opinion that "pure self-interest dictated the actions of merchant and planter." See Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 195.

present annual export in British shipping) thrown upon the market.” If the British were to abolish the slave trade, he argues, “the French, the Dutch, and the other maritime nations of Europe, by seizing on what we surrender, will increase their trade in proportion to the increased supply” (2:101). By naturalizing the workings of supply and demand, Edwards cleverly deploys the logic of free trade against those who brandished it in opposing the West India Lobby’s monopoly on sugar.<sup>25</sup> More precisely, he recasts Adam Smith’s model of a natural and benevolent economic system as a fundamental threat to English imperial influence.

Moreover, in positioning West Indian planters and metropolitan Englishmen alike as subject to the autonomous operations of an Atlantic commercial dependent upon slavery, Edwards taps into more general fears prevailing even among some of his opponents about the extent to which the rapid expansion and invasive power of commercial capitalism had thoroughly and irreversibly penetrated metropolitan domestic spaces. For example, in 1791, radical pamphleteer and antislavery activist William Fox published *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum*. The enormously influential pamphlet indicted British consumers for their complicity in slavery, arguing, “[i]f we purchase the commodity we participate in the crime. The slave dealer, the slave holder, and the slave driver, are virtually agents of the consumer, and may be considered as employed and hired by him to procure the commodity... In every pound of sugar used we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh.”<sup>26</sup> Fox’s pamphlet and the ensuing boycott

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<sup>25</sup> According to Scottish political economist, Adam Smith, “The quantity of every commodity brought to market naturally suits itself to the effectual demand.” See *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 64-65.

<sup>26</sup> Anon. [William Fox], *An Address to the People of Great Britain, On the Utility of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum*, (London: Sold by I. Philips, 1791) 3-4. As Julie Holcomb explains, Fox’s pamphlet was “[r]eprinted widely in Britain and the USA” and “sold more than 250,000 copies in more than 20 editions by 1792, outselling every other abolitionist pamphlet up to that time.” See “Blood-stained Sugar: Gender, Commerce and the

reflect widespread anxieties about consuming the products of enslaved labor or conspicuously flaunting wealth generated through slavery's vast circuits of capital: both the objects and the captive laborers that produced them, it was feared, "psychologically and physically invaded British identity in the process of being collected."<sup>27</sup>

Edwards disabuses his readers of the notion that boycotting sugar at home could materially distance them from slavery in the West Indies by reminding them that many other products of the slave trade circulate throughout England. Not only did West Indian produce, like cotton, enter English homes, but English domestic goods—like printed calico, earthenware, and spirits—as well as goods imported from other parts of the empire—like East India silk and tea—were traded for enslaved labor on the coast of Africa and were thus similarly implicated in the various excesses thrust disproportionately, Edwards believed, on the West Indies (Edwards 2:62). Whatever slavery's excesses may be, Edwards argued, they were not limited either to sugar or even to the West Indies, but rather permeated an empire financed by the larger systems of commerce that encompassed them and by the consumer culture flourishing in the nation's metropole.

### *Women and/as the Seductions of Commerce*

How, then, does the interracial seduction at the heart of the Sable Venus ode and image fit into Edwards's larger program? Eighteenth-century feminist scholars Regulus Allen and Felicity Nussbaum have fruitfully examined the ways in which the Sable Venus texts invoke and

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British Slave-Trade Debates," *Slavery & Abolition*, 35:4. (2014): 619. See also Timothy Whelan, "William Fox, Martha Gurney and Radical Discourse of the 1790s," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42 (2009): 397-411.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 13-14; Nandini Bhattacharya, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Connoisseurship: Gender and Eighteenth-Century Literary Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2018), 3.



perpetuate assumptions about the allegedly superior beauty and virtue of white women and the compromising lure of Black women.<sup>28</sup> Much like the Black Venus narratives I examined in the previous chapter, the Sable Venus texts reveal a far less stable racialized gender binary than has been imputed to them. Indeed, the apparent dichotomy of white and Black womanhood that the ode and image seem to reinforce in isolation breaks down when we read these texts as integral pieces of the *History*'s rhetorical project. In the chapter of the *History* which contains the Sable Venus ode and image, Edwards further disrupts the apparent binary between West Indian depravity and metropolitan English virtue by inverting the symbolic centrality of white English women to the preservation of national character. Specifically, Edwards troubles the notion that white English women could isolate themselves from the corrupting influence of slavery, empire, and commerce, and thus serve as guardians of English national virtue.

The chapter culminating in the Sable Venus texts serves an ostensibly ethnographic purpose, characterizing the "Present Inhabitants" of the British West Indies, including, among others, white Creole women and free women of color. Contrary to most assumptions, however, Edwards does not reproduce a simple opposition between virtuous white womanhood and licentious Black or brown womanhood. Although he undoubtedly constructs a racial hierarchy that reinforces white supremacy, he strategically manipulates racialized categories of womanhood, scaffolding models of female virtue less according to race than to forms of consumptive excess. In so doing, he demonstrates how variable such models of womanhood were across different sites of empire. Echoing his rhetorical strategies elsewhere in the *History*, here Edwards aims to vindicate his own Englishness by demonstrating the proper female virtue

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<sup>28</sup> See Allen, "'The Sable Venus' and Desire for the Undesirable" in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2011): 667–691 and Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human*, 152–5.

of West Indian women against accusations that the tropical climate and their proximity to slavery made them depraved.<sup>29</sup>

Although Edwards begins his account of the islands' inhabitants at what we might call the apex of his West Indian racial hierarchy, Edwards's description of white Creole women does not identify their whiteness as the source of their virtue. Nor does he conjure the spectre of Black womanhood as their foil. Instead, he draws an explicit contrast between the "habitual temperance and self-denial" of white *Creole* women and the consumptive excesses of white *European* women.<sup>30</sup> "In their diet, the creole women are, I think, abstemious even to a fault," he explains. "Simple water, or lemonade, is the strongest beverage in which they indulge" (2:209). Such virtuous self-regulation found its opposite, Edwards proposed, not in "sable and saffron" women, but in "[t]hose midnight assemblies and gambling conventions, wherein the health, fortune, and beauty are so frequently sacrificed in the cities of Europe" (2:209). Edwards's rhetorical approach here is entirely consistent with the *History* as a whole. He defends the Englishness of the West Indian colonies against accusations of excess by instead displacing that excess back onto the inhabitants of the metropole. However, as with his contrast between West Indian enslavers and metropolitan Englishmen, Edwards's emphasis here is on a form of *economic*—rather than strictly sexual—excess.

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<sup>29</sup> Julie Holcomb explains that "anxieties about female commerce intensified with the publication of the sensational stories of female cruelty, which were presented to the House of Commons during the slave-trade debates of 1790 and 1791 and published in an abstract in 1791. According to testimony, colonial women of all ranks were responsible for ordering and supervising, and even inflicting punishment on their slaves; one colonial woman was accused of routinely prostituting her female slave... Feminine sensibility had been corrupted by sustained contact with slavery." See "Blood-stained Sugar," 617-18.

<sup>30</sup> According to Edwards, it is thanks to white Creole women's "system of life and manners (sequestered, domestic, and unobtrusive) ... that no women on earth make better wives, or better mothers" (2:13).

He applies a similar logic in his description of the free women of color who inhabit the sugar islands. Edwards does not characterize them according to sexual *or* consumptive forms of excess, “the accusation most generally brought against the free people of Colour,” but describes them instead as “modest” in their “dress and carriage” and “reserved” in their conversation” (2:21-22, 2:23). In fact, he follows the same rhetorical pattern as he did in his account of white Creole women by positioning free women of color as superior in virtue to a class of so-called white women in Europe. Very “few of these poor females, in comparison of the whole,” he explains, “are guilty of that infamous species of profligacy and prostitution, which flourishes, without principle or shame, and in the broad eye of day, throughout all the cities of Europe,” including London (2: 22). The linking of “profligacy” with “prostitution” here is significant, both because it redraws lines of (especially sexual) virtue less according to race than to excessive forms of commerce and consumption, and because it identifies women as the symbolic site where these forms of excess intersect. Curiously, when Edwards outwardly condemns the practice of concubinage—a licentious and debaucherous practice “too notorious to be concealed or controverted”—he levels his critique not at the free women of color, whom he deems more victims of circumstance than wicked seductresses, but at the white men who keep them as mistresses: “Undoubtedly, the conduct of many of the Whites in this respect, is a violation of all decency and decorum; and an insult and injury to society” (2:221). Edwards’s explicit indictment of white men (rather than mixed-race women) as the perpetrators of licentiousness and debauchery in these affairs diverges significantly from the anticonquest narrative typically ascribed to such miscegenistic unions and is the more remarkable given how vigorously he labors throughout the *History* to contest such characterizations of West Indian men.

If this admission seems at odds with Edwards's larger project, it appears less so when we consider the more troubling interracial intimacies it overwrites in framing the Sable Venus ode. As a preface, Edwards's introductory remarks to the ode are deliberately misleading. They present the poem as illustrative of the interracial liaisons between *free* women of color who are "universally maintained by White men of all ranks and conditions, as kept mistresses," when the ode and its accompanying image clearly illustrate a sexual dynamic Edwards has conspicuously omitted in his account preceding it—that of the forced intimacies between *enslaved* African and African-descended women and the white men who buy, sell, transport, and oversee them as property (2:22). In broad terms, the ode's positioning at the close of the chapter suggests that enslaved African women form the base, or foundation, of Edwards's hierarchical scaffolding of the female inhabitants of the West Indies. Much like white Creole women and free women of color, African women are thrust into a sexual-economic paradigm which Edwards harnesses to advance the broader claims of the *History*.

However, the position of enslaved women within that paradigm is markedly different. They cannot symbolize consumptive restraint—either sexual or economic—to secure for the West Indies any pretense to superior virtue, because the sugar colonies depended precisely on the commercialization of their sexual labor. As Carina Ray explains, sexual relations between white men and enslaved Black women "were not just about domination and desire, they were also about wealth and its reproduction. Both rape and consensual sex held out the possibility of literally reproducing slave masters' wealth, and hence the empire's wealth, when it resulted in pregnancy because the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*...mandated that the offspring's legal

status followed that of the mother.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that Edwards’s account of enslaved African women is conveyed through a fantastical neoclassical ode and image, rather than the empirical and ethnographic language that dominates the rest of the chapter, betrays his efforts to conceal how thoroughly these women embody the central contradiction of his *History*: Edwards goes to great lengths to establish the enormous profitability of slavery and its related circuits of Atlantic commerce which—especially in the eventuality of the slave trade’s abolition—will depend significantly on the exploitation of enslaved women’s reproductive labor.<sup>32</sup> He is at equal pains, however, to defend West Indian planters against their reputation in the popular metropolitan press as rapacious in their sexual and monetary appetites, excesses that convene in the profitable sexual exploitation of enslaved African women. The Sable Venus, a powerful goddess whose seductions are both libidinal and economic, becomes in this context a figure meant to contain that contradiction.

### **The Sable Venus, An Ode**

The ode undoubtedly characterizes the Sable Venus as sexually available, as so many scholars have rightly pointed out, but that sexuality is always employed to reinforce the benefits of slavery to England’s economic stability and sovereignty. For example, the ode draws upon poetic tropes of romantic competition to reinforce Edwards’s claims elsewhere in the *History* for Britain’s commercial and naval dominance. In taking stock of the Sable Venus’s many suitors,

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<sup>31</sup> Carina Ray, “Interracial Sex and the Making of Empire” in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 198.

<sup>32</sup> As Audra Diptee has elucidated, Edwards (like many planters) sought to prepare for the eventuality of abolition by increasing the population of enslaved African women, upon whose reproductive labor the continuation of plantation slavery would depend. See Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica: The Making of an Atlantic Slave Society, 1775-1807* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

the poet-narrator mentions only European contenders — Frank, Spaniard, Scot, Hibernian, English are all said to “own/ the pleasing softness of [her] sway”—but her courting of a *British* tar and willing journey to *British* Jamaica testify to Britain’s dominance among these other commercial and naval rivals (stanza 7).<sup>33</sup> Drawing a line of continuity from his earlier account of the *free* “sable and saffron beauties” in the West Indies, the poet-narrator of the ode compares the Sable Venus with so-called white, English sex workers. He abandons Paphian Bowers and abjures his loyalty to Cyprian Thrones (both gentlemanly cant for English brothels), in exchange for the Sable Venus who offers “*unbought* raptures” (stanza 6 emphasis added). The fact that Edwards emended the original version of the poem to include this more explicitly monetary reference—in the 1765 and 1792 editions, the line reads “all *true* raptures”—supports my contention that Edwards used the ode as a strategic vehicle for the *History*’s broader (and often contradictory) arguments.<sup>34</sup> The erasure of a transaction here positions the Sable Venus as both an utterly disempowered object in economic circulation and a powerful deity operating above the tangle of mere human economic endeavors.

The ode’s characterization of the Sable Venus as a consenting goddess relishing her trans-Atlantic journey belies her status as chattel circulating in the slave trade between Angola and Jamaica, Bryan Edwards’s long-time home and the geographic center of his empirical

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<sup>33</sup> This stanza may also refer to exchange between European nations. As Roxann Wheeler explains, “controlling slave women’s bodies encourage[d] friendly trading relations among European men. An African woman [was] used to cement a friendship between European men of different nations in their commercial transaction.” See *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 132.

<sup>34</sup> See Gourlay, ““Art Delivered,”” 548. Note also that in the ode’s initial staging of exchange between the poet-narrator and the Sable Venus, no money changes hands: “But now, the sable queen of love,/ Resolv’d my gratitude to prove,/ Had sent me for a song./ The ladies look’d extremely shy,/ Apollo’s smile was arch and sly,/ But not one word they said:/ I gaz’d,—sure silence is consent,—/ I made my bow, away I went;/ Was not my duty paid?” (stanza 3).

*History*. In its account of the Sable Venus's extraordinary conveyance, the ode describes a mobile exotic treasure trove—an ivory car, shells of lively shade, a burnished gold throne, a gay and beaming coral footstool, and amber wheels—whose component parts seem almost as alive as the frolicking dolphins that draw them across the Atlantic. Immediately after this list, the poet-narrator describes the Sable Venus's equally glorious physical characteristics: "Her skin excell'd the ravens plume,/ Her breath the fragrant orange bloom,/ Her eye the tropic beam:/ Soft was her lip as silken down" (stanza 14). On its surface, this inventory of her features appears reminiscent of a blazon—a poetic cataloguing of female virtues used to seduce the reader by allowing them to visualize the speaker's beloved. However, its positioning here at the conclusion of the list of exotic goods in tow renders it a dehumanizing register of the Sable Venus's potentially monetizable parts. In this light, the account recalls the brutally invasive inspections to which enslaved women's bodies were subject on the auction block, particularly to determine their speculative value as breeders.

Consistent with Edwards's larger rhetorical project, the ode represents the Sable Venus's commodity value as inseparable from white European women's consumer comfort and privileged virtue which it sustains. This link emerges in the poet-narrator's comparison of the Black goddess to her white, Florentine counterpart. He says of the Sable Venus:

The loveliest limbs her form compose,  
Such as her sister Venus chose,  
In Florence, where she's seen;  
Both just alike, except the white,  
No difference, no—none at night,  
The beauteous dames between. (stanza 15)

On their face, these lines repeat the old saying that “all cats are grey in the dark.”<sup>35</sup> Beneath the surface, however, it reinforces the relative value and agency of white European and enslaved African women. The Sable Venus’s rendering in the ode as an almost disembodied assemblage of valuable parts over which she has no agency affirms her unquestioned sexual consent. By contrast, her white sister—most likely the famous marble sculpture *Venus de Medici*—“chose” to employ her lovely limbs in the chaste concealment of her nakedness. For a plantation owner like Edwards, the value of the Sable Venus’s “loveliest limbs” resides in their capacity for labor, and it is this labor which produces the conditions necessary for white women’s supposedly virtuous leisure.

The distinction of the Florentine Venus’s choice notwithstanding, the white metropolitan women and enslaved Black women at which the ode gestures overlap here, for, in a shocking display of apparent irony, the ode portrays the Sable Venus herself as enjoying leisurely repose: she sits serenely as peacock feathers grant her shade and wanton breezes fan her breast (stanza 11). In one sense, this depiction echoes Edwards’s account in the *History* of the Middle Passage as a pleasure cruise where enslaved Africans are portrayed as consumers rather than chattel. Alan Rice—one of few scholars to analyze the Sable Venus texts in an economic register—compellingly argues that this “portrayal of luxurious ease is a projection of the surplus value attendant on this black body,” which will “ensure a more comfortable life in Europe and America” and will guarantee “an endless supply of free labour which will eventually reproduce itself at no extra cost.”<sup>36</sup> Edwards’s use of the Sable Venus extends a more explicitly domestic

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the phrase’s origins, see Allen, ““The Sable Venus,”” 688 n13.

<sup>36</sup> Alan J. Rice, ““Food for the Sharks’: Constructions and Reconstructions of the Middle-Passage Imaginary in the Transatlantic Economy” in *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003), 62.



discourse wherein “British culture projected onto the female subject both its fondest wishes for the transforming power of consumerism and its deepest anxieties about the corrupting influence of goods.”<sup>37</sup> The Sable Venus’s dual status as consumer and corrupting goods consumed compresses the above dichotomy and eliminates the distance between the presumably civilized metropole and the depraved colony.

Even as Edwards reaffirms the complicity of leisured white European women in slavery’s corrupting commerce, his presentation of the Sable Venus as an agent and beneficiary of that commerce betrays a greater desire on his part to share in innocence rather than guilt. The Sable Venus, we should remember, is at the helm of her sea-shell chariot and thus guides the transport of her precious cargo to the British sugar colonies. By rendering her here as a conspicuous consumer of the leisure and luxury that her commodification and labor afford, the ode positions *the Sable Venus*—and not English or West Indian men or women—as the controlling agent of an Atlantic commercial system in which she circulates. Far from a satirical jest about the desirability of Black women, then, the Sable Venus ode and its accompanying image—which I will discuss in due course—constitute the most egregious and complex form of displacement in Edwards’s *History*. They expose both the seductions of slavery’s lucre as well as Atlantic commerce’s inescapable intrusion into England’s social fabric by making the Sable Venus, the seductive goddess of Atlantic commerce, a scapegoat for its economic and sexual excesses. In other words, while the Sable Venus ode does mount an anticonquest narrative of sorts, white planters are not subject to the seductive powers of the colonized per se, but rather to the system of Atlantic commerce for which the colonized becomes a figure. Ultimately, enslaved African and African-descended women are made to bear both the material and symbolic burden of

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<sup>37</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 6.

upholding a British imperial system of commerce that is both essential and deleterious to the health of the nation. Edwards could never mount such a claim in the empirical prose of his *History*, however. Instead, he utilizes an elevated and abstracting art form that mythologizes and naturalizes these intersecting excesses as the inevitable fallout of imperial expansion, both past and present.

Edwards's use of a neoclassical ode and image proves indispensable to his efforts to absolve himself and other West Indian planters of moral responsibility for slavery and thus to secure his position as a proper English patriot. As he grafts a Roman goddess onto the figure of an enslaved African woman, Edwards draws upon a familiar late-eighteenth-century discourse linking the glories of classical Empires (notably Rome) with their eventual decline in the wake of corrupting excesses. According to Kaul, "poems of nation" and "anthems of empire" regularly invoked Augustan Rome both "as a model for [British] imperial and cultural strength" and as "a paradigm for the decline of this strength."<sup>38</sup> Thus, if we examine both the style and subject of the Sable Venus texts in light of Edwards's desire to portray himself as patriotic, his invocation of classical figures—especially the Roman goddess of love and the patron goddess of prostitutes—works as much to express anxieties about the loss of English liberty and the eventual decline of the British empire through excessive trade as it does to celebrate its glorious bounty. Curiously, however, the absolutist tyranny of Rome, in Edwards's vision, is not embodied by an English ruler as it is in the poetry Kaul examines, but rather by the Sable Venus, the Atlantic deity of intimate imperial commerce itself.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kaul, *Poems of Nation*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Allen argues that the Sable Venus is, like her Mediterranean predecessors, an *ocean* goddess who symbolizes "transgression, moving from country to country, embodying the features of different nations, and always signifying a threatening sexuality that, like her mythology, knows no boundaries." See "'The Sable Venus,'" 670-1. For a fuller

The Sable Venus ode overwrites the violent commodification and sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women by portraying the Sable Venus as the controlling agent of the interracial liaisons it narrates: “The prating FRANK, the SPANIARD proud,/ The double SCOT, HIBERNIAN loud,/ And sullen English *own*,/ The pleasing softness of thy sway,/ And here, transferr’d allegiance pay,/ For gracious is thy throne” (stanza 7 emphasis added). “Own” here is doubled to mean “possess” on the one hand (as I articulated earlier), because the Sable Venus is a commodity in circulation among competing European powers, and they may harness her pleasing sway to augment their capital. On the other hand, however, these European nations also own or admit her sway, her sovereignty as an ocean goddess.

From East to West, o’er either Ind’  
Thy scepter sways; thy pow’r we find  
By both the tropics felt;  
The blazing sun that gilds the zone,  
Waits but the triumphs of thy throne,  
Quite round the burning belt. (stanza 8)

As the passage above attests, the Sable Venus’s power lies not in her erotic appeal alone—the pleasing softness of her sway—but also in the vast economic influence she wields. By casting the Sable Venus as a despotic governor presiding over British imperial commerce in both the West *and* East Indies, Edwards evacuates the slave trade of any human political agency to absolve himself of its excesses, much as he did elsewhere in his *History*.<sup>40</sup>

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discussion of Venus’s ancient history, see Barry B. Powell and Herbert M. Howe, *Classical Myth* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 22 and 161–3.

<sup>40</sup> Julie Holcomb reminds us that in condemning the popular consumption of sweetened tea, Samuel Taylor Coleridge argued that colonial labourers “were murdered so that ‘fine Ladies and Prostitutes’ might be fashionably outfitted as they gathered around the British tea table” (612). Notably, Coleridge does not single out colonial

In the greatest of ironies, the Sable Venus becomes a figure for the overwhelming power of slavery as the motor of Atlantic commercial capitalism, itself something of a tyrant that renders planters and the people they enslave alike subject to its automatized operations. Edwards draws upon this logic in his primary argument against abolition—that any other number of slaveholding European nations will quickly take the place of England should it attempt to extricate itself from the market in human beings. Edwards thus relies upon the ode’s neoclassical rendering of the Sable Venus to mythologize and naturalize the slave trade and the enormous commercial networks in which it participates and which it sustains, designating them beyond the direct control of West Indian planters, and even of the English nation and empire. The neoclassical style of the Sable Venus texts also secures for Edwards a strategic anachronism, a temporal displacement which enables him to distance his subject—and his proximity to it—from a contemporary reality in which “the circulation of abolitionist texts and images, and well-publicized parliamentary debates on the slave trade and colonial slavery, enhanced public awareness of the harsh treatment of slaves—particularly enslaved women—in the West Indian colonies.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, I contend that Edwards used the Sable Venus to distance himself and his involvement in the slave trade from one antislavery text in particular.

In concluding my discussion of the Sable Venus, I argue that Edwards commissioned Stothard’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (see fig. 2) as an explicit revision and inversion of an explosive antislavery print by Isaac Cruikshank (see fig. 3). Through *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, Edwards responds to a widely publicized contemporaneous example of slavery’s brutality by

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commerce in either the East or West Indies, but rather indicts both, and links both with consumerism of women from high to low stations in England.

<sup>41</sup> Brooke Newman, “Enslaved Women and British Comic Culture” in *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 199.

super-imposing upon it an allegorical image of slavery's lucre and indomitable economic power. By demonstrating the remarkable similarities between these images, and highlighting Stothard's central revisions, I complicate notions that Stothard's *Voyage* was merely an elaborate joke about the appeal of interracial sex. The image's revision of Cruikshank's print visually reinforces the strategies of the *History* and ode, particularly the displacement of blame for slavery's excesses.

### **Voyage of the Sable Venus**

Cruikshank's popular print, entitled *Abolition of the Slave Trade, Or the Inhumanity of Dealers in human flesh exemplified in Capt'n Kimber's treatment of a Young Negro Girl of 15 for her Virjen [sic] Modesty* (1792), was published the same year that Edwards returned to England from the West Indies and just one year before the publication of his *History*. The image was one of many responses in the popular press to William Wilberforce's shocking announcement in parliament a week prior. Hoping to re-invigorate antislavery sentiment after multiple disappointments in the House of Commons, Wilberforce confronted parliament on April 2, 1792 with the scandalous case of Captain John Kimber of the Bristol slave ship *Recovery*, who had viciously beaten an enslaved teenaged African girl for refusing to dance on deck:

A young girl of fifteen, of extreme modesty, who finding herself in a situation incident to her sex, was extremely anxious to conceal it. The captain of the vessel, instead of encouraging so laudable a disposition, tied her to the waist, and placed her in a position so as to make her a spectacle to the whole crew. In this situation he beat her; but not thinking the exhibition he had made sufficiently conspicuous, he tied her up by the legs

and then also beat her. But his cruel ingenuity was not yet exhausted, for he next tied her up by one leg, after which she lost all sensation, and in the course of three days expired.<sup>42</sup>

News of the scandal spread like wildfire and Wilberforce's account was published in countless newspapers. Only eight days after his announcement, and months before Kimber's trial and acquittal, Cruikshank's *Abolition of the Slave Trade* was published by Samuel W. Fores.<sup>43</sup>

The print depicts the deck of the slave ship *Recovery* and features three triangulated figures. In the center of the image, an enslaved African teenager, naked but for a small loincloth, is hanging by her ankle from a rope held in place on a pulley by a sailor on the right. His furrowed brow and disapproving remark—"Dam me if I like it I have a good mind to let go"—convey his reluctant participation in the violent spectacle. While the girl faces away from the viewer, her hands grasp her head in visible anguish. On her left stands Captain Kimber who stares directly at the viewer with a lecherous and satisfied grin as he holds a scourge in his hand. Cruikshank's image captures the way abolitionist discourse transforms suffering Black women into abstract vehicles of righteous English outrage and sentiment not only to rouse support for the abolition of the *trade*, but also to absolve English men and women of their ongoing economic

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<sup>42</sup> William Wilberforce, qtd. in Anne Stott, *Wilberforce: Family and Friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 200. As it happens, the girl's fate was not only a consequence of her refusal to dance on deck, but also her refusal to eat. Through an imposition of what meager agency she could claim, she threatened her own commodity value, and, in the example she set, threatened the value of other enslaved captives on board. Kimber sought to make an example of her and sought the insurance benefit that would attend her "loss" only if she had not died of natural causes (which would have been the case had she successfully starved herself to death). The virtue of this enslaved woman was much debated; the accusations about threats to her modesty suggest her refusal to dance and refusal of sexual advances. This episode is important for understanding the competing discourses of, on the one hand, assaults against female virtue and the place of Black women in that discourse (especially abolitionist and sentimental) and the economic discourse of property ownership. This young woman was caught in the crosshairs of these discourses.

<sup>43</sup> As Saidiya Hartman reminds us, Wilberforce did not speak of another enslaved girl called Venus, who was also murdered aboard the *Recovery*. "The pet name licensed debauchery and made it sound agreeable." See *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 143. Since the name was given indiscriminately and reflected nothing of the individuality of those girls and women bearing it, is the young woman at the center of the Kimber case not also Venus? Stothard's print seems, ultimately, to have made her so.

reliance on hereditary slavery. Edwards understood this tactic well and dedicated considerable effort in his *History* to undermining it. Nonetheless, Cruikshank's print would have been troubling to Edwards because it publicized slavery's gross victimization of enslaved women just as he and other planters were advocating for a drastic increase in their importation.<sup>44</sup>

Edwards's efforts to mitigate his own complicity in slavery's excesses come into sharper focus when we examine Stothard's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* as a revision and inversion of Cruikshank's *Abolition*. Edwards hired Royal Academician Thomas Stothard to illustrate Teale's ode for the second edition of his *History*, which he published in 1794. Although the original painting was lost, art historian Alexander Gourlay suggests it was probably a full-scale oil painting, rather than a small-scale wash drawing.<sup>45</sup> Grainger's engraving of the image was reproduced in every edition of Edwards's *History* from 1794 onward and was even added as a supplement to first edition copies originally published without the print.<sup>46</sup> Whereas Cruikshank's image relied upon sentiment to create exonerating distance, Stothard's relied upon time. Like most representations of African women in 1790s British visual culture—whether they were caricatures in graphic satires, ethnographic, or sentimental images—Cruikshank's *Abolition* participates in the debate over slavery and is thus situated within its present political context. By

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<sup>44</sup> Edwards repeatedly comments in the *History* on the disproportion of the sexes among the enslaved and argues that “instead of abolishing the slave trade by act of parliament, further encouragement should be given to the importation of a greater population of African women” which will lead to ‘natural’ reproduction and eventually, “it cannot be doubted that the slave trade will itself gradually diminish, and perhaps in a few years cease altogether, and expire without a struggle” (2:140). Although women sold for a lower price than men, their reproductive labor made them uniquely valuable as the abolition of the trade—and thus the supply of enslaved labor—loomed near. For more on the role of reproductive labor in the slavery debates, see Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 46.

<sup>45</sup> Gourlay, “‘Art Delivered,’” 533.

<sup>46</sup> Gourlay, 548, n.10.

contrast, Stothard's *Voyage*, like Teale's ode, deploys neoclassical techniques to remove its central figure—the Sable Venus—from this present and to situate her in a mythologized past.

The image depicts the Sable Venus mid-voyage, centering her shell throne and her entourage of ocean fauna and winged amoretti. Although Stothard has swapped the deck of the slave ship for the neoclassical Sea Triumph scene of Venus's birth, the image features a striking echo of the triangulated figures in Cruikshank's print. On the left is Neptune (formerly Captain Kimber). He holds not a whip, but rather a British flag, signaling his naval authority as an agent of the nation and empire. On the right, the reluctant pulley-holding sailor has been replaced by Triton, who turns away from the viewer as he keeps a tight grip on one of the dolphins. Triton's rendering here seems particularly significant because it reflects Edwards's own public self-positioning relative to the institution. Whereas Kimber and Neptune, as clear figures of British maritime power, are the overt perpetrators of sexual violence and imperial exploitation, the pulley-holding sailor, Triton, and Edwards himself are all reluctant cogs in the massive engine of slavery and empire over which the Sable Venus reigns as an absolutist monarch. The Sable Venus thus appears in the center of the engraving, where, in a complete inversion of Cruikshank's image, she stands elevated above the other figures and holds—rather than hangs from—the reigns directing the dolphins who draw her shell throne across the Atlantic.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Scholars of the Sable Venus works have frequently observed discontinuities between poem and image—the former aligning the Sable Venus's body with classically European ideals of beauty, “except the white,” and the latter depicting muscular African woman with short curly hair. See, for example, Allen, “The Sable Venus,” 681-83. Some suggest that the incongruity betrays the satire of the ode, suggesting that, at its core, it mocks the aesthetic appeal of African women. Others read her muscular body and more distinctly African features as indicative of her value as a laborer. As Rice contends, “[w]hile the image of the *Sable Venus* contains no goods as such, its opulence points to the consequences of a *conspicuous consumption* developed directly from the riches of stolen labour. Of course, the Venus herself is the paradigmatic ‘body as goods’, furnishing both surplus labour value and surplus libidinal value.” See “Food for the Sharks,” my emphasis, 62. It is also worth noting the tendency in eighteenth-century portraiture to position black figures as a *ficelle* (a minor character who sets off the main character), in which exoticized black servants are markers of wealth. Here, however, rather than being a subordinate figure, the Sable Venus is centered as both the source and agent of wealth.



Stothard's revision of Cruikshank's print thus reinforces Edwards's efforts in the ode and the *History* more broadly to distance himself and other West Indian planters from accountability for slavery's un-English excesses.

Their apparent opposition notwithstanding, these images cannot be reduced to pro- and antislavery agendas. Although Cruikshank's *Abolition* takes the brutality of the slave trade as its central subject, this image, like the Sable Venus ode, compares slavery's sexual-economic matrix to sex work in England in a way that expands its significance beyond the explicit frame of the slave-trade debates. As I mentioned earlier, the ode makes multiple references to the preference for the "unbought raptures" of the Sable Venus over the fees of English sex workers in their Paphian bowers. One of the sailors depicted on the far right of Cruikshank's image exclaims, "My Eyes Jack our Girles at Wapping are never flogged for their modesty." Another chimes in, "By G-d that's too bad if he had taken her to bed to him it would be well enough. Split me I'm allmost sick of this Black Business." On their surface, the sailors' remarks make a joke of the grotesque scene, both through the punning phrase "Black Business" and the invocation of Wapping, a London dock on the Thames infamous for its widespread prostitution, its "Girles" notable for their commercialized sexuality rather than their modesty. Such irony is typical of the period's graphic satires which frequently mounted unlikely comparisons—between aristocratic ladies from St. James and prostitutes from St. Giles, for example—to chide the English for their hypocrisy and the failures of the 'better sorts' of society to demonstrate the virtues that supposedly elevated them above their proletarian menials (or, in this case, their colonized inferiors).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*. London: Atlantic, 2007.

By likening the enslaved girl to sex workers in Wapping, the joke exposes the hypocrisy of a nation that tolerates loose, so-called white Englishwomen on its own soil but licenses agents of English law to viciously punish Black women for their modesty. Regardless of its sentiment and apparent vindication of the girl's "virjen" modesty, the print's ironic comparison between enslaved Black women and English sex workers nonetheless renders their sexual labor interchangeable and instrumentalizes the girl's abjection at the hands of imperial power in levying a variety of domestic critiques. Cruikshank's print thus transforms a once-living, breathing girl into a flexible and rhetorically useful Black Venus like so many before and after her. Here the Black Venus layers onto eighteenth-century English sex workers who, Laura Rosenthal argues, "represent the fallout of commercial society" and "the anxious possibility of abandonment to an unforgiving marketplace that threatens the boundaries of personal and national identity."<sup>49</sup> While Wapping was not directly involved in the slave trade, its connection to West India trade and the layering of its "Girles" onto enslaved Black women nonetheless demonstrate how the intimate commerce of slavery extends both materially and imaginatively into the very heart of London.<sup>50</sup> Edwards's *History* goes to great lengths to make a similar point.

Consequently, although they approach their depictions of Black female figures from seemingly divergent positions within the slavery debates, neither Cruikshank nor Edwards draws

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<sup>49</sup> Laura J. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>50</sup> Also published in 1792 by Samuel W. Fores, another version of Cruikshank's *Abolition of the Slave Trade* alters the speech of the second sailor. This one too is "almost sick of [the] Black Business" Captain Kimber carries out in flogging the modest girl to death. Unlike the sailor in the first version, who proposes that the Captain should have "taken her to bed" instead, the sailor in the alternate version suggests that the Captain should have "taken her to Blackwall." Blackwall was a naval shipyard for the East India Company and later for the Royal Navy, so it was undoubtedly linked to imperial trade and British maritime security. The alteration may indicate a reluctance to make such explicit reference to the British sexual exploitation of enslaved women, but the effect of both versions is to layer London trade and naval security—both Wapping and Blackwall—onto slave ship ports like the ones in Bristol where the *Recovery* originated.

an explicit or stable distinction between white English female virtue and African sexual depravity. Instead, the contrast they emphasize is between modesty and commercialized sexuality, or the violation of female modesty by its imposition into commercial transaction. Edwards's layering of the Sable Venus over the unnamed girl in Cruikshank's explosive print reveals the similarly layered character of discourses we have tended to understand in largely oppositional terms. Far from a static stereotype, the Sable Venus is ever shifting and capacious in her signifying registers: she appears alternately as a victim of slavery's sexual rapaciousness, a tyrannical ocean goddess, a valuable collection of commodifiable parts, a coyly consenting lover, an English sex worker, an emblem of British naval dominance, evidence of West Indian excess, and evidence of English excess. Across all of these permutations, the Sable Venus binds London to the West Indies through layered forms of intimate commerce. The same is true of the Black Venuses leveraged to critique the profligate Prince William Henry, the Duke of Clarence.

### *Neptune's Last Resource*

Seventeen years after the publication of Stothard's *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, Charles Williams redeploys the Black Venus in his graphic satire *Neptune's Last Resource* to expose the interconnectedness of England's domestic and imperial excesses (see fig. 1). Beyond the clear visual similarities between *Voyage of the Sable Venus* and *Neptune's Last Resource*, the two images are also linked by the Duke of Clarence, third son to King George III. The Duke had publicly supported Captain Kimber's actions aboard the *Recovery*, putting him at odds with Edwards, who labored to obscure evidence of the trade's violence because he knew it would undermine his dual efforts to influence legislation on abolition and to reverse the tide of public

opinion regarding West Indian slaveholders.<sup>51</sup> And yet, Edwards had simultaneously harnessed the Duke of Clarence's good opinion of West Indian planters as evidence that they were not the depraved wretches they were so frequently made out to be in the public press, and that their Englishness was vouched for by a member of the royal family.<sup>52</sup>

This overlapping context informs my reading of *Neptune's Last Resource*, which was the culminating print in a series of graphic satires between 1788 to 1811 which ridiculed the Duke of Clarence for both his private and public excesses. As these satires layer the Duke's scandalous affairs with white and Black women of questionable virtue onto his unpopular support of slavery and his profligate spending of a publicly-funded allowance, they cast the wayward royal as an emblem of England's corrupt governance more broadly.<sup>53</sup> Like the Sable Venus, then, the Hottentot Venus emerges as a figure through whom questions of English patriotism and sovereignty play out at a moment when both were under siege by the revolutionary fervor spreading from France. Far from confirming a stable binary between Black women's licentiousness and white women's virtue, the Hottentot Venus appears in *Neptune's Last Resource* as a layered palimpsest of the Duke's former lovers, all Black and so-called white women who emblemize the intimate commerce linking the colonial excesses of West Indian slavery to the domestic excesses of aristocratic and newly moneyed Londoners alike. As I will go on to demonstrate, the Black Venus's legibility as a figure of these intersecting excesses makes

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<sup>51</sup> See Hartman *Lose Your Mother*, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Edwards says, "The condescending and unsolicited interposition of the Duke of Clarence on this occasion, is the more valuable, as, happily for the planters, it is founded on his Royal Highness's personal observation of their manners, and knowledge of their dispositions, acquired on the spot" (2:xvii).

<sup>53</sup> Jocelyn Harris productively traces this narrative, though with narrow attention to the Black Venus figure, in *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017).

her instrumental in attacking the Crown at a moment when laws against seditious libel rendered such critiques punishable as treason.<sup>54</sup>

### ***The Return of Wowski...***

Before he became the Duke of Clarence, Prince William Henry served in the Royal Navy and in 1786 was stationed in the British West Indies under Horatio Nelson. A staunch supporter of slavery and West Indian interests, the prince indulged in precisely the sensual excesses which Bryan Edwards lamented had become almost synonymous with West Indian life, most notably, sexual exploits with women of color. He was reported to have kept a mulatto Jamaican mistress, described as “a very nice and well-dressed girl and handsome,” whom he later brought back to England.<sup>55</sup> James Gillray’s 1788 satirical print *Wowski* (see fig. 4) is ostensibly an illustration of the pair, depicting the prince in an embrace with a well-endowed, dark-skinned woman. We do not know this woman’s actual name, in part, because Gillray’s image overwrites it with that of the caricatured Black African servant character in George Colman Jr.’s comic-opera *Inkle and Yarico* (1787). At one level, by invoking one of the most popular cultural engagements with slavery in the period, Gillray’s *Wowski* mobilizes a reproachful suggestion that the Duke’s mistress may very well have been his property. The stakes of such an implication would have been significant, for *this* man was neither a planter nor a slave trader, but rather a highly visible public figure, an agent of British naval authority, and, as a member of the royal family, the very embodiment of Englishness. In other words, the ostensibly private scandal of the Duke’s

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<sup>54</sup> As Andrew Bricker explains, visual satire was able to evade the strict government censure because laws against seditious libel were largely designed to contend with the verbal elements of satire. See “After the Golden Age: Libel, Caricature, and the Deverbalization of Satire,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 305-336.

<sup>55</sup> See Brooke Newman, “Enslaved Women and British Comic Culture,” 189.

interracial liaison was magnified by suspicions that his intimate affair was vitiated by slavery's commerce in human beings.

*...and The So-Called White Actress...*

However, like her staged counterpart, Gillray's Wowski is layered among the Black Venuses that come before and after her and is thus irreducible to a singular signifying function or a stable racial identity. She could just as easily refer to the so-called white actresses performing the role as to the character herself. Indeed, when we recall that Wowski—like Imoinda—was almost synonymous with “actress,” we can better understand the visual layering of Wowski onto the Duke's subsequent mistress, celebrity actress Dorothy Jordan. William Dent's 1791 print *Nell's Coach* demonstrates how the Duke's sexual exploits with women of color and his infamous support of slavery became inseparable in the public imagination from his domestic dissipations, both sexual and economic (see fig. 5).<sup>56</sup> The print depicts John Bull, here literally a bull whose body is imprinted with the word “Taxes,” drawing a carriage driven by the Duke of Clarence. Actress Dorothy Jordan is just visible inside the carriage, which rides roughshod over rocks and mounds of dirt inscribed “decency,” “shame,” “morality,” and “contempt.” John Bull complains about the royal family's extravagant spending: “I am finely Burthened—things have come to a fine pass if I am to be sweated for such purposes—have a care! I may be provoked to kick—” to which the Duke replies, “Give us none of your growling Mr. Bull...what signifies if both our pay comes from the Public- we have a right to spend as we like.” While the dialogue between these figures clearly targets the Duke's prodigal spending of state taxes, the Duke's

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<sup>56</sup> The print's full title is *Story of \*Nell's Coach made good by the Cunning Man. Addressed to the Ducal Conjuror and Duchess of [chamber pot] \*in The Devil to Pay.*

remark conflates his own profligacy with Jordan's self-made wealth as a public performer and her corresponding social mobility, both of which brand her as a woman of compromised virtue.<sup>57</sup>

Born of illegitimate origins in Ireland, Dorothy Jordan was an “unmarried working mother who crossed every social barrier, going from penniless provincial to royal intimacy in a few years.”<sup>58</sup> At the time she began her twenty-year relationship with the Duke of Clarence, Jordan was already an enormously popular and beloved comedic actress and a major celebrity in the popular press. As Felicity Nussbaum reminds us, eighteenth-century “[a]ctresses—urban, newly moneyed, and thoroughly engaged with the world—were among the first of their sex to achieve social mobility, cultural authority, and financial independence by virtue of their own efforts.”<sup>59</sup> However, both Jordan's professional success and notoriety as the royal mistress branded her a public woman and a highly visible example of intimate commerce. Through vulgar puns on her name, ‘Jordan,’ which was slang for both “chamber pot” and “vagina,” the satirical press capitalized on her embodiment of both sexual and economic excess as waste.<sup>60</sup> Such a characterization was only exacerbated by widely circulating reports that the lovers had agreed upon a financial contract, whereby the Duke would pay Jordan an annual salary of 1,000 pounds.<sup>61</sup> Jordan's life became a cautionary tale about the ways in which self-made wealth and

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<sup>57</sup> The print's reference to Charles Coffey's ballad opera *The Devil to Pay* is an explicit jab at this mobility. In it, Jordan played an abused cobbler's wife who experiences a sudden and miraculous rise in station when she becomes a Lord's wife.

<sup>58</sup> Harris, *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen*, 219.

<sup>59</sup> Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> The title's reference to Jordan as the Duchess of [picture of a chamber pot] not only repeats the vulgar pun (vagina) which labeled her a loose woman; it also evokes the notion of waste. On the one hand, Jordan and William could not produce any legitimate royal heirs. Furthermore, as Patten has argued, graphic satire frequently conflated sexual, economic, and political forms of excessive consumption as “the devouring and excreting of national wealth” (Patten 152-53).

<sup>61</sup> See Claire Jerrold, *The Story of Dorothy Jordan* (London: E. Nash, 1914): 164. If the public found Jordan's financial-sexual arrangement distasteful, far more so was the fact, reported by *The Bon Ton* among other periodicals,

women's participation in the marketplace threatened the sanctity of domestic life, particularly motherhood.<sup>62</sup> Not only was Jordan unnaturally forsaking her maternal duties in the apparent pursuit of luxury, but she was doing so at the expense of a public already exasperated by the royal family's spendthrift habits. The confluence of Jordan and the Duke's individual celebrity, their shared reliance on public money, and the notoriously transactional nature of their intimacy, transformed them into a visual allegory of a threatened domestic sphere.<sup>63</sup>

The connective tissue of this allegory was a racially tenuous palimpsest that blended Jordan with Wowski, and later the Hottentot Venus. Wowski makes an appearance in Dent's print to warn Jordan: "Ay madam, Massa love me once, now he love you—you be very White after Black till another Fair make you Brown—then you be left like poor Wowski." Here Wowski exposes a figurative substitutability between herself and Jordan, where Blackness signals neither an inherent trait, nor an exclusive reference to sexual excess. Rather, it pivots around Wowski and Jordan's economically inflected intimacies with the Duke, as a purchased, enslaved consort and a contracted mistress respectively. Dent's print is illustrative of how the increasing celebrity of actresses like Jordan created an uneasy slippage between white and Black

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that the Duke, having squandered his considerable allowance, "was so short of money that he collected Jordan's salary in person, and even took it in advance on the night of the performance." See Jerrold, *The Story of Dorothy Jordan*, 177. As sympathetic as her fans were to Jordan's predicament, the widely publicized arrangement by which a Prince of England—an example par excellence of the aristocracy—was being financially supported by an actress of illegitimate origins must have been a shocking reminder of the social transformation taking place at a national level, in which the aristocracy were being displaced by a self-made middling class. Even when Jordan sought to retire after decades of hard work on stage—not to mention her labor as a mother to ten children by the Duke—he pressured her to continue performing so that he could reap the financial rewards.

<sup>62</sup> Harris, *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen*, 219.

<sup>63</sup> In his parody of Edmund Burke, who had famously referred to the common man as a "swinish multitude," radical pamphleteer Thomas Spence metaphorically links the intimate commerce of interested marriage (fortune hunting) with the government's self-interested corruption of the national family. "My mandate should you now neglect,/ Ye multitude of grunterns;/ We'll tax ye still, without respect,/ To feed us fortune hunters." See Thomas Spence, "Edmund Burke's Address to the Swinish Multitude," *Pig's Meat; Or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* (London: Printed for T. Spence, 1794).



women as public and highly visible figures whose commercialized bodies on display positioned them somewhat outside of strictly male-controlled economies of intimacy and consumption or, worse yet, made men of power and influence economically dependent upon them.<sup>64</sup>

Attending to the racially unstable model of womanhood that these images construct in aggregate better enables us to see how the forms of excess Wowski and Jordan embodied were effectively repurposed to expose and critique forms of political excess on a national and imperial scale. For example, Gillray's 1792 print, *Vices overlook'd in the new proclamation*, collapses Wowski and Jordan in staging a broader critique of the Crown's consumptive and political excesses (see fig. 6). Among four panels depicting the many vices of the royal family—greed, gambling, drunkenness, and debauchery—the last is a near copy of Gillray's *Wowski* print, only it has swapped Wowski for Dorothy Jordan (see fig. 7). Collectively, the four panels satirize the hypocrisy undergirding the Proclamation of 21 May “for the preventing of tumultuous meetings and seditious writings,” a conservative response by George III and William Pitt to radical calls for parliamentary reform.<sup>65</sup> The striking visual substitution of Wowski for Jordan not only exposes the provisional character of Jordan's whiteness and its vulnerability to the taint of public money, it also conflates the earlier print's references to the excesses of the slave trade with excessive forms of consumption corrupting the central governing body of the nation. Jordan and/as Wowski thus forms the visual-rhetorical link through which *chattel* slavery in the West

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<sup>64</sup> As Nussbaum points out, “well-paid actresses [were] attractive as prospective wives” because husbands could claim half their income. Jordan was no different: she “was, according to her recent biographer, ‘both in public acclaim and in earning power...the man of the family’” (Nussbaum, *Rival Queens* 48). See also Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 110.

<sup>65</sup> See M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum* v.6 (London: British Museum, 1870-1954): no. 8095.

Indies becomes imbricated with the threat of *political* slavery at home, here in the form of repressive governance.

***...and the Hottentot Venus...***

In 1811, the fictional Wowski's prediction comes to pass. Desperate for a more lucrative and less compromised intimate arrangement, the Duke abandoned Jordan (and their ten children) and in the span of six months, proposed marriage to several heiresses, all of whom rejected him. This is the subject of Charles Williams's print, *Neptune's Last Resource, or The Fortune Hunter Foiled* (see fig. 1). Echoing the central features of Stothard's *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, *Neptune's Last Resource* depicts the Duke wearing his admiral's uniform but with Neptune's beard, crown, and trident. He kneels in the sand, proposing marriage to Sarah Baartman—the so-called Hottentot Venus—while simultaneously trying to relieve her of large bags of money. In the background, the Duke's carriage, shaped like a giant clam shell, founders in the breaking waves. Edwards had deployed neoclassical flourish to coyly conceal mercenary interest in the Sable Venus as a commodity beneath the language of courtly love—"all, adoring thee, do one,/ One Deity confess" (stanza 22). Williams abandons the ode and its heightened sentiments in favor of simpler tetrameter couplets which, combined with his image, lay bare the ultimate seductress of both love affairs—money: "Since golden Long my suit denie,/ Some other fortune now I'll try,/ Now Venus Barton I'll come o'er/ For *wealth's* the Goddess I adore" (emphasis added). Consistent with my reading of the Sable Venus, my understanding of Baartman's significance here as the Hottentot Venus extends far beyond the prevailing assumption that she signaled an unnatural desire for Black women, or overdeveloped, brutish sexuality alone.

Baartman was everywhere in the metropolitan popular press at this time, appearing in over twenty prints, either as a central subject or as a print within a print. She was renowned for her putatively large (by European standards) rear end, and, for some, she was an ethnographic specimen of African womanhood plucked from its primitive origins, as if untouched by modern commerce. However, as I have suggested earlier, Baartman's notoriety was not limited to her striking figure alone but emerged also in response to a widely publicized court case brought by Zachary Macaulay, among other members of the African Institution, which sought to determine whether she was displaying herself of her own accord or whether she was a coerced captive. Only three years after the abolition of the slave trade—which, we should remember, the Duke of Clarence vociferously denounced—the idea that an African woman was being enslaved in London drew significant public attention.<sup>66</sup> As such, the court's ultimate ruling that Baartman was indeed a willing entrepreneur aiming to profit from the public display of her body was widely publicized, as were the court's demands that her handler abide by an official contract to split the profits of her performance.<sup>67</sup> Although it is unlikely that he fulfilled his contractual obligations, the popular press regarded Baartman as wealthy and jokingly suggested she would make a good catch for some of the town's minor fortune hunters.<sup>68</sup> Baartman's liminal status

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<sup>66</sup> Like the antislavery sugar boycotts of the 1790s, humanitarian objections to Baartman's display were also rooted in a desire to move away from slavery and to embrace alternate avenues of imperial economic expansion. See Zine Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus,'" in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 47-61.

<sup>67</sup> According to biographers Crais and Scully, Baartman also held the copyright to two widely circulated aquatints by Frederick Christian Lewis (dated September 1810 and March 1811) that represent her in indigenous dress. Both were converted into broadsheet advertisements for her performances. See Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 75.

<sup>68</sup> Harris, *Satire, Celebrity, and Politics in Jane Austen*, 251. See also Lindfors, *Early African Entertainments Abroad*, 42.

between an enslaved woman and an entrepreneurial performer afforded her a potent symbolic resonance in the public imagination and rendered her the perfect embodiment of the Duke's mercenary intimate history with Wowski and Jordan.

Returning to *Neptune's Last Resource* with this context in mind, we can better appreciate how its portrayal of the Hottentot Venus undermines the static qualities usually ascribed to the Black Venus as a stereotype. To begin with, her condescending refusal of the Duke's advances in Williams's image contradicts characterizations of the Black Venus as always implicitly consenting. Moreover, the Hottentot Venus here is neither a nude mythological goddess nor a so-called primitive African in Indigenous garb, but rather a modern consumer of the courtly fashions her public display—and *performance* of the exotic specimen—have enabled her to purchase. Williams's rendering provocatively invites us to read caricatures of Baartman's voluptuous body as a mark of her modern, self-made fortune. For example, closer attention to the construction of the image reveals that her large bags of money mirror the curvature of her behind. And the pound notes bulging out of her pocket almost make it seem as if her rear end is *made* of money, not unlike the way that John Bull in *Nell's Coach* was inscribed everywhere with the word "taxes" to signify his contributions to the Duke's personal allowance.

Most compelling of all is the Hottentot Venus's damning reference here to the Duke's mercenary abandonment of Jordan and their children: "For if [the heiress] Missi Golden Long would have you/ You would not come to me to sue/ And leave your Wife and Pickaninies/ To come and try to take my Guineas." Not unlike Wowski's warning that one more fair—a woman whose wealth was inherited—would make Jordan "Brown," the Hottentot Venus blackens the so-called white actress through the word "Pickaninies," a derogatory term for Black children. Moreover, by rhyming "Pickaninies" with "Guineas," she links the Duke's private exchange of

family for money with his public support for slavery's "transformation of kin into commodity."<sup>69</sup> Like Wowski before her, Williams's Venus cleverly manipulates racial signifiers ostensibly designed to denigrate *her* as a colonized other, and deploys them instead to critique supposedly white, metropolitan subjects.

### ***Conclusion: Resituating the Romantic Black Venus***

Analyzing the Sable and Hottentot Venuses as a layered palimpsest not only unsettles the apparently rigid racial binary they are thought to reinforce, it also upends interpretations of their resonance in the period as retrogressionist or anti-modern in their mythical or primitive sexual appetites. For example, the Hottentot Venus's use of West Indian pidgin in *Neptune's Last Resource* locates her within a modern matrix of Atlantic capital. Although Baartman, who was from the Cape Colony of South Africa, spoke Dutch and some English (in addition to her native Khoisan language), here she is depicted speaking a language "[d]erived from forced labor and global profit networks, and spoken mainly on [West Indian] plantations" which "combined words and syntax from both West African and British regional dialects."<sup>70</sup> Not coincidentally, stage pidgin was made most popular by the character Wowski from Colman's *Inkle and Yarico*. As a language of racial performance, Roxann Wheeler explains, it was not indicative of "the orality of a simpler society untouched by commercial forces. On the contrary, pidgin was a modern language brought into being because of global actors united by trade, the profit motive, and slavery."<sup>71</sup> Likewise, while the Sable Venus's mythical aura as a pseudo-Roman goddess

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<sup>69</sup> Morgan, "Partus sequitur ventrem," 11.

<sup>70</sup> Roxann Wheeler, "Sounding Black-Ish: West Indian Pidgin in London Performance and Print," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 51.1 (2017): 66

<sup>71</sup> Wheeler, 79-80.

makes her seem chronologically distant from the up-to-the-moment *History* she punctuates, her interpolation into the rapidly circulating print culture of the slavery debates positions her at the crux of the period's social, political, and economic transformations.

## Appendix of Images



Fig. 1 Charles Williams, *Neptune's Last Resource, or The Fortune Hunter Foiled: A Sketch from Heathen Mythology* (London, 1811). © The Trustees of the British Museum

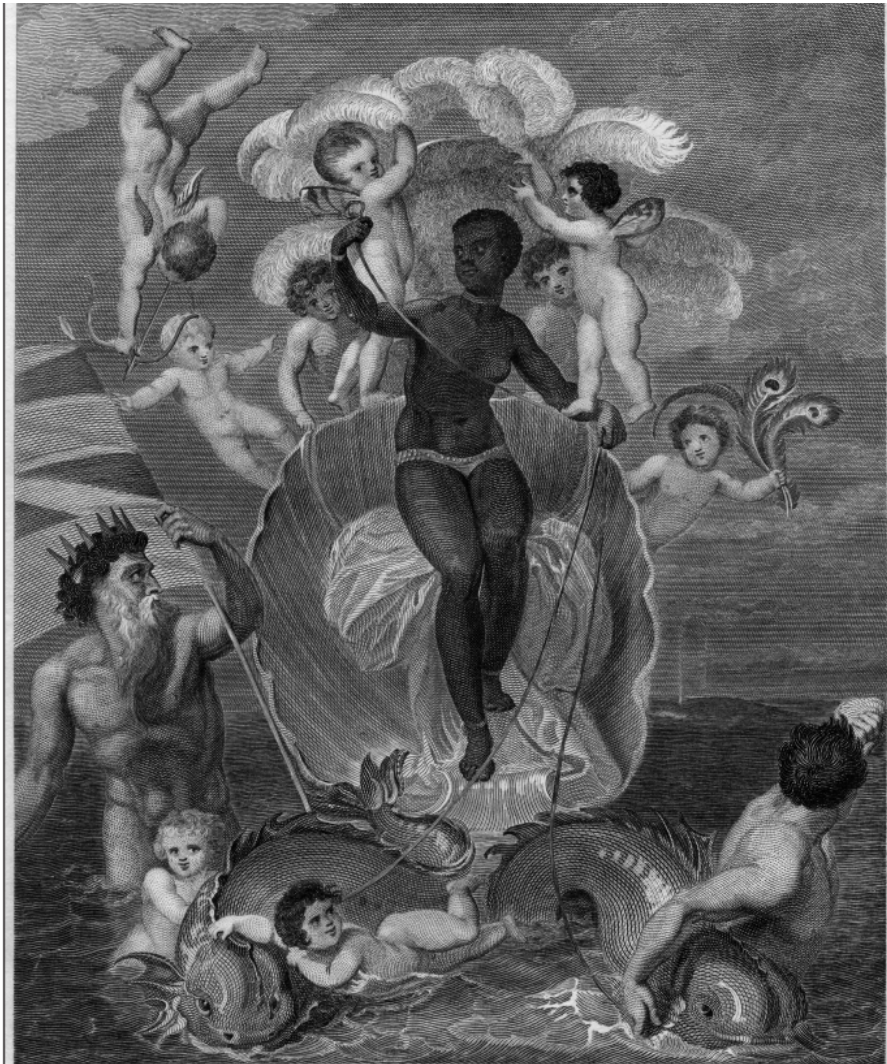


Fig. 2 William Grainger after Thomas Stothard, *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, from Bryan Edwards, *The History Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies: In Two Volumes* (London: John Stockdale, 1794).





Fig. 3 Isaac Cruikshank, *Abolition of the Slave Trade, Or the Inhumanity of Dealers in human flesh exemplified in Capt'n Kimber's treatment of a Young Negro Girl of 15 for her Virjen [sic] Modesty* (London, 1792). © The Trustees of the British Museum

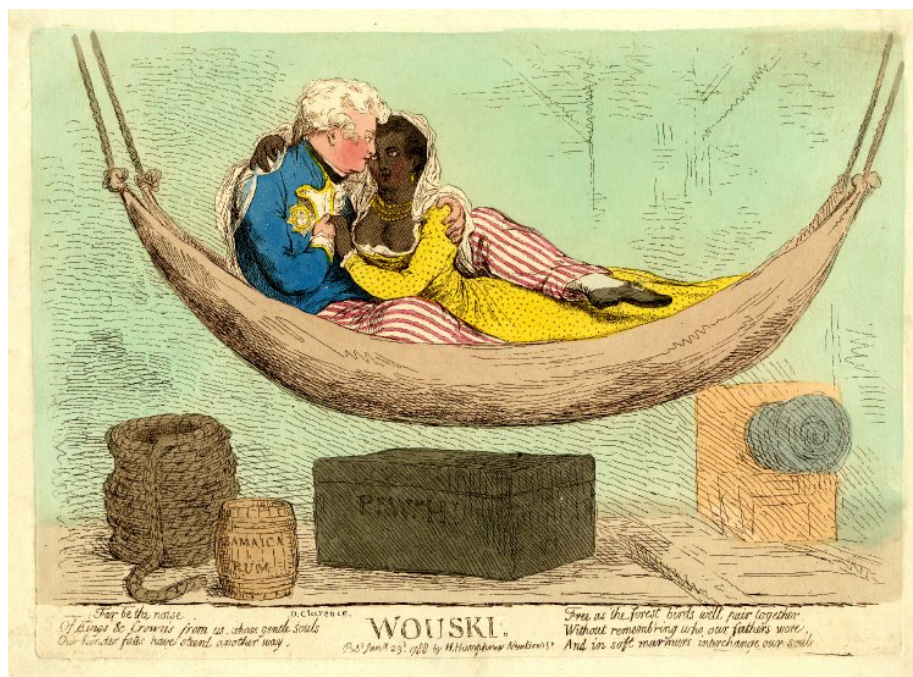


Fig. 4 James Gillray, *Wouski* (London, 1788). © The Trustees of the British Museum





Fig. 6 James Gillray, *Vices overlook'd in the new proclamation* (London, 1792). © National Portrait Gallery, London



Fig. 7 details of James Gillray's *Wouski* (left) and of *Vices overlook'd in the new proclamation* (right)

### Chapter Three

#### **“The Daughters of Albion Hear Her Woes and Echo Back Her Sighs”: Palimpsestic Revisions of the Black Venus in William Blake and Robin Coste Lewis<sup>1</sup>**

In histories of slavery, women stood for nothing more or less than symbolic cyphers of abuses—corporeal and ahistorical. The move encapsulated by *partus sequitur ventrem* expels these women on terms deeply rooted in the body and thus apparently both natural and deserved. But the consequences of that embodied determinism are not entirely confined to the process by which their expulsion was naturalized; rather, they are the routes through which that exclusion can be reckoned with and the processes through which a new narrative arc might be constructed in the aftermath of enslavement.

—Jennifer Morgan, “*partus sequitur ventrem*”

“From tracks left yesterday and today, mixed together”

—Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

My previous chapter demonstrated how one enslaved young woman’s murder aboard the *Recovery* was domesticated and commodified as grist for both sides of the slavery debate: Cruikshank’s *Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1792) renders the young woman a spectacular victim of slavery’s rapaciousness and a sentimental vehicle of English benevolence.<sup>2</sup> Stothard’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (1793) overwrites Cruikshank’s image and its abolitionist implications, further abstracting the enslaved young woman into a Black goddess who presides as economic and libidinal ruler of Atlantic commerce.<sup>3</sup> Stothard’s efforts notwithstanding, the contours of Cruikshank’s image seep through the Sable Venus’s neoclassical veneer prompting the central interpretive questions guiding this chapter: what if, rather than setting these images in opposition as pro- and antislavery abstractions, we layered them, one over the other, as palimpsestic

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this chapter was completed during the tenure of a Clark Library Dissertation Fellowship thanks to the generous support of UCLA’s Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies.

<sup>2</sup> See fig. 3 in Chapter 2, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> See fig. 2 in Chapter 2, p. 170.

material objects (see fig. 8)?<sup>4</sup> How might a palimpsestic reading of the Black Venus grant new insight into the figure's ongoing revision and circulation in our own moment? I find answers to these questions in an unlikely pairing of William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) and Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015). Emerging from vastly different contexts, both experimental poems expose the violence that Stothard's image tries to paper over. Rather than reverting to the sentimentalized victim of Cruikshank's image, however, Blake and Lewis layer together pro- and anti-slavery Black Venus figures—in the 1790s London print market and the archives of Atlantic slavery respectively—to magnify their shared contours as commodified material objects whose ongoing consumption shores up white hegemony.

Blake's *Visions* appears to tell the story of Oothoon, the “soft soul of America,” as she pursues her virgin love for Theotormon across the Atlantic, whereupon she is raped and enslaved by Bromion. In the aftermath of her rape, Theotormon—a stand-in for the man of feeling—spurns the now-pregnant Oothoon for her despoiled virtue and is so consumed with sanctimonious self-pity that he is insensible to her protestations. As art historian Alexander Gourlay has noted, the triangulated figures of Blake's frontispiece—Bromion, Oothoon, and Theotormon—layer precisely onto those in Stothard's image—Neptune, the Sable Venus, and Triton respectively (see fig. 9).<sup>5</sup> Blake brings the intimate violence of Cruikshank's original image to the foreground of Stothard's mythic romance, but in place of Cruikshank's explicitly

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am blending the notion of the palimpsest as a paleographic object and as a figure for a certain form of intertextuality. In the former instance, a palimpsest refers to the recycling of a writing surface by erasing and overwriting an original text with a new, unrelated one. The process of overwriting is imperfect however, as chemicals in the ink oxidize, leaving a ghostly remnant of the original text visible beneath the newly inscribed one. In the latter instance, a palimpsest refers to the layering of divergent, sometimes antithetical, texts to reveal their shared contours. For an in-depth theorization of these dual notions of the palimpsest, see Sarah Dillon, *Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander S. Gourlay, “‘Art Delivered’: Stothard's the *Sable Venus* and Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.4 (2008): 529-50.

Black female victim, Blake's Oothoon is a Native American, an African, and a white Englishwoman all at once. This perplexing rendering has led many to read Oothoon as an amalgam of the allegorical female figures in Blake's *Europe Supported by Africa and America*, which he engraved for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition* (see fig. 10).<sup>6</sup> Read as a material palimpsest rather than an abstract allegory, however, we see in Oothoon the range of Black Venus figures I have traced across the popular culture of the British eighteenth century. Oothoon's appearance in Blake's text and images as an enslaved white European woman recalls Southerne's Imoinda; her designation as the "soft soul of America" evokes the betrayed Yarico; and her portrayal as a brutalized African victim of chattel slavery conjures the young woman in Cruikshank's *Abolition* as well as the "Female Samboe Slave" which, as I will discuss shortly, Blake also engraved for Stedman's *Narrative*.

By layering these sentimentalized Black Venus figures together with Stothard's tyrannical Sable Venus, Blake exposes the imbrication of antislavery material culture with the violent human commerce it protests. Around the time that Blake published *Visions*, antislavery abstention campaigns were replacing the consumption of actual enslaved Black bodies and the products of their labor (like sugar) with the consumption of enslaved suffering emblazoned on abolitionist swag like cameos, snuff boxes, and sugar bowls. These abolitionist objects would then go on to ornament as outward signals of English virtue the same white leisured domesticity

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, David Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15 (1952): 242-52 and Debbie Lee, "Intimacy as Imitation: Monkeys in Blake's Engraving for Stedman's Narrative" in *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 66-119. Other critical accounts of *Visions* interpret Oothoon's enslavement as an allegory for more domestic forms of oppression, whether the mind-forged manacles of middle-class marriage and self-regulation or the "dark satanic mills" of textile industrialization. See, for example, Makdisi, "Laboring at the Mill with Slaves" in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 78-154; Anne Mellor, "Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3/4 (1995): 345-370; and James F. Moyer, "'The Daughters Weave their Work in loud cries': Blake, Slavery, and Cotton," *Blake/ An Illustrated Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3 (Winter 2014-15).

which slavery's circuits of commerce helped to finance.<sup>7</sup> By emphasizing Oothoon's materiality as a palimpsestic figure, Blake short-circuits the commercialized sentiment that her isolation as an individual suffering Black female victim would provoke. In so doing, he also exposes the mechanistic way in which English benevolence transforms enslaved Black womanhood into a resource for asserting white domestic virtue. For Blake, virtue thus secured is pathological, an extension of middle-class subjectivity's mind-forged manacles which prompt Oothoon to declaim the moralistic man of feeling, Theotormon, "is a sick man's dream."<sup>8</sup>

Robin Coste Lewis's engagement with Stothard is more direct, but she takes a similar approach: "return[ing] to the archive with scissors,"<sup>9</sup> she appropriates *Voyage of the Sable Venus* as the title of her long poem which is comprised entirely of "the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which the Black female figure is present."<sup>10</sup> In addition to its title, Lewis also includes an archival description of the Sable Venus within the poem itself. This description forms the concluding image of a tangled collection of other ocean-bound Black female figures:

Ship Negro Woman seated.

At right, Slavers throwing over.

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<sup>7</sup> We need look no further than Josiah Wedgwood's famous abolitionist emblem of a kneeling enslaved man uttering the words, "Am I not a man and a brother?" The emblem protests the commodification of human beings as objects for consumption and profitable reproduction. However, its material form and function as a purchasable and reproducible commodity reinforce its participation in a domestic economy inseparable from slavery.

<sup>8</sup> William Blake and Robert N. Essick, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (San Marino: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 2004), 9:19. All subsequent citations are in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Translatio Studii and the Poetics of the Digital Archive: Early American Literature, Caribbean Assemblages, and Freedom Dreams," *American Literary History* 29.2 (2017): 259.

<sup>10</sup> Robin Coste Lewis, *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2015), 35. All subsequent citations are in the text.

Board the Dead-and-Dying.

Typhoon coming.

On manacled limbs of

Slaves among the Waves:

Foreground-Slave,

Ship in Middle

Distance: a Black Woman Kneeling

In a Storm, Her Hands Clasped

In Prayer and Her Eyes

Cast Upward.

Nude Black Woman

in an Oyster Shell

Drawn by Dolphins

through the Water

and accompanied by Cupids,

Neptune, and Others. (73)



Like Blake, Lewis exposes the brutal reality festering beneath the mythical sheen of Stothard's image by bringing the fragmented horror of the Middle Passage to the surface—in this case, to the top of the page. Like Blake, Lewis also draws the horror she layers onto the Sable Venus from popular antislavery texts, most notably J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting *The Slave Ship*, originally titled *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* (see fig. 11).<sup>11</sup> Turner's sublime depiction of the 1781 Zong massacre—in which more than 120 enslaved captives were thrown overboard to recoup the insurance that would attend their deaths—transforms the suffering of the enslaved into an aesthetic vehicle for the sympathetic white viewer's absolution while leaving the humanity of those it instrumentalizes quite literally in a churning wake.<sup>12</sup>

Turner's painting exonerates its viewers from the violent commerce it depicts not only through the cathartic dynamics of sentiment or the abstracting power of the sublime, but also through the mechanics of historical time. Turner's rendering of the Zong massacre half a century after the fact and two years after the British abolition of slavery likely created affirming distance

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<sup>11</sup> Note that one of the mostly sharply rendered details of the image appears in the bottom-right portion of the painting, where a school of fish appears to be feasting on a disembodied leg still attached to a chain at the ankle. The style of the leg's rendering seems less consistent with that of the rest of the painting than it does with the graphic satires I have examined thus far. In fact, its positioning vividly recalls Cruikshank's *Abolition*, in which the unnamed enslaved teenager is forcibly held aloft, suspended by her one leg by at the ankle. While there is no way to be sure of Turner's familiarity with the print, his friend and patron Walter Ramsden Fawkes had campaigned for abolition right alongside William Wilberforce who made the scandal depicted in Cruikshank's painting so famous. See Leslie Stephen, ed., *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.18 (United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1889), 269.

<sup>12</sup> For Ian Baucom, Turner's painting and John Ruskin's account of its significance are marked by a "worldly attitude of sympathetic guilt" characteristic of "late, neoliberal romanticism." See Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 312. Desmond Manderson identifies Turner's painting as emblematic of "the dark side of colonial righteousness" which, despite "the sincerity of its aspirations," does harm to "the objects of its pity." See Desmond Manderson, *Danse Macabre: Temporalities of Law in the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 105. For an excellent reading of the painting as combining the Zong massacre—an indictment of Britain's eighteenth-century involvement in the slave trade—with their participation in "pursuit and jettison" in the aftermath of British abolition, see Leo Costello, "Turner's the Slave Ship (1840): Towards a Dialectical History Painting," *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and Its Colonies, 1760-1838*, eds. Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis, Sarah Salih (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 209-222.

between Britain's sullied past (a moment frozen in the painting) and the more civilized, dynamic present of its consumption in London's Royal Academy. Lewis's interpolation of positional cues—"at right," "foreground," and "distance"—extends the exonerating gesture of Turner's painting to the present moment in which her readers encounter it, recontextualized, alongside the *Sable Venus*.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, Lewis likens the safe detachment Turner's painting secured for its nineteenth-century viewers to that afforded by the archival technologies of labeling and order that mediate our access to the material artifacts of slavery as relics of the past. Lewis's recontextualization of Stothard's *Voyage* thus models the poem's broader approach to the archival objects it manipulates as its poetic materials by wresting away and overwriting the referential authority of the systems that contain them, dictate how they circulate, how they are assigned value, and the systems that naturalize how we make use of them.

By foregrounding the mechanisms occluding Black women's subjectivity in the material culture of slavery, rather than the subjects they occlude, Blake's *Visions* and Lewis's *Voyage* resist the redemptive dynamics of what Stephen Best terms the "recovery imperative."<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, the recovery imperative is an ethical imperative for scholars of Atlantic slavery to retrieve and repair the humanity, voice, and resistant agency of enslaved people from within hegemonic histories dependent upon their omission. Questions of archival recovery—its feasibility and its ethical complications—have featured prominently in Atlantic Slavery Studies by historians and cultural scholars alike. Some argue that its modes of redemptive reading keep in circulation and put to use the very Black subjects they set out to recover from centuries of

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<sup>13</sup> As Manderson puts it, "[w]hat matters most is not just what we see, but where we stand." See Manderson, *Danse Macabre*, 105. See also Sarah Fulford, "David Dabydeen and Turner's Sublime Aesthetic," *Anthurium: a Caribbean Studies Journal*, 3.1 (2005): 4-21.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 12.

instrumentalization. In her foundational essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman probes the limits of what can be recovered of the Black women reduced to archetypes or commodities in the archives of Atlantic slavery.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on the two girls murdered aboard the *Recovery*, the unnamed one in Cruikshank’s print and the girl called Venus, Hartman cautions that efforts to make their lives legible and politically useful can imbue the individual Venus(es) we try to write back into history with a symbolic significance that transforms them into another form of currency in the present. Jenny Sharpe and Anjali Arondekar suggest that filling in archival gaps simply reinforces the authority of colonial institutions and hegemonic historical narratives responsible for those gaps in the first place.<sup>16</sup> Stephen Best questions the appearance of resolution and redemption such efforts secure when they “equate the recovery of the past with a recovery from it.”<sup>17</sup> These critical considerations collectively prompt the question, whom does the redemptive reading of recovery really redeem? And how is that redemption contingent upon our own extrication, as contemporary scholars of slavery, from the histories we set out to repair?

Blake’s *Visions* and Lewis’s *Voyage* make such modes of redemptive reading and the distance they might afford impossible. As they frame Stothard’s *Voyage* within a broader material network of Black Venuses—from book illustrations to household objects—they illuminate the imbricated circulation of Black women as enslaved captives in the Atlantic trade and as instrumental objects domesticating that trade in drawing rooms and museums alike. The uncanny palimpsest of Black Venuses they construct provokes a suspicion of her lurking

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<sup>15</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2008): 2, 3, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives: an African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 8; Anjali Arondekar, “Introduction: Without a Trace” in *For the Record: on Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 85.

everywhere and prompts unresolvable questions about where her contours bleed into something else entirely, where the figure ends and real women begin, about what and whom we are seeing or not seeing in the material culture of a long eighteenth century steeped in slavery. This palimpsest demands radical modes of reading unbound by the progressive historical teleology that risks obscuring the Black Venus's ongoing instrumentalization even as it makes redemptive recovery possible. As such, this chapter's navigation of Blake's *Visions* and Lewis's *Voyage* takes a decidedly non-linear and sometimes circuitous route. It begins with my own archival encounter with a palimpsestic Black Venus figure I had not expected to find, a figure who forms a material link between the historical moments this chapter traverses. Framed by Freud's notion of the uncanny, Toni Morrison's trope of rememory, and Lisa Lowe's call for a palimpsestic engagement with the archives of Atlantic slavery, this unexpected Black Venus also helps me to theorize the radical modes of reading Blake and Lewis make possible as an alternative to the recovery imperative.

### ***Theorizing the Unhomely Archive***

In 2019, I was examining a first edition copy of John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname* (1796) at the Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles because of its status as a suspected intertext for Blake's *Visions*. Leafing carefully through the second volume, I happened upon Blake's engraving, *The Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*.<sup>18</sup> It illustrates Stedman's encounter with an enslaved woman whose refusal of an overseer's sexual advances is punished with two hundred rending lashes. Stedman's efforts to intervene result only in a doubling of the punishment, at which point he literally runs

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<sup>18</sup> I have deliberately omitted this image and choose to let its palimpsestic afterimage stand in its place.

away from the scene, leaving the brutalized woman hanging by her wrists from a tree. Stedman's sympathetic reflection on this "most affecting spectacle" reliably distances him from culpability in the violent commodification of human life he witnesses but fails to amend.<sup>19</sup> Like all the *Narrative's* engravings, Blake's *Flagellation* was printed on a single sheet of thicker paper, separated in texture and space from the text of the *Narrative* itself. The image was familiar to me. It has circulated widely as evidence of the pornography of slavery's violence, and I had seen it many times before in scholarly articles and monographs.<sup>20</sup> The image was designed to provoke pity, but that pity served the metropolitan readers of Stedman's *Narrative* rather than the woman whose suffering prompted it. Such pity created distance between the site of slavery's atrocity and the site of that atrocity's cathartic consumption.

While I felt viscerally for the woman whose name I would likely never know, I too felt distant from the violence I witnessed. However, my own sense of distance came less through the mechanics of sentiment than through the logic of progressive linear time which reassured me that both her brutalization and her subsequent instrumentalization as an object of cleansing sensibility were fixed in the past. The trappings of archival encounter that surrounded me—foam wedges and book snake weights—confirmed this sense of temporal distance as material reminders that the object in front of me was a rare relic of a distant age. However, turning the page revealed a

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<sup>19</sup>John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church Yard, & J. Edwards, Pall Mall, 1796), 1: 326. All subsequent citations are in the text.

<sup>20</sup>In her account of Blake's engravings for Stedman, Debbie Lee notes that "[s]ome of them have permanently lodged themselves in the collective consciousness, showing up in today's academic marketplace with assertive rapidity, as book covers, illustrations, and exhibits in scholarly arguments." See Debbie Lee, "Intimacy as Imitation," 66. See also Hartman's discussion of the association with flogging and sexual arousal in reference to Cruikshank's *Abolition of the Slave Trade* print. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 145-46 and Mario Klarer, "Humanitarian Pornography: John Gabriel Stedman's 'Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam' (1796)," *New Literary History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2005): 559-597.

figure who breached this distance with astonishing rapidity. Somehow, over the course of two hundred years, the black ink that formerly held the Female Samboe Slave<sup>21</sup> captive as a material and symbolic instrument of whiteness had come to mar that whiteness, to literally stain what should have been the blank reverse page of the engraving grey and a brownish red reminiscent of dried blood. More precisely, the linseed oil or other materials in the ink used to print the image had seeped through the paper to leave a ghostly outline of the woman tied to a tree by her wrists, her eyes and mouth gaping in silent anguish (see fig. 12). Her appearance was arresting. She was not supposed to be here; she should not have been able to move, to pass through walls of paper and leave evidence of her passing, but she had.

Almost instantly, the outlines of the Sable Venus and the hanging girl in Cruikshank's *Abolition* seemed to rise from the contours of the ghostly afterimage (see fig. 13). Simultaneously, its blurred interior—black ink turned grey—confirmed the illegible presence of the actual women whom these Black Venus figures abstracted, anonymized women whose voices proved irrelevant to the broader political economy of white sensibility that the depictions of their suffering sustained. This was reinforced by the horizontal lines transecting the woman's ghostly outline, apparently ink that had transferred or burned over time, from the text of Stedman's *Narrative* on the facing page.<sup>22</sup> In one sense, these lines materialized her incarceration within the sentimental discourse Stedman invokes to domesticate his complicity in slavery's violent economies of intimacy. The illegibility of the lines—the loss of detail they endure in their transfer from the page of their origin to their resting place superimposed upon the afterimage—

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<sup>21</sup> I retain the capitalization of this figure's identifying labels to distinguish her from others I discuss without uncritically reproducing these terms.

<sup>22</sup> For a description of the potential photochemical processes involved, see Ad Stijnman, "Oil-based Printing Ink on Paper: Bleeding, Browning, Blanching and Peroxides," *Papier-Restaurierung* 1 (2000): 61-68.

effectively collapses what seem to be divergent, even oppositional, rhetorical frames for these spectacularly violent images: whether they issue justifications or apologies or laments, the victimized women they describe never escape their instrumentality.

Staring at the grey-brown stain of this unexpected Black Venus, her repeated instrumentalization seemed to accumulate on the page, layer upon layer. As an enslaved laborer, she augmented the wealth of those who claimed her and any children she may have borne as property. As a spectacular victim of intimate violence, she prompted the cleansing sensibility Stedman models for his metropolitan readers. As a commissioned engraving, she put money in Blake's pocket. As portable evidence of slavery's inhumanity, she served as an adaptable tool of abolitionist rhetoric and, much later, as a scholarly exhibit in histories of slavery. She was becoming, at that very moment, a piece of archival evidence in my dissertation. This layered, ghostly figure illuminates the shared contours of chattel slavery's physical violence and material culture's representational violence (past and present) while retaining their important differences.

Nonetheless, the imbricated modes of the woman's exploitation—her liminality between human being and familiar abstract figure, between commodified human property and commodified print object—and the layering of its violence in the past with its consumption in the present made my encounter with this ghostly palimpsest profoundly uncanny. According to Freud, the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, is a product of both material and temporal liminality. In material terms, we might call uncanny something intimately familiar made eerily unfamiliar “by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as...when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes.”<sup>23</sup> Freud ascribes these effects of the uncanny to things that blur the line between the inanimate and the animate such as wax figures,

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<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny, 1919’” in *Imago*, trans. Alix Strachery (repr. in *Sammlung*, Fünfte Folge), 14.

dolls, and automatons.<sup>24</sup> In temporal terms, Freud describes the uncanny as the involuntary and inescapable repetition of something familiar that has been repressed, something that ought to have been concealed but willfully and repeatedly comes to light.<sup>25</sup> The Female Samboe Slave's uncanny intrusion into the time and space of the present demanded a mode of reading which, like Blake's *Visions* and Lewis's *Voyage*, proved incompatible with the redemptive distance of recovery. As I suggested earlier, Joseph Roach's "deep eighteenth century," or "the one that isn't over yet," structures such a model by framing the connections between past and present as material and embodied rather than as abstract.<sup>26</sup> Felicity Nussbaum's assessment of the deep eighteenth century as "a phrase meant to describe the ghostly afterimages that persist as the Enlightenment's unfinished project" seems particularly apposite here.<sup>27</sup>

Lisa Lowe theorizes a similar mode of reading more attentive to the unique dynamics of recovery when she invokes *rememory* as an alternative hermeneutic for engaging with the archives of slavery and the histories they contort, occlude, and omit.<sup>28</sup> A prominent trope in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *rememory* captures the way space and time are marked by the trauma of slavery. As a noun, a *rememory* conjures a thought picture endowed with material substance, such that you might bump into it, be physically arrested by it. As a verb, to *rememory* something is to refuse time as a linear ordering principle of the world under the conditions of slavery and its

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<sup>24</sup> Freud, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 288 n.3

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Lowe, "Race, Blackness, and Romanticism: Dialogues with Professors Simon Gikandi and Lisa Lowe," University of Buffalo, 10 March 2021.



aftermaths. The rememory of slavery, much like the uncanny afterimage of the Female Samboe Slave, thus registers the material manifestation of its haunting presence in the present, not as spectral repetition but as fleshy accumulation.<sup>29</sup> Through her call to rememory, then, Lowe deters us from engaging in the recovery imperative's "petrified reduction" of objects lost to the past. She urges us instead to attend to the uncanny, material thingness of the past *not past* by replacing traditional chronologies of archival order with a temporality that moves forwards and backwards simultaneously.<sup>30</sup>

Absent from Lowe's formulation but critical to the "uncanny material thingness" of rememory in *Beloved*, *Voyage*, and *Visions* alike is that uniquely domestic dimension embedded in Freud's term *unheimlich*, meaning unhomely.<sup>31</sup> Two examples from *Beloved* provide useful grounding here. Initially, the novel's protagonist Sethe explains the concept of rememory to her daughter Denver saying that if a house burns down, the rememory of it remains in place as a physical thing you might bump into. The house as vague example quickly gives way to the specific site of Sethe's trauma, Sweet Home, the plantation where she and her family were enslaved, and from which she and her daughter escaped. Sethe concludes her definition of

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<sup>29</sup> Madhu Dubey discusses the temporality of haunting as characteristic of neoslave narratives like *Beloved*. Drawing on Gordon and Young, Dubey invokes *haunting* to describe an "emotional and corporeal mode of knowing the past." Haunting as a critical and creative "'methodology' repudiates not only the rational and detached stance of modern historiography (*HC*, 46), but also its linear and progressive temporality." See Madhu Dubey, "Speculative Fictions of Slavery," *American Literature; a Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography*, 82.4 (2010): 788-89.

<sup>30</sup> Lowe, "Race, Blackness, and Romanticism," Sarah Dillon understands such a temporality as the product of reading palimpsestically: "thinking through the palimpsest," Dillon argues, "temporality is figured as the erasure, superimposition and persistence of one temporal moment in another, a spectral temporality which is defined by the inhabitation of the present by the past, by what Geoff Bennington, after Jacques Derrida, has called 'the necessary non-coincidence of the present with itself.'" See Sarah Dillon, "Palimpsesting: Reading and Writing Lives in H.D.'s Palimpsest," *Critical Survey*, Special Issue: Modernist Women Writers Using History, eds. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, 19:1 (2007): 33.

<sup>31</sup> On the unhomely and *Beloved*, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1-28.

rememory by prohibiting Denver from ever returning to Sweet Home: “if you go there—if you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.”<sup>32</sup> Of course, as we learn over the course of the novel, the trauma of slavery breeches far beyond the boundaries of the plantation, intruding even into Sethe’s own Ohio home at 124 Bluestone Road. It is here that her former enslaver “schoolteacher” comes to recapture her, prompting Sethe to murder her own infant daughter rather than allow her to suffer the dehumanizing violence Sethe herself endured. 124 is thereafter haunted by the ghost of the murdered child, first as a poltergeist and then as the embodied woman Beloved. Freud’s temporal notion of the *unheimlich* as a repeated return of the repressed is not, in Morrison’s novel, circular, but rather cumulative. Its own Black Venus, Beloved, literally takes on flesh as an unhomely rememory, a layered accumulation of slavery’s intrusions into the domestic spaces and intimacies which have endeavored to repress it.<sup>33</sup>

Foremost among these, not only in *Beloved*, but in *Visions* and *Voyage* too, are those white spaces governed by a liberal sentiment that belies—and thereby represses—their complicity in slavery’s intimate violence. Indeed, one of the most unhomely moments in *Beloved* plays out in the home of the white abolitionist Bodwin siblings, the “good whitefolks” Denver hopes will hire her out of her own haunted home.<sup>34</sup> Denver has just met with Janey, the Black woman currently employed there as a servant, and is preparing to leave when she is struck by a distinctly unhomely object:

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<sup>32</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 43-44. All subsequent citations are in the text.

<sup>33</sup> For a brief but excellent reading of *Beloved* as a Black Venus, see Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 59-64.

<sup>34</sup> It is notable, too, that 124 Bluestone Road used to belong to the Bodwins.

sitting on a shelf by the back door, [Denver spies] a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins, or crab-apple jelly.

Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words 'At Yo Service.' (300)

Although *Beloved* has long been considered a paradigmatic example of the recovery imperative in action for the way it creatively imagines the interior lives of the enslaved, it bears noting that we never learn Denver's feelings about this particular racist curio.<sup>35</sup> Instead, Morrison's lengthy description of the object arrests and protracts Denver's momentary glance, freezing her, Janey, and the "blackboy" in an uncanny tableau that renders them disturbingly interchangeable figures of Black servitude and thus instruments of white supremacy. Morrison's repeated use of the possessive pronoun "his"—his head, his hands, his hair, his mouth—lends the grotesquely caricatured figure a liminal humanity which amplifies both the extremity of his abjection and the unhomeliness of its domestication. His bulging eyes and gaping mouth, apparent evidence of his subhumanity, become instead affective evidence of slavery's inhuman violence, a boy's response to having his head punctured with nails and his neck hyperextended to the point of breaking. Like the Female Samboe Slave, the figure's potential humanity registers only as the kind of

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Best, *None Like Us*, 68-70.

spectacular and instrumental victimhood that fueled the invigorating days of abolitionist fervor for which Mr. Bodwin nostalgically longs.

As Morrison lodges us in the figure's jarring liminality between pitiable boy and ornamental object, she reveals that the home of these "good whitefolks," an ostensible refuge from slavery's dehumanizing logic, is, instead, a site of its unhomely domestication. Unhomely moments like this one complicate critical alignments of *Beloved* with the recovery imperative by subverting any cathartic tears the novel may otherwise provoke, particularly from white readers inclined to identify with its only seemingly progressive, "good whitefolks." I thus join Lowe in recognizing the radical potential of rememory as a mode of reading that fruitfully collapses spatial and temporal boundaries which colonial historiography and narratives of recovery alike take for granted. Rememory replaces the linear unfolding of colonial history and its aftermaths with the unhomely and implicating logic of the palimpsest definitive of the ghostly afterimage of the Female Samboe Slave, of Blake's *Visions*, and of Lewis's *Voyage*. If such a collapse reveals the persistent exploitation of Black women, its consequent layering casts in relief the insidious ways in which such exploitation is continually domesticated and sanitized of its violence, whether in antislavery material culture of the 1790s or in the archives through which we encounter them.

### ***Lewis's Voyage: The Black Venus and/As White Pathology***

Robin Coste Lewis has repeatedly referred to *Voyage of the Sable Venus* as a narrative poem, but the unruly collection of fragmented Black Venus figures populating this seventy-nine-page epic obscure what or whose story it tells. Rather than singling out individual figures or endowing them with interiority, *Voyage* deliberately maintains their anonymity and often

manipulates line breaks and punctuation to obscure where one figure ends and another begins. For example, the museum description of Stothard's *Voyage* which I cited earlier omits the "name" of its title figure, such that the Sable Venus becomes another anonymous Black woman crossing the Atlantic. Reduced to "Nude Black Woman," she blends more seamlessly with the earlier figures on the page, the "Ship Negro Woman seated" and the "Black Woman Kneeling" (73). Terms of anonymity like "Negro Woman," "Black girl," and "Female slave" proliferate across the poem, replacing the proper nouns we expect of a narrative's characters. Moreover, the stories of these figures do not unfold along a linear narrative plotline but rather accumulate layer upon layer producing a dense palimpsest resistant to interpretation. Jacquelyn Ardam has thoughtfully observed that we "try to understand Lewis's work by finding evidence of the original works, but we soon realize that the attempt leads us into a sort of infinite regress." I agree with Ardam that the figures in *Voyage* are always already entangled," however I am not convinced that the "impossibility of nailing down an antecedent [is] the ultimate point."<sup>36</sup>

To begin with, a quick Google search of title fragments embedded in the "Modern: Post" section of Lewis's poem reveals a range of works by contemporary Black women artists. These include Kara Walker's silhouettes "Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!" (106) and "The Battle of Atlanta, Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire" (102); photographer Jennie C. Jones's "Homage to Unknown Suburban Black Girl" (105); ceramist Simone Leigh's "You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been" (106); and even a reference to conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady's avatar, *Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire* (104). Ultimately, though, it is not the original works that we are after when we feel compelled to separate out one figure from the

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<sup>36</sup> Jacquelyn Ardam, "Reduction and Relief," *Public Books*, (30 Sept. 2015), [www.publicbooks.org/reduction-and-relief/](http://www.publicbooks.org/reduction-and-relief/).

next. Lewis tempts us to forget that they *are* archived art objects and to think of them instead as actual women in need of rescue from a dispossessing history. By transforming broken art objects like “Statuette of Black Slave Girl/ Right Half of Body and Head Missing” and “Partially Broken Young Black Girl” into broken anonymous people, Lewis heightens our desire to extricate them from the aqueous *Voyage* where they are cast adrift as so many “manacled limbs” among the waves, to make them whole, and to return them to a locatable place and time on dry land (43-44). Lewis simultaneously thwarts such rescue attempts by precluding readerly efforts to disentangle living women from archived art objects and by submerging us, instead, in the disorienting unhomeliness of their entanglement. By Lewis’s own admission, this bewildering unhomeliness targets white readers in particular to demonstrate how the white sympathy motivating some archival rescue risks extending the white supremacist archival violence it sets out to repair.

Much like the “blackboy” figure in *Beloved*, Lewis’s palimpsestic figures reproduce for white readers the sense of disorientation she asserts results from having forms of Blackness forged in whiteness projected onto you. “You can’t tell what’s going on?” Lewis asks, “Well, no shit. Neither can millions of other people! We haven’t been able to tell what’s been going on for millennia with regard to the majority of narratives about black people. What has been projected onto us is so insane, so pathological, that we don’t know either.” In a conversation with white poet Sharon Olds, Lewis asserts that her poetic assemblage of Black female figures is “not [in fact] about black people. This poem is about your people.” We get the clearest sense of what Lewis means when she bristles at one reader’s expression of sadness about her poem’s delineation of “what’s been done to black women.” Lewis emphatically asserts that *Voyage* is not an articulation of Black women’s pain, but rather a portrait of white pathological subjectivity

that constructs itself through the domestication of that pain.<sup>37</sup> As we saw in Cruikshank and Stedman, demonstrations of sadness in response to victimized Black womanhood simply overwrote white complicity in the violence provocative of that sadness in the first place with evidence of triumphant white virtue. Without diminishing the significance *Voyage* may bear for Black readers or readers of color, Lewis's remarks invite us to see the poem's resistance to legibility as, at least in part, a short-circuiting of white readerly sympathy which preempts the re-domestication of its Black Venus figures into vehicles of exculpatory sentiment. As Lewis actively eliminates any escape hatch for white readers eager to disavow their part in the violent objectification of its fragmented figures, she reveals that the desire for such easy absolution is part of the past not past.<sup>38</sup>

By layering material art objects onto victimized subjects, *Voyage* extends the construction of pathological white subjectivity beyond white feelings and into white spaces, whether through the literal incorporation of Black figures into white households (as in the case of Morrison's "blackboy") or through the material organization of Black figures in the colonial archive. Ultimately, *Voyage* is not about individual women recovered from oblivion, or even about the Black artists whose work appears in her poem.<sup>39</sup> It is, instead, a narrative about the

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<sup>37</sup> Robin Coste Lewis, "Robin Coste Lewis by Matthew Sharpe," *BOMB Magazine*, interview by Matthew Sharpe (13 Jan. 2016), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/robin-coste-lewis/>.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Gikandi has recently suggested that sensibility works against the logic of exchange as an authorized grammar for archival inclusion. Lewis's expanded, unhomey archive illuminates the collusive grammars of sensibility and intimacy in the racialized violence of slavery and the archive that documents its operations. Sensibility was constitutive of the private sphere coded as white, in part, through its function as a mechanism for sanitizing the intimate commerce of slavery, absolving those complicit in its violence, and overwriting the intimate bonds of the enslaved and colonized whose commodification funded the private sphere as a site of sentimental feeling. See "Race, Blackness, and Romanticism: Dialogues with Professors Simon Gikandi and Lisa Lowe," University of Buffalo, 10 March 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Neither Lorraine O'Grady nor her avatar's poetic critique of the suffocating white art world enter Lewis's *Voyage*. Lewis includes only the archival description of a photograph of Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire—one of many O'Grady laments "were widely reproduced without an explanatory context, becoming empty signifiers;" see

systems of colonial order and value that authorized Black women's entry into the archive only as instruments of white supremacist history. It is, simultaneously, a narrative about how these logics of order continue to mediate our encounters with the archive and the histories it tells in the present. As Lewis's palimpsestic figures layer the redemptive operations of archival recovery, its "linear narrative pull... (from a worse past to a better future)," onto the colonial archive's hegemonic histories of imperial progress, they reveal how our desire to make these women whole and lay them to rest within the histories constructed through their deliberate omission risks reaffirming the authority of those histories and replicating the exonerating distance afforded by their progressive linearity.<sup>40</sup>

### ***The Unhomely Archive: Collapsing Space and Time***

Lewis's confrontation with the colonial archive responds to Achille Mbembe's exhortation that the demythologizing of these hegemonic histories "must go hand in hand with the demythologizing of whiteness."<sup>41</sup> *Voyage* casts in relief their mutual dependence upon the instrumentalization of the Black body and their mutual disavowal of that dependence through

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Lorraine O'Grady, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire: performance 1980-83" (2207), <http://lorraineogrady.com/art/mlle-bourgeoise-noire/>

<sup>40</sup> Claire Grandy, "Poetics of the Record: Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus*," *Criticism*. 62.4 (2020): 523. Grandy interprets the inscrutability of this entanglement as Lewis's refusal of the recovery imperative's contemporary desire for closure, "whereby the narrativization of injury and the sympathy it inspires produce the sense of having resolved something." Grandy demonstrates the pull of such closure in revealing the number of scholars who interpret Lewis's poem as recovery in spite of the poem's resistance to it: "critical responses to [Lewis's] work tend to fall back on the restorative, vitalizing, and ultimately progressive narrative of 'giving voice' to lost, silenced figures. Molly Hagan writes: 'She resurrects the women of the past, giving them back their limbs and names.' Tessa Royon writes: Lewis 'returns the humanity to these anonymous women.' Dan Chiasson writes: 'All those women made into serviceable, mute paddles and spoons, missing their limbs and heads, are, by the miracle of verbal art, restored.'" See Grandy, "Poetics of the Record," 537-38.

<sup>41</sup> Achille J. Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), 2015.



archival technologies of distance. Whether temporal, spatial, quantitative, or qualitative, these technologies of distance operate like an invisible hand to grant the white supremacist histories they construct the appearance of neutrality, truth, and linear progress.<sup>42</sup> *Voyage* collapses such distance, not by making it impossible to identify original art objects, but by making it impossible for (white) readers (in particular) to either extricate the poem's Black female figures from the larger archival palimpsest they now constitute or to extricate themselves from the dispossessing histories they try to amend. Lewis achieves this by transforming *Voyage* itself into an unhomey material archive where we encounter Black Venus figures much as I encountered the ghostly afterimage of the "Female Samboe Slave": we can turn the page back to locate the original engraving, but we cannot *unsee* the palimpsest or the accumulating layers of instrumentalization that have forged it.

Lewis brings that process to the fore and denaturalizes it by mimicking the structural dimensions of the archive. Like the physical archives from which she derives her materials, the pages of *Voyage* are framed by deliberate regimes of order and value. Whereas the archive's mechanisms of order are designed to appear natural—indeed, not to appear at all—Lewis's paratexts bring them to the surface of her narrative. Much as opening a clock reveals the complex system of cogs and wheels that propels the hands of time inexorably forward, Lewis's Table of Contents, Prologue, Notes, and "The Ship's Inventory" expose the mechanical workings of a colonial project that corrals the things and people it collects through unimaginable acts of extractive violence into a sanitized narrative of triumphant progress. Before we get to the poem

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<sup>42</sup> According to Mbembe these distancing mechanisms are endemic to Western traditions of knowledge production, which "claim detachment of the known from the knower...They are traditions in which the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context." See Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge."

itself, Lewis's Table of Contents maps out the poem's arrangement into eight chronologically ordered sections which frame its linear historical progress as a product of archival organization:

Catalog 1: Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome

Catalog 2: Ancient Egypt

Catalog 3: The Womb of Christianity

Catalog 4: Medieval Colonial

Catalog 5: Emancipation & Independence

Catalog 6: Modern, Civil, Right

Catalog 7: Modern Post

Catalog 8: The Present/ Our Town

Even when we know better than to trust its neatness, what Lewis deems the colonial desire "to have a whole story in one teaspoon," *Voyage's* chronological mooring tempts a reader wading through the poem's maelstrom of blurred, frayed, and fragmented figures in hopes of their liberation.<sup>43</sup> Her chronological catalog titles thus become load-bearing narrative "columns" giving material form to Mbembe's theorization of the archive as both a collection of documents and the building that houses them.<sup>44</sup> By mimicking the "architectural dimension" that grants the archive the status and power of what Édouard Glissant calls History "written with a capital H,"

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<sup>43</sup> Robin Coste Lewis, "'Black Joy Is My Primary Aesthetic': 2015's National Book Award Winner for Poetry, One Year Later," interview by Claire Schwartz, *Literary Hub* (14 November 2016).

<sup>44</sup> As Mbembe puts it, the "coding, classification and distribution" of archival documents "according to chronological, thematic or geographical criteria" are, like "the arrangement of the rooms" and the "labyrinth of corridors" that house them, "simply a matter of creating order." See Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits" in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19.

Lewis shatters that History's supposedly transparent and universal rhetorical frame.<sup>45</sup> After all, Lewis's index of the Black female figure's progressive history—complete with the distance it creates between the dark past of colonial slavery and the enlightened present of our redemptive reading—exists only as an extension of the numbered material catalogs that organize it and assemble it as such.

Lewis's Prologue similarly frames the material space of the poem's pages as a carefully ordered archive, here through a numeric list of formal rules guiding the poem's assembly. Most of these rules outline Lewis's criteria for inclusion: readers learn, for example, that they will encounter art objects depicting the Black female body, art *by* Black women and Black queer artists and curators whether or not a Black female figure was present, and art depicting Black women Lewis believed to be passing as white.<sup>46</sup> The Prologue also delineates how, like many museums and special collections, the physical space of Lewis's archive is governed by clear rules about how materials can and cannot be handled: she explains, for example, that except for punctuation, “[n]o title could be *broken* or changed in any way” (35 emphasis added). By outlining the logics of order and value according to which Black female figures arrive in her poem, Lewis's Prologue invites us to reconsider the apparent neutrality of their former display on the white wall or glass pedestal of a museum exhibit. Such neutrality, Lewis shows, is a product of their deliberate recontextualization and the distance it creates between their mundane original contexts and their exemplary institutional resting places. For example, the second rule in

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<sup>45</sup> Édouard Glissant and J.M. Dash, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 64.

<sup>46</sup> In many ways, the prologue functions like the “Notanda” of Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*. For more on Lewis's research process and her own sense of *Voyage* as a boat, see “Broken, Defaced, Unseen: The Hidden Black Female Figures of Western Art,” *The New Yorker* (2017), [www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/broken-defaced-unseen-the-hidden-black-female-figures-of-western-art](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/broken-defaced-unseen-the-hidden-black-female-figures-of-western-art).

Lewis's Prologue explains that, because "black female figures were...used in ways [she] could never have anticipated," the art objects constituting her poem extend well beyond the traditional media of painting and sculpture to include intimate household items like "combs, spoons, buckles, pans, knives, [and] table legs" (35). The blank walls and transparent display cases of the museum occlude the imbrication of these racist objects with the domestic spaces they, like the "blackboy" in *Beloved*, once constituted.

Although Lewis appropriates the contours of archival space, the unhomeliness of her poetic archive's contents—Black female figures indistinguishable as objects or real people—disfigures the archive's claims to neutrality, collapses its distance, and makes its spaces equally unhomey. Within *Voyage*, the museum, the drawing room, the cemetery, and the slave ship become one palimpsestic site of rememory where Black Venus figures accumulate one upon the other as a haunting material presence in the present. To return to an earlier example, as Lewis transforms the disinterested archival descriptions "Statuette of Black Slave Girl/ Right Half of Body and Head Missing" and "Partially Broken Young Black Girl" into instruments of bodily and ontological violence, she also transforms the contemporary institutional contexts that assume for themselves a degree of historical objectivity into a mass grave (43-44). The archive as documents and the building housing them becomes a site of haunting where "fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred," their "shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics."<sup>47</sup> Lewis's concluding paratext, a disordered, four-page list of her archival

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<sup>47</sup> Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 19. This effect comes across most forcefully in Lewis's paratext, "Invocation: Blessing the Boat" which precedes her first Catalog. The "Invocation" stands out as the only section in the poem in which no discernable women, girls, or figures are present. In their stead is a collection of materials and media, ancient and modern, precious and waste. These include paper, stucco, gelatin, bone, and even chewing gum. As the "Invocation" progresses, and materials give way to disarticulated body parts—"head," "busts," "headless," "armless," "footless"—the "Invocation" becomes a blessing for or call to the nameless dead torn apart, used, and discarded by the operations of empire. See Lewis, *Voyage*, 40-42.

sources titled “Notes,” expands the scale and scope of these graves beyond the grounds of traditional archival institutions and into the intimate spaces of dispossession these Black female figures have populated as both coerced sources and domesticated ornaments of imperial wealth, as captive laborers and as “combs, spoons, buckles, pans, knives, [and] table legs” (35).

Specifically, Lewis’s “Notes” layer national libraries and museums of anthropology, art, natural history, and archaeology onto private foundations bearing the names of generous donors, private collections, estates, and even individual homes, arranging them on the page in columns reminiscent of Lewis’s architectural Catalog titles:

NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF  
NATURAL HISTORY SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE, WASHINGTON, DC

CHICAGO WORLD’S FAIR 1893

GEOFFROY SAINT-HILAIRE AND FRÉDÉRIC CUVIER, HISTOIRE NATURELLE  
DES MAMMIFERES

NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC LIBRARY

NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DIVISION

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES

GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

MANFRED HEITING COLLECTION, AMSTERDAM (112)

However artificial, Lewis’s Catalog titles promised a stable chronology of progress from past to present. By contrast, two sources which stand out in Lewis’s “Notes” for their historical specificity—archival records of the “CHICAGO WORLD’S FAIR, 1893” cited above and “BENETTON’S CAMPAIGNS FOR RACIAL EQUALITY, 1989” on the following page—feature unhomey Black female figures who collapse not only the century of progress that

ostensibly separates them, but also the spatial distance between their domestic origins and their institutional resting places (112, 113). At the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the R.T. Davis Mills company marketed its instant pancake product by offering attendees the opportunity to "Meet Aunt Jemima in Person." When it hired the formerly enslaved Nancy Green to *be* "Aunt Jemima in Person" and cook pancakes for fairgoers, the R.T. David Mills company literally repackaged slavery's extractive and reproductive violence as mass-marketed modern domestic convenience. Dressed as Aunt Jemima, Green sang songs and told stories consistent with the stereotype of the mammy figure, content in her subordination to the white Southern family whose children she nourished as a surrogate mother at the expense of her own.<sup>48</sup> Like so many women before and after her, Green enters the archive overwritten by the figure layered onto her. Nearly a century later, when Aunt Jemima's pancakes continued to fill white children's bellies, a Benetton clothing campaign sparked controversy by featuring a faceless Black woman breastfeeding a white child as an emblem of "racial equality." As Lewis's "Notes" layer the World's Fair onto the Benetton campaign, the distant past onto the near present, they also imbricate institutional archival and white domestic space as sites in which Black women—real and fabricated—register the unhomely rememory of slavery's domestication as the past not past.

This unhomely rememory manifests most explicitly in "The Ship's Inventory," a verse paratext whose title transforms *Voyage*—as poem, archive, and intimate space—into a slave ship and its Black female figures into cargo. "The Ship's Inventory" unfolds as a tangle of inanimate objects and anonymous women and girls:

*Four-Breasted Vessel, Three Women*

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<sup>48</sup> For an in-depth study of Aunt Jemima and racial capitalism, see Sarah C. Kaplan, "Ain't Your mama on the Pancake Box? Aunt Jemima and the Reproduction of the Racial State" in *The Black Reproductive: Unfree Labor and Insurgent Motherhood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 29-66.

In Front of a Steamy Pit, *Two-Faced*

Head Fish Trying on Earrings, Unidentified.

[...]

Kite                      Empty

Chair                     Pocket

Book                     Girl

in Red Dress with Cats and Dog's Devil.

House Door of No Return. Head-of-a-Girl-

In-the-Bedroom in the kitchen.

Contemplation Dark-Girl Girl.

In the Window *Negress with*

*Flower* Sleeping Woman

(*Negress with Flower* Head (38 emphases added))

As with her other paratexts, Lewis's "Inventory" assumes some of the trappings of archival organization. Her first stanza includes the numerical markers we might expect of a catalogue and her fifth stanza organizes its contents into columns. Where "The Ship's Inventory" differs, however, is in its provocative invitation to read the slave ship ledger as an indelible subtext of the archival catalog. Through this paratextual collapse, Lewis alerts us to the ways in which the

colonial archive's logics of material and rhetorical value exclude the enslaved as subjects in the narrative of History, authorizing them to enter only as instruments of that History.<sup>49</sup> When we search for such people in the archives of empires that formerly claimed them as property, we "most often encounter not individuals, but columns in which subjects have been transformed into cargo marked in the ledger with the notation 'negro man, ditto, negro woman, ditto.'"<sup>50</sup> It is in this context that we can best appreciate that the inventory's seventh and eighth stanzas feature the only title in all of *Voyage* which Lewis chooses to repeat, "Negress with Flower." By layering the archive onto the ledger, Lewis illuminates the way animate and inanimate Black female figures accumulate in the anonymity of terms like "Negress" across white supremacist spaces.

Like the ghostly afterimage of the Female Samboe Slave, these Black Venus figures take on flesh as the weight of their accumulation collapses the exculpatory distance constitutive of white supremacist space and the progressive linearity of its historical time. Let us examine, by way of example, a fragment from the inventory cited above: "House Door of No Return. Head-of-a-Girl-/ In-the-Bedroom in the kitchen." This fragment foregrounds the domestication of slavery by materially embedding an iconic site of the slave trade's horror—the Door of No

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<sup>49</sup> Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 19. Documents (or debris) within the archive acquire "the status of proof...that a life truly existed, that something actually happened, an account of which can be put together. The final destination of the archive is therefore always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible" (Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 21).

<sup>50</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 54. The archival record of the Zong massacre featured in Turner's painting, for example, reduces the children, women, and men thrown overboard to lost currency, forging a historical narrative through which, to use Coleridge's phrase, they are "translated, not kill'd." See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude: Written, April 1798, During the Alarms of an Invasion" in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 112. See also Jenny Sharpe, "The Archive and Affective Memory in M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 16.4 (2014): 468.



Return<sup>51</sup>—within the squarely domestic spaces boasting the fruits of that horror, the “House,” “Bedroom,” and “kitchen.” The fractured “Girl” in the passage forms the material link between the slave fortress which transmutes her into chattel, the colonial space she inhabits as a reproductive laborer, and the metropolitan space she might ornament as a decorative object, a bust on a mantelpiece. In other words, the accumulation of her instrumental value across these sites of white supremacy mars white domestic space with the stain of the slave ship’s violent unhoming of Black subjects.

However, the same fragmented girl also forms a material link between slavery’s domestication in the past and its domestication in the present. Today, the Door of No Return operates as a site of slavery tourism, a monument to the slave trade’s terror which simultaneously makes a neat business of commodifying mourning and kinship across the African diaspora. In her trenchant critique of such tourism, Hartman asks, “what does it bode for our relationship to the past when atrocity becomes a commodity for transnational consumption, and this history of defeat comes to be narrated as a story of progress and triumph?”<sup>52</sup> We need only recall Lewis’s strategic framing of Turner’s *Zong* painting to “trouble the redemptive narratives” enacted at such sites.<sup>53</sup> As with Turner’s painting, or the engraving of the *Female Samboe Slave*, the Door of No Return becomes an implicating site of rememory’s temporal compression. As such, it

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<sup>51</sup> The Door of No Return refers to a Cape Coast castle fortress off the coast of Senegal where Africans were held captive in unimaginable conditions prior to boarding ships destined for the West Indies and North American colonies.

<sup>52</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, “The Time of Slavery,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.4 (2002): 760. According to Hartman, “the ‘time of slavery’ negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead” (759).

<sup>53</sup> Hartman, 759.

forces us to recognize that the commodification of absolution from atrocity is embedded in the very history that progressive gestures of recovery seek to amend.

Lewis's Black female figures thus haunt our readerly desire for recovery and closure by reminding us that, even when we arrive in the poem's present, we have yet to disembark from the unhomely vessel set in motion by "The Ship's Inventory."<sup>54</sup> I am speaking specifically of *Voyage's* concluding section titled "Catalog 8: The Present/ Our Town." Given its brevity, I reproduce it here in full:

Still:

Life

(of Flowers)

with Figures—

including

a Negro servant. (110)

The poem's anachronistic reference to a "Negro servant" jars with the otherwise squarely domestic and plausibly contemporary still life of flowers, but this is of course the point. The visual space between "Still" and "Life" slows and arrests the apparent progress and closure the "Present" is expected to signal just as "Still" emphasizes the ongoing domestication of the Black female figure as servant and art object. Indeed, Lewis's unhomely inclusion of the word "Negro"

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<sup>54</sup> Lewis characterizes linear narratives of History as "formal propaganda—it's like a flag—that has been used against people for millennia. I can't separate the fantasy of history from the fantasy of narrative." See Lewis, "Black Joy."

in “The Present” calls attention to contemporary archival practices which, like the museum’s white wall or glass pedestal, domesticate the past to make it more palatable in the present.

As Lewis explains in her Prologue, many of the museums and archives from which she collected her poetic material had removed “historically specific markers—such as *slave*, *colored*, and *Negro*—from their titles or archives,” and papered over them “with the sanitized, but perhaps equally vapid, *African-American*” (35). Like so many of the archival technologies Lewis upends, these archival revisions construct a linguistic barrier of exculpatory distance between a violent past and its resolution in a redeemed present. And so, in “order to replace this historical erasure of slavery (however well intended), [Lewis] re-erased the postmodern *African-American*, then changed those titles back. That is, [she] re-corrected the corrected horror in order to allow that original horror to stand” (35). Whether or not the “Still:/ Life/ (of Flowers)” was one of the objects whose title Lewis “re-corrected,” its anachronism nonetheless stages an unhomely return of the repressed. It reminds us, moreover, that Lewis’s indictment of white pathology is not restricted to the creators of such objects themselves or even to the *obviously* racist historical moments that produced and sanctioned them. *Voyage* also aims to narrate “how normative and complicit artists, curators, and art institutions have been in participating in—if not creating—this history” (35). In other words, the unhomely temporality of Lewis’s *Voyage* moves forwards and backwards simultaneously by foregrounding not only how the past intrudes into the present, but also how the present frames the stories we tell about the past, what we look for, what we see, and where we fail to see ourselves within it.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> As Tricia Matthew reminds us, “looking backward at the various ways that black female figures circulate and are put to use is more than just filling in some gap in our understanding of the period. It also teaches us how we view the use of black figures today. It teaches what to see and how to read it.” See Patricia A. Matthew, “Look before You Leap: Seeing What’s Right in Front of Us in Portraits from the Past,” *Lapham's Quarterly* (4 Nov. 2019), <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/look-you-leap>.

### *Lewis and Palimpsestic Reading*

For example, “Catalog 4: Medieval Colonial” ostensibly contains art objects produced within a period ranging roughly from the fifth through the mid-nineteenth century—including Stothard’s *Voyage*—and yet the first piece in the catalog is a “detail” from visual artist Kara Walker’s 1994 silhouette, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (see fig. 14). Walker’s silhouettes reimagine the nineteenth-century art form to re-tell historical romances of antebellum American life. Using stark black and white tableaux, Walker depicts on an epic scale the (largely sexual) violence perpetrated by enslavers (men, women, and children) against those they enslaved. This particular silhouette features a collection of images that, like the “Four-breasted vessel” which opens Lewis’s “Inventory,” render the Black Venus a cargo-bearing vessel, a prolific womb, and a haint betraying the violent underpinnings of Anglo-American domestic intimacy. In the center of the image, an enslaved young woman shaped like a boat floats on the water. To her right, a young, enslaved girl lifts her leg as multiple infants drop from her skirts. On the far left of the image, two implicitly white figures—a finely dressed man and woman—lean in to kiss. However, the image is rendered unhomey by the appearance beneath the woman’s voluminous skirt of a second set of legs—implicitly belonging to an enslaved figure—that literally prop up the white woman and the domestic romance in which she figures.

Walker’s silhouettes are not rendered unhomey only by their haunting content or anachronistic placement in Lewis’s *Voyage*, but also through the implicating modes of reading their material form sets in motion. In Walker’s silhouettes, pathological whiteness becomes a materially layered accumulation of distorted representations of Blackness. That is, the silhouettes’ stark black and white form makes white pathology visible as the dense layering of

racialized violence rendered both mundanely and allegorically familiar through repetition. Walker does not simply present her viewers with disturbing images of graphic violence, then. Instead, she implicates her viewers in putting racist stereotypes to use as ciphers without which her silhouettes remain illegible.<sup>56</sup> While it bears noting that Lewis's readers are not privy to anything beyond Walker's title, that title alone captures the silhouette's collapse of American historical romance and the violent commodification of Black women's wombs—the space between “the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart”—into an unhomely palimpsest of white supremacy. Lewis's irredeemably fragmented Black female figures thus fracture from within the linear, white supremacist History of Western civilization's triumph that the chronological frame of *Voyage* proposes, that the archive's sanitized terminology confirms, and that the apparent closure of recovery risks replicating. As a result, *Voyage* disfigures the chronologies and mechanisms of emplotment that would distance the contemporary reader as bystander from the history they consume.

We observe this most explicitly in poem XV of “Catalog 4: Medieval Colonial” which literalizes the Black female figure as a domestic mechanism of modern linear time through its description of a clock made to look like a Black woman's face:

When the Woman's Left Ear  
Ring is Pulled  
Her Eyes Recede  
And a Mechanism Rises  
Into Place

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<sup>56</sup> For more on the confrontational character of Kara Walker's silhouettes, see Arlene R. Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1649-72.

Showing the Hour

In the Right Eye

And Minutes

In the Left. (80)

While the poem stands out in *Voyage*'s narrative tangle of fragmented figures by focusing on a single object, Lewis's line breaks tear apart the complete and orderly sentence of its archival documentation. The lines jolt along from one to the next deliberately evading metrical regularity. Outside the neutralizing context of the archive or museum, the figure takes on the disturbing unhomeliness of the automaton or the caricaturish "blackboy," and Lewis refuses us any distance from the grotesqueness of its domestication. To the contrary, she implicates us in making use of this Black female figure as a material instrument of white supremacist linear time. Recalling the tempting stability of Lewis's chronological catalog titles, our readerly desire for the orderliness of a complete sentence in a sea of fragments prompts us to suture the lines of poem XV together, smoothing over the bumps of the line breaks as we go. It is the very act of our reading, Lewis implies, which sets the clock in motion and intertwines us with what Lowe calls the uncanny material thingness of the past not past.

When Lowe reflects that "[w]e too are marked by the violence of slavery and colonialism in ways we can't fathom until we 'bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else,' a palimpsest of what remains," she reminds us that such a palimpsest is not reducible to "what survives" but rather involves "an uneven process of creation."<sup>57</sup> Attention to the material palimpsest of Lewis's *Voyage*, the way it reiterates and recontextualizes a range of Black Venus figures, demands equal attention to the ways in which the very process of reading layers them

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<sup>57</sup> Lowe, "Race, Blackness, and Romanticism." Here Lowe quotes Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 16.

together cumulatively in what M. Jacqui Alexander calls “palimpsestic time,” or, in Lowe’s terms, a temporality that moves forwards and backwards simultaneously. Palimpsestic time attends to the “here and there,” the “then and now.”<sup>58</sup> It contends with the archive’s technologies of erasure while refusing the progressivist dynamics of resolution that might attend the scholarly or creative recovery of subjects lost to the past. Lewis’s *Voyage* thus teaches us to read the Black Venus’s reiteration over centuries not as circular repetition then, but as accumulation, not a stereotype, but a fleshy instrumental medium linking the past and the present, an implicating site of rememory. In so doing, *Voyage* forces us to abdicate the safety of distance and to “bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else.”

### ***William Blake and the Material Palimpsest of the Illuminated Book***

William Blake’s Black Venus in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) emerges as a kindred figure of palimpsestic accumulation. Oothoon not only layers together Stothard’s Sable Venus, Cruikshank’s brutalized victim, and even Blake’s own engraving, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*, she also occupies the same liminal position between commodified captive and commodified print object that rendered Lewis’s Black female figures unhomey. Like Lewis’s palimpsestic poetics, the radical intertextuality of Blake’s *Visions* disrupts, in both principle and form, the domesticating circuits of commerce which render Black women instruments of pathological whiteness, in Blake’s case the 1790s London print market. Blake was himself complicit in this market and he knew it. As a “reproductive engraver” obliged “to faithfully copy prior images into a new medium where they could be rapidly and accurately

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<sup>58</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 190.

reproduced in print,”<sup>59</sup> Blake’s livelihood depended upon a commercial system he recognized as an extension of the reproductive logic governing industrialization’s “dark Satanic mills,” of Englishwomen’s reduction to “silent fecundity,”<sup>60</sup> and of the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* governing hereditary slavery. Consequently, we cannot understand Blake’s engagement with the Black Venus without first distinguishing between his mass-reproduced engravings for Stedman and the revolutionary material process through which he physically remakes this figure in the living text of his illuminated book.

The “*conventional* illustrated book” of the 1790s “was the product of much divided labor.”<sup>61</sup> Let us take, for example, Stedman’s commercially printed *Narrative*. Its images were printed in one workshop by etching designs into metal plates, saturating the incised lines with ink, and repeatedly running the plate through a press to reproduce identical copies of the original image. Text, on the other hand, was printed in a separate workshop by arranging, inking, and pressing blocks of raised type to reproduce identical copies of the original text. The publisher, in this case Joseph Johnson, would then assemble and bind the printed images—like that of the Female Samboe Slave—and text—like Stedman’s description of her—according to a linear order we understandably take for granted. Blake’s engraving of the abject woman would appear in every copy to illustrate the scene of Stedman’s sentimental encounter. In short, commercially printed books like Stedman’s were, in both signification and material reproduction, “finite texts,

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<sup>59</sup> Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 168.

<sup>60</sup> Julia M. Wright, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 89.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Viscomi, “Illuminated Printing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), my emphasis 41-42.



contained within a closed circuit of interpretation as defined by [a] cage of mutually illustrative (and hence reinforcing) words and images.”<sup>62</sup>

By contrast, Blake produced *Visions* through a revolutionary method of relief etching he developed in 1788. This method, which Blake alternately referred to as “illuminated printing” or “the infernal method,” defied the mass reproducibility of the commercial book as a “good for nothing commodity” in large part through a logic of porousness and palimpsestic layering.<sup>63</sup> Blake’s “infernal method” abjured the industrial logic of original and copy and dispensed with the ordered division of labor required for commercial printing by interweaving image and text on a single copper plate through a painstaking manual process. Blake used pens and brushes to draw both designs and words (in mirror image) directly onto his plates using an impervious liquid medium or stop-out varnish. He then subjected the plate to acid, which would burn away the unvarnished negative space, leaving his words and images raised in relief, or, as he articulates in *the Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, revealing “the infinite which was hid” (39).<sup>64</sup> After inking the raised portions of the plate and running them through a rolling press, Blake hand-colored and embellished each print. Each copy’s distinctiveness—a result of the ways post-printing embellishments layer onto and even obscure the contours of the copper plate—shows us that Blake’s illuminated books signify in excess of their reproducibility.

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<sup>62</sup> Makdisi, *Impossible History*, 163.

<sup>63</sup> William Blake, “Public Address” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, eds. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 576. This text is also available on the web through the William Blake Archive: <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/>. All subsequent references to Blake’s works—apart from *Visions*—are to this edition, indicated by page or plate and line numbers.

<sup>64</sup> For more detailed engagements with Blake’s illuminated printing methods, see Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, “An Inquiry into Blake’s Method of Color Printing,” *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 35 (Winter 2001/02): 73-102, [www.blakequarterly.org](http://www.blakequarterly.org) and Michael Phillips, “‘Printing in the infernal method’: William Blake’s method of ‘Illuminated Printing,’” *Interfaces*, 39 (2018): 67-89.

In ways that resonate with Lewis's palimpsestic archive, the material logic animating Blake's illuminated work resists the "closed circuit[s] of interpretation" that characterize commercial print consumption, demanding instead materially open-ended and temporally "ongoing" modes of reading that are "essentially incompatible with the...linear sense of time, and indeed the very habits of reading, to which we have generally been conditioned."<sup>65</sup> This resistance to linearity is immediately apparent in the way Blake's material arrangement of images and text in *Visions* invokes a temporality—of reading and of meaning—that moves forwards and backwards simultaneously. For example, the first plate of *Visions* initiates a series of organizational short circuits—what Essick characterizes as multiple openings—that replace a linear unfolding of the illuminated poem with a recursive one that courses around the poem's triangulated figures—Bromion, Theotormon, and Oothoon. The first three plates of *Visions*—the frontispiece, title page, and Argument respectively—illustrate the poem's narrative (articulated on Plates 4 and 5) but in reverse. The image on Plate 3 (The Argument) depicts the poem's opening scene, in which Oothoon encounters a flower nymph in Leutha's Vale who encourages her to set out over the Atlantic in pursuit of her beloved Theotormon (see fig. 15). The image on Plate 2 (the title page) depicts the immanent moment of Oothoon's rape by Bromion who intercepts her en route to Theotormon, soaring menacingly above her on wings of flame (see fig. 16). Shortly thereafter, Bromion taunts Theotormon, "Now thou may'st marry Bromion's harlot, and protect the child/ Of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons' time" (5.1-2). Finally, Plate 1 (the frontispiece) depicts the aftermath of this exchange, whereupon the jealous Theotormon binds both victim and victimizer together in a cave whose threshold he

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<sup>65</sup> Makdisi, *Impossible History*, 163-64.

inundates with tears of self-pity (see fig. 17). It is here that the poem's seemingly circular and unresolved laments play out with each rising sun.<sup>66</sup>

The time loop instantiated by the frontispiece is reinforced not only by the poem's very framing—wherein the Daughters of Albion repeatedly hear Oothoon's woes and echo back her sighs—but also in the material embellishments to plate 7 across multiples copies of the illuminated book. In the uncolored version of the plate (copy a), the sky on the right of the chained Oothoon and the tortured Theotormon appears as open space. In several colored copies, however, Blake paints the sun in various positions, usually sinking beneath (or rising from) the horizon. Sometimes this sun is ominously red as in copies G, R, and F; sometimes it is yellow, casting golden rays as in copies I and J, or purple as in copy A (see fig. 18). In some copies there is no sun at all, but the sky alters—from the clear blue of midday in copies B, C, and H to the bands of pink, red, and orange signaling sunset or sunrise as in copy E (see fig. 19). In isolation, each copy of plate 7 lends a different tenor to the illuminated book in which it appears: a red sun may forebode future violence or mark violence already perpetrated; golden rays may denote Oothoon's awakening to an infinite world beyond Theotormon's cave.

When we attend to the opening lines of the subsequent plate—"But when the morn arose, her lamentation renewed,/ the Daughters of Albion hear her woes and echo back her sighs"—the rising and setting of the sun across copies of plate 7 materialize the ongoing, echoing lament through which *Visions* signals its refusal to relegate its exploited heroine to some mythologized past (as Stothard's *Voyage* did) (8:1-2). It is through this unending lament, too, that *Visions* refuses to release its reader through a pre-scripted provocation of cathartic resolution (as

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<sup>66</sup> We can observe a similar temporal effect across copies of Blake's "Ah! Sunflower" from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Cruikshank's *Abolition* did). As Julia Wright argues, "Blake resists his works' implication in the production of readers as reproductive receptacles, passively repeating what they are told by splitting his texts into an assemblage of textual and visual parts with varying signficatory interests."<sup>67</sup> For all its apparent circularity, the illuminated poem does not retread a single linear narrative over and again. Instead, its repetitions accumulate, and they do so materially across different iterations of the illuminated book. We can best appreciate this by comparing Blake's frontispiece in copies E (held at the Huntington Library) and F (held at the Morgan Library) (see fig. 20). Copy E features a light wash of watercolor, giving its images an almost translucent appearance with relatively little depth. By contrast, copy F features oil colors so densely layered that they obscure the lines of the copper plate. The paint is so thick, in fact, that it rises noticeably above the surface of the page, catching the light in ways that almost make the images seem to move, to be alive.

As living—or virtual—texts, then, the meanings of Blake's illuminated works are never foreclosed or identically reproduced; instead, they proliferate within and beyond the apparent boundaries of any single print or book. Indeed, Blake scholars have examined at length the way Blake's illuminated books bleed into one another. Works like *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), *America, A Prophecy* (1793), *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) share common themes: collectively, these texts resist the repressive regimes of the church and state and the mind-forged manacles they foster as constitutive of self-regulating individual subjects. They also share an unbridled celebration of joy, sensual pleasure, and generous (rather than generative) love. In excess of these thematic overlaps, Blake's illuminated books share material ones:

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<sup>67</sup> Wright, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*, 89-90.

individual lines and images from one text reappear in others. For example, a memorable Proverb of Hell from Blake's *Marriage* asserts that "The soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd" (37). This line is repeated by the revolutionary spirit Orc on Plate 10 of *America* (54), and again, somewhat altered, early in *Visions*, when Oothoon is reassured that "The soul of sweet delight can never pass away" (4: 9-10). Likewise, the image of an old man entering a doorway in Blake's "London" from *Songs* reappears, inverted and recontextualized, in plate 14 of *America* (1794). The fact that images and text within a single book or even on a single page frequently fail to correspond only amplifies the energy with which one illuminated book opens to and beyond others.

Reading Blake's *Visions* palimpsestically with Lewis's *Voyage* may push the limit of what it means to locate "much of the meaning of [Blake's] work in the very logic animating it, the kinds of connections it allows us to make," but it is only through such a palimpsestic reading that we can most fully appreciate the blurred contours of Blake's Black Venus as a product of his radical material praxis.<sup>68</sup> As with Lewis's Sable Venus, Oothoon is not reducible to the strictly allegorical function many have attributed to her as a combination of the three female figures featured in Blake's concluding print for Stedman's *Narrative: Europe Supported by Africa and America* (1796) (see fig. 10).<sup>69</sup> Rather, she is, in material terms, an unhomely palimpsestic figure containing and reforging a range of Black Venuses that proliferated in the 1790s as emblems of white pathology. Moreover, it is through this palimpsestic figure that Blake's *Visions* extends its critique of Black women's reproductive exploitation beyond the Atlantic slave market itself,

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<sup>68</sup> Makdisi, *Impossible History*, 163-64.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Lee, "Intimacy as Imitation," 66-119.

locating its extractive intimate commerce uncannily close to home in the metropolitan print market of the 1790s slavery debates.

### ***Blake and the Material Market of Slavery and Abolition***

Recent studies of 1790s material culture have shown that debates over slavery and abolition were commercialized as part of a broader consumer revolution at the close of the century.<sup>70</sup> London print sellers profited neatly from a booming market in prints ridiculing both pro- and antislavery advocates, selling “thousands of mass-produced single-sheet etchings to elite and middling purchasers for a standard price of one shilling plain and two shillings colored” and drawing “crowds of viewers to their display windows and showrooms.”<sup>71</sup> These prints circulated not only through public display in “print-shop windows, in taverns and coffee-houses,” however. Black bodies commodified by London’s print market also ornamented the private homes of middling and elite Londoners, like Lewis’s “head of a girl/ in the bedroom in the kitchen.”<sup>72</sup> It bears repeating that abolitionist culture was at the forefront of commercializing virtuous opposition to slavery through the domestication of victimized Black figures: in addition to antislavery-themed pottery and personal accessories, “single-sheet graphic prints emerged as a highly sought after consumer product conterminously with the abolitionists’ campaign of mass

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Julie L. Holcomb, “Blood-stained Sugar: Gender, Commerce and the British Slave-Trade Debates,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 35.4 (2014): 611-628; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: British Women and Consumer Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Brooke Newman, “Enslaved Women and British Comic Culture” in *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 179-228.

<sup>71</sup> Newman, “Enslaved Women and British Comic Culture,” 181.

<sup>72</sup> John Brewer, *The Common People and Politics, 1750-1790s* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), 46.

distribution.”<sup>73</sup> For example, William Fox’s 1791 antislavery pamphlet, *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum*, prompted a popular sugar boycott by equating the consumption of goods produced by enslaved laborers with a cannibalistic consumption of enslaved African bodies themselves. Ironically, the resulting reduction in the domestic consumption of sugar coincided with an *increase* in the consumption of commodified Black bodies in the material culture of the slavery debates. In other words, the overt violence of slavery and empire was inseparable from the sleight of hand by which abolitionist culture abstracted that violence into a profitable resource for shoring up white sentimental virtue.

In his illuminated work, Blake was a consistent critic of the way abstraction, particularly that of sentiment, was weaponized to naturalize structures of oppression and the extractive violence of commerce. The opening lines of “The Human Abstract” proclaim with devastating simplicity, “Pity would be no more/ If we did not make somebody Poor” (27).<sup>74</sup> As a commercial engraver, however, Blake was thoroughly immersed in the print marketplace where the exchange of sentiment could displace culpability for the exchange of enslaved people at a profit. We need look no further than Blake’s engravings for Stedman’s wildly popular *Narrative*, which he worked on concurrently with *Visions*. Scholars have long noted the connections between these texts, some going so far as to suggest that “Blake's attitudes towards slavery and colonialism” as they are expressed in *Visions* and *America*, “were indebted to Stedman's autobiographical

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<sup>73</sup> Newman, “Enslaved Women and British Comic Culture,” 182.

<sup>74</sup> For more on Blake’s critiques of the economics of sentiment, see Dennis Welch, “Blake and the Web of Interest and Sensibility,” *South Atlantic Review: The Publication of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association*, 71.3 (2006): 29-56.

narrative.”<sup>75</sup> It behooves us, however, to think more critically about the nature of this indebtedness and the ways in which it manifests and morphs in *Visions*. From its first publication in 1796, John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative, of a Five Years’ Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) saw twenty-five editions and was translated into a number of different languages. Printed in two volumes, the *Narrative* documents the Anglo-Dutch mercenary’s observations of everything from colonial Surinam’s flora and fauna to the grotesque torture of enslaved Africans and captured maroons. It also narrates Stedman’s apparent romance with the enslaved young mulatto woman, Joanna. In 1791, the book’s radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, commissioned Blake to engrave sixteen illustrations for the *Narrative*. Its tremendous success and long afterlife of sampling and adaptation mean that Blake’s engravings for Stedman “were perhaps more widely seen by his contemporaries than any others he made.”<sup>76</sup> Blake’s well-publicized resistance to mass reproduced texts—the book as a “good for nothing commodity”—alone throws into question whether or not this would have constituted a triumph, but closer attention to Stedman’s text itself illuminates rhetoric Blake wholeheartedly opposed.

After all, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Stedman’s *Narrative* which made it so amenable to abolitionist ends—even as it advocated amelioration over abolition—is its use of various Black Venus figures to abstract and domesticate slavery’s violence through cathartic demonstrations of sentiment. For example, Stedman repeatedly conjures the single most

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<sup>75</sup> Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, headnote to John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of a Five Years’ Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (Composed 1796), <http://www.blakearchive.org/work/bb499>. For Erdman, Blake’s “real interest is shown in the fact that he was the only one of the engravers who subscribed for the published work—if we can assume that he is the subscriber designated ‘Blake (Mr. Wm.) London.’” See Erdman, “Blake’s Vision of Slavery,” 244.

<sup>76</sup> G.E. Bentley, Jr. traces 138 copies of the first edition in public collections, as well as reprintings of “the less common edition of 1806 (26 copies) and the rather uncommon edition of 1813 (11 copies).” See G.E. Bentley Jr., “Blake and Stedman as Costumiers: Curious Copies of Blake’s Engravings in 1821,” *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 4 (Spring 2013): 1.



recognizable eighteenth-century fictional vehicle of such cleansing sensibility in his invocations of the wronged Yarico, whose beloved Inkle sold her and their child into slavery to maximize the profitability of his West Indian adventures. When it seems Joanna will be sold to satisfy the debts of her former enslaver, Stedman effuses:

Good God!—I flew to the spot in search of poor Joanna: I found her bathed in tears. — She gave me such a look—ah! such a look!—From that moment I determined to be her protector against every insult, and persevered, as shall be seen in the sequel.—Here, reader, let my youth, blended with extreme sensibility, plead my excuse; yet assuredly my feelings will be forgiven me— by those few only excepted—who delight in the prudent conduct of Mr. Inkle, to the hapless and much-injured Yarico at Barbadoes. (99-100)

As Stedman overwrites actual enslaved women with fictionalized ones domestically consumed by middling English readers, he bridges the colonial site of slavery's intimate commerce with the metropolitan site of its mitigation. Stedman's account of the "Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave," which I detailed earlier in this chapter, offers another potent example of the way Stedman models performances of sensibility in the face of the institution's violence in order to distance himself—and, we should note, his readers—from culpability in that violence. As was the case in London theatres—where English actresses so frequently brought audiences to cleansing tears through their performances of Yarico—sentimental value in the print marketplace where Stedman's *Narrative* flourished takes on material dimensions in excess of the abstract.

When we consider that Blake's mass-produced "Flagellation" became a commodifiable vehicle for asserting Stedman's and his readers' virtue, Blake seems less indebted *to* Stedman than *by* him. And I propose that *Visions* may have been, in part, Blake's way of repaying that debt. Debbie Lee gestures at Blake's regretful participation when she notes that Stedman wrote

twice to Blake to thank him for his engravings but never received a reply.<sup>77</sup> While he doesn't interpret it as such, Robert Essick describes a faint image in Blake's notebook sketches for *Visions* that seems to echo "Flagellation," suggesting that the poet may have had the latter in mind as he developed his radical illuminated book. Specifically, Essick notes that in Blake's preliminary sketches for Plate 3 of *Visions*, the "drawing shows on the right a large tree encircled with a vine and the ghostly outlines of a standing figure just left of the tree. The figure has its legs together, arms bent at the elbows...and a rather grim expression on its face" (40). While it is difficult to appreciate the level of detail Essick describes, we can, at the very least, discern echoes in the placement of the figure beneath the tree, a mirror image of "Flagellation," since all notebook drawings would ultimately appear mirrored once engraved.

If Stedman's *Narrative* was guilty of profitably abstracting the grossest violations of slavery, Stothard's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* took such abstraction to new depths. As I demonstrated in my previous chapter, Stothard's image portrays the Black Venus not as a victim of intimate commerce, but as an allegorical agent of it. She embodies the same overwhelming Atlantic commercial power that naturalizes Stedman's tearful acceptance of the enslaved woman's torture, sanctioned, as it is, by the laws of absolute property. Most critically, Stothard's *Sable Venus* diverts attention from British economic reliance on hereditary slavery and the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women at a moment when such practices were both critical to the survival of a West Indian plantation economy and under increased scrutiny for their brutal commodification of maternal intimacy. Like Blake's *Flagellation*, Stothard's *Voyage* was a commissioned work rather than a subject of his own choosing. Blake was not responsible for

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<sup>77</sup> Lee, "Intimacy as Imitation," 66.

Stothard's grotesque *Voyage*, but he may well have regretted his indebtedness to Stothard whose designs constituted a substantial portion of Blake's engraving work in the early 1780s.<sup>78</sup>

A colleague of Blake's in the Royal Academy, Stothard was among the most popular and prolific book illustrators in eighteenth-century England and Blake likely disapproved of the fact that he was, "par excellence, a creator of popular female stereotypes," famed for his depictions of "sexualized innocence, broadcast primarily (though by no means exclusively) through *The Lady's Magazine* (for which he produced no less than 90 plates between 1770-90)."<sup>79</sup> As a periodical targeting upwardly mobile women of the town, *The Lady's Magazine* reproduced precisely the middle-class ideologies of self-regulation and commercialized sensibility Blake rejected. If, as Bruder expresses so well, Blake spent the early years of his professional career "working for a man whose reputation rested upon his ability to produce consumable women," we can understand how Stothard's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* may have, in the radical poet's eyes, taken this practice too far.<sup>80</sup> Gourlay argues that Blake's professional relationship with Stothard leading up to the nearly concurrent publication of *Visions* and *Voyage* provides reasonable grounds for reading the multiple echoes of the Sable Venus in *Visions* as a deliberate engagement with "a captive artefact in need of redemptive recontextualization."<sup>81</sup> While I agree that *Visions* recontextualizes Stothard's *Voyage*, redemption conjures a kind of programmatic

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<sup>78</sup> According to Helen Bruder, "around half of Blake's engraving work between 1780-85 consist[ed] of plates after Stothard's designs." She notes, moreover, that the "private art which [Blake] produced during the 1780s enters into direct, and often contentious, dialogue with Stothard's models." See Helen Bruder, *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), 66-67.

<sup>79</sup> Bruder, 66-67.

<sup>80</sup> Bruder, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Blake started working on the engravings for Stedman's *Narrative* in 1791, and although *Visions* was published the year before Stothard's *Voyage*, Blake may very well have seen it prior to publication (and may as likely have known the ode it illustrated). For more on the timing of *Visions* and Stothard's *Voyage*, see Gourlay, "Art Delivered," 543.

resolution entirely at odds with Blake's artistic praxis and the ongoing, implicating modes of reading it demands.

Instead, *Visions* operates according to the logic of the illuminated book, which we might, following Makdisi, think of "heuristically, as a performance to be repeatedly recreated without the intervention of a controlling principle designed to guarantee its outcome or meaning—or at least without *absolute* principles, since what we encounter in Blake's work is not really sheer dissemination but rather a series of repetitions through preexisting channels of reiteration."<sup>82</sup> These channels of reiteration are not circumscribed by Blake's own oeuvre, however. Rather, Blake's *Visions* layers its triangulated figures—Bromion, Theotormon, and Oothoon—onto the "preexisting channels of reiteration" graven into his contemporaries' mass-produced texts. Stothard's *Voyage*, we must remember, is itself a mythologized revision of the living—if abstracted—figures in Cruikshank's *Abolition* (1792). Blake's Bromion contains not only Neptune, but also the brutal naval officer John Kimber. Oothoon embodies not only the empowered Sable Venus but the unnamed young, enslaved woman whose murder at Kimber's hands is overwritten by the Sable Venus's majestic agency.<sup>83</sup> We can even see the triangulated figures of Stedman's account of the Female Samboe Slave haunting beneath the surface of Blake's frontispiece. The vicious overseer claiming the enslaved woman as his sexual property easily evokes Bromion, the "flagellated" woman recalls Oothoon's rending by Theotormon's

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<sup>82</sup> Makdisi, *Impossible History*, 175.

<sup>83</sup> Erdman does not make direct reference to the visual overlaps between Cruikshank's *Abolition* and Blake's frontispiece for *Visions*, but I am persuaded by his reading of plate 7, where Oothoon, caught in a rising wave, is chained by the ankle, as a reference to Kimber's hanging of the young, enslaved woman by her ankle. See Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery," 245-46.

eagles, and the helpless, hand-wringing Stedman blends neatly into Theotormon.<sup>84</sup> In short, the repetitions that emerge like the ghostly afterimage in the Clark Library as unhomey echoes in *Visions* extend well beyond Blake's illuminated books and even his commercial prints to include a range of 1790s Black Venus texts. By layering these texts one over the other, Blake's *Visions* casts in relief the discursive patterns of violent abstraction that accumulate through their reiteration. Much as Blake's "infernal method" of printing invokes the range of possible meanings raised out of negative space by "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid," Blake's palimpsestic layering of 1790s Black Venus texts in *Visions* brings to the surface that which was always already there.

### ***Blake's Black Venus: Palimpsest Over Allegory***

By palimpsestically layering an explicit narrative of hereditary slavery's intimate violence onto the mythological romance of the Sable Venus texts, Blake exposes, indelibly, the meaning Stothard had strategically concealed. The most striking visual parallels of *Voyage* appear in the triangulated figures of the frontispiece for *Visions* (see fig. 9). Neptune (left), the Sable Venus (center), and Triton (right) become Bromion, Oothoon, and Theotormon respectively. Both Bromion and Neptune appear older than their romantic rivals, Triton/Theotormon; both are bearded and well-muscled and Bromion's hair stands on end like Neptune's spiked crown. Theotormon looks away from Oothoon just as Triton looks away from the Sable Venus.<sup>85</sup> These visual parallels only amplify the stark divergence of the narratives they

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<sup>84</sup> Erdman rightly links this moment to that of Oothoon's rending by Theotormon's eagles, though I will treat this somewhat differently.

<sup>85</sup> Moreover, in what Gourlay observes is the only reference in Blake's work to dolphins, Bromion's taunting remark to Theotormon—"let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely maid"—seems to reference the dolphin Triton grasps in Stothard's image. See Gourlay, "'Art Delivered,'" 546-47.

illustrate. Stothard's image depicts a critical scene in the ode, where Neptune—"The pow'r that rules old ocean wide"—encounters the Sable Venus on her transoceanic journey.<sup>86</sup> We are told he "Assum'd the figure of a tar,/ the Captain of a man of war," which Stothard conveys by having him hold a Union Jack in place of his traditional trident (stanza 17). The Sable Venus smiles in response "with kind consenting eyes," after which point Neptune raises a murky cloud to shield (for reasons of decency) their emphatically consensual intimate encounter (stanza 18). "Sure silence is consent," the ode's narrator proclaims (stanza 3). The various ocean fauna and mythical beings in attendance welcome with joy the ensuing "Blest offspring of the warm embrace!/ Gay ruler of the saffron race!" The "saffron," or mixed-race child of Neptune and the Sable Venus is described and depicted as Cupid, whose "mingled shafts of black and white, Are wing'd with feathers of delight" (stanza 19). The account makes no mention whatsoever of the Sable Venus's status as chattel, nor does it reflect her child's fate to inherit the status of property from his African mother rather than to inherit property itself from his English father.

Blake's *Visions*—in both image and text—upends the supposedly consensual romance that *Voyage* and its sister ode illustrate between Neptune and the seductive Black Venus. Blake's Bromion, an apparent enslaver and embodiment of imperial violence, rapes Oothoon and then disposes of her and the child of her rape to Theotormon (formerly Triton).<sup>87</sup> Thereafter Theotormon spurns his erstwhile beloved Oothoon for her now tarnished virtue, or so most readings have it, and chains her to Bromion in a cave. It is from this cave that Oothoon issues her

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<sup>86</sup> Isaac Teale, *The Sable Venus: An Ode. Inscribed to Bryan Edwards, Esq.* (Kingston, Jamaica 1765), stanza 17. All subsequent citations are in the text.

<sup>87</sup> While the British flag on the left of Stothard's image links Neptune (and Bromion) with empire, the amoretti holding the peacock feather on the right links Triton (and Theotormon) with marriage and domestic intimacy. In the Roman mythology from which these figures derive, the peacock was the symbol of Juno, the goddess of marriage and wives. I am indebted to Hannah Claire Becker for alerting me to this.

reiterative lament (4:21-22, 5:1-2). In visual terms, Blake transforms the subtle bands around the Sable Venus's wrists and ankles—the only visual reference to her enslavement—into substantial chains that bind Oothoon directly to her enslaver, Bromion. And, whereas the empowered Sable Venus gazes up at the reigns that signal her apparent control over her journey from Angola to the West Indies and her reign as the goddess of Atlantic commerce, Oothoon's gaze is cast down at the floor of the cave where she remains Theotormon's captive. However, Blake does not simply swap the abstraction of a mythical goddess for that of the sentimental victim in Cruikshank's *Abolition*, because he rejects the way both abstractions position slavery's violence at a safe distance from the shores of Albion. Instead, like Lewis, Blake collapses such distance to make the domestic space of Albion unhomely.

Specifically, Blake embeds within his revision a critique of the London print market in which the Sable Venus circulates as a vehicle for naturalizing the intimate commerce of slavery. Just after Bromion has “rent [Oothoon] with his thunders,” he taunts Theotormon:

Bromion spoke, behold this harlot here on Bromion's bed,  
And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely maid!  
Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south:  
Stamp'd with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun;  
They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge;  
Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent.  
Now thou may'st marry Bromion's harlot, and protect the child

Of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons' time.' (4:18-23 – 5:1-2)

Here Bromion fulfills the stereotype of the West Indian planter which Bryan Edwards worked so hard to contest: he is tyrannical and excessive in his desire for power, in his sexual exploits, and

in his greed, all characteristics Edwards had, in the bitterest of ironies, foisted onto the Sable Venus. The chiasmic structure of line 20—“Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south”—frames Bromion’s identity in terms of possession and property, as does his branding of those he enslaves: “Stamp’d with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun” (4:21). Blake maximizes the potential of branding as a material metaphor for commercial printing, where both signal control over the profitable reproduction of that which is possessed as property and reduced to a “good for nothing commodity,” be it human or image. His boast that those he brands (or stamps) “are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge,” conjures engraving tools that dig into a copper plate as a scourge digs into and marks flesh. The Sable Venus and the hanging girl in Cruikshank are precisely such stamped figures; they do not resist because they are abstractions fabricated and disseminated to a purpose. However, Blake invites us to read Bromion’s boast in a third way. “Stamp’d with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun” betrays the ease with which those who bear Bromion’s image—namely the mixed-race children of enslaved women he rapes—slide into the category of chattel, a proliferation of so many coins or profitable prints.

Blake’s damning portrait of Bromion notwithstanding, we cannot restrict the link between slavery and domestic intimacy to the villainous West Indian planter; it extends just as materially to Theotormon, a stand in for the ostensibly liberal man of feeling. To appreciate how this is so, we must first revisit the prevailing notion that colonial slavery and domestic intimacy function in Blake’s *Visions* as allegories for one another. Erdman says it best when he notes that “love and slavery prove to be the two poles of the poem’s axis,” around which it spins, “for it does not progress,” and yet, like most readings of the poem, his does not explain what links these



poles, beyond one's allegorizing of another.<sup>88</sup> Many, like Ann Mellor and Helen Bruder, see slavery's function in *Visions* as an allegory for domestic forms of patriarchal oppression generally, and the oppression of the white Daughters of Albion specifically.<sup>89</sup> There are plausible rationales for this reading. First, Blake does not reinvent the enslaved African woman as a wholly resistant or even legible figure. Instead, Oothoon embodies a mix of women—the native “soft soul of America,” the enslaved African, and the white daughters of Albion who, the poem's refrain tells us, hear Oothoon's woes and echo back her sighs (5:20, 8:2, 11:13).<sup>90</sup> Second, Blake's Oothoon appears white in almost every copy and is described as having “snowy limbs” (5:12). Perhaps most critically, Bromion seems to defy the capitalist logic of hereditary slavery by giving his property in Oothoon and their child away for free to Theotormon. While Erdman does not meaningfully address these inconsistencies, he makes a compelling case for reading the

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<sup>88</sup> Erdman, “Blake's Vision of Slavery,” 242. Here Erdman's framing of the poem within the 1790s slavery debates proves critical for the way it aligns Theotormon's trembling hypocrisy with the “humanitarian professions” of abolitionists who pitied the enslaved while accepting their status as “legitimate commodities” (246).

<sup>89</sup> For example, according to Ann Mellor's reading of *Visions*, Blake primarily deploys chattel slavery as a metaphor to amplify his larger concern: liberating Englishwomen “from the greater slavery they experience at home” which is not, Mellor contends, “the civil and legal slavery [of marriage] described by Wollstonecraft,” but rather “the psychological slavery of ‘subtil modesty,’” the sexual slavery of self-regulating middle-class female propriety (“Sex, Violence, and Slavery” 365-66). Bruder understands Oothoon's rendering as wife, slave, and prostitute to fall under a broader umbrella of patriarchal oppression characteristic of 1790s sexual politics. She concludes that Oothoon's failure to escape the dominating patriarchal system that reinscribes her valuation as a sexual and pornographic *object* rather than *subject* of desire marks Blake's own failure to escape the limitations of the visual discourse he enters, a discourse in which men like Stothard—the producer par excellence of “consumable women”—thrive (*William Blake and the Daughters of Albion* 84, 67).

<sup>90</sup> Blake may very well have imagined a kind of sisterhood of oppressed labor across the Atlantic, as John Moyer suggests, but the Daughters of Albion may also include the middling and elite Englishwomen to benefit from such labor. Because we have tended to assume that representations of Black womanhood (and the Black Venus in particular) operate in the long eighteenth century as ethnographic evidence of African difference, it has, thus far, been impossible to imagine the more knotted economic and symbolic dynamic that entwines Oothoon and the Daughters of Albion who echo back her sighs. Together, and only together, these linked women invoke the Black Venus as a figure of white womanhood's constitution through an economic dependence on Black women's commodified maternity and (simultaneously) through a symbolic disavowal of that dependence. See Moyer, “The Daughters Weave their Work in loud cries.”

allegory in reverse, wherein the romantic rivalry between Bromion and Theotormon allegorizes parliamentary debates between the pro-slavery lobby and abolitionists respectively.

Missing from Mellor, Bruder, and Erdman's allegorical readings, however, is the very *material* hinge between domestic intimacy and colonial slavery: the unequivocal reliance by pro- and anti-abolitionists alike upon the intimate commerce of *partus sequitur ventrem*. The 1790s slavery debates did not, after all, call for the wholesale emancipation of enslaved Africans but rather for the end of the transatlantic *trade*. Thus, while abolitionists presented themselves in the public press as morally progressive against the barbaric rapaciousness of the planters they maligned, they too accepted that reproductive slavery would be critical for keeping the colonial economy afloat once the trade's abolition had eliminated a renewable supply of free laborers. In this light, Bromion and Theotormon emerge not strictly as romantic rivals or as adversaries on two sides of the slavery debates, but rather as layered Urizenic emblems of the intimate commerce binding the moral turpitude of colonial slavery to the sentimental virtue of metropolitan domesticity.

More precisely, when we read *Visions* palimpsestically, we realize that Bromion and Theotormon are kin: if Neptune was Triton's father, it follows that Bromion is Theotormon's. He does not, therefore, give away his property in Oothoon and their child for free; Theotormon inherits them. Their child, in turn, inherits Oothoon's enslaved status, her "lot." In this formulation, Bruder and Mellor's allegorical domestication of Oothoon as an oppressed English wife becomes untenable. Through her palimpsestic layering over Stothard's *Sable Venus*, Oothoon becomes instead the material evidence of hereditary slavery's origins in English property law and thus an embodiment of English domesticity's profound unhomeliness.<sup>91</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>91</sup> Whether or not Blake would have noted the closeness of "harlot" and "her lot" is uncertain. Inheritance here forms another important link between *Visions* and Stothard's *Voyage*. Theotormon seems, at first, to be a passive recipient

reading *Visions* as a material palimpsest of Black Venus narratives—rather than an abstract allegory—reveals how Oothoon’s potential transformation from the enslaved captive of a greedy wretch into the wife of the man of feeling upends the most recognizable Black Venus narrative of the century, George Colman Jr.’s ballad opera *Inkle and Yarico* (1787).<sup>92</sup> We can see in Theotormon’s displacement of the roaring enslaver Bromion echoes of Inkle’s transformation from the heartless mercantilist he embodied throughout the century to the reformed husband he performs at its close in Colman Jr.’s opera. As I discuss at length in my first chapter, this transformation responded to a growing sense of English complicity that would make Inkle’s sale of Yarico abhorrent to a London theatergoing public at a moment when the encroaching abolition of the slave trade brought both the exigency of hereditary slavery and its intrusion into domestic intimacy perilously close to home. While Yarico’s pitiful pleas at the moment of her impending abandonment to the market ultimately secure her reprieve, they merely relocate her from one market to another, from the public exchange of slaves to the public exchange of emotion where she facilitates both Inkle and the audience’s absolution from the ostensibly distant crimes of slavery.<sup>93</sup> Inkle’s decision to marry Yarico in the end—to transform a West Indian slave into an

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of the enslaved Oothoon. When Bryan Edwards aligned himself with Triton (and the pulley-holding sailor in Cruikshank’s image) as a reluctant cog in slavery’s overwhelmingly powerful commercial machine, he specifically invoked inheritance to frame slavery as a passive form of property ownership:

Much the greatest part of the present inhabitants of the British West Indies came into possession of their plantations by inheritance or accident. Many persons there are, in Great Britain itself, who, amidst the continual fluctuation of human affairs, and the changes incident to property, find themselves possessed of estates in the West Indies which they have never seen, and invested with powers over their fellow creatures there, which, however extensively odious, they have never abused. (Edwards, *History Civil and Commercial* 2:34)

<sup>92</sup> Given Yarico’s repeated appearance in Stedman’s *Narrative* and her vast popularity throughout the eighteenth century, it is hardly a stretch to see the variably Native American and African Yarico in Blake’s enslaved Oothoon, “the Soft soul of America.”

<sup>93</sup> Daniel O’Quinn, “Mercantile Deformities: George Colman’s “Inkle and Yarico” and the Racialization of Class Relations,” *Theatre Journal*, 54.3 (2002): 401.

English wife—only reveals how fears about the intrusion of slavery’s inhumane commerce into English domestic spaces were mitigated by desperately papering over one with the other.

Unlike Yarico, however, Oothoon never quite completes this transformation; instead, she is held captive on the margin between slave, wife, and instrumental representation in a narrative that never resolves. Blake’s *Visions* thus recontextualizes the triumphant narrative of Inkle’s reformation and incorporation of Yarico into English domesticity, rendering both the domestic space of marriage and the white subjectivity it houses grotesque and unhomely to reflect the extractive violence that constitutes them both. It is in this light that we can best appreciate Blake’s particularly trenchant critique of Theotormon, the hypocritical man of feeling who floods with jealous tears<sup>94</sup> and polices with sanctimonious moralism the boundaries of “Bromion’s cave,” the site of reiterative lament depicted in the frontispiece:

At entrance Theotormon sits wearing the threshold hard  
With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a desert shore  
The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money,  
That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires  
Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth (5:6-10)

Although referred to as “Bromion’s cave,” Theotormon’s visible dominance in this space—as the only figure not physically bound—suggests that it too constitutes part of his inheritance from the tyrannical enslaver he now displaces as the tortured abolitionist. As Theotormon sits on the margin uniting the Atlantic site of Oothoon’s rape and enslavement and the domestic space founded in that violence, his efforts to wear “the threshold hard” betray his desperation to

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<sup>94</sup> Theotormon’s jealousy recalls Stedman’s positioning of the “Female Samboe Slave” between beloved and property: “her only crime had consisted in her firmly refusing to submit to the loathsome Embraces of her despicable Executioner, which his Jealousy having Construed to Disobedience, she was thus skinned alive” (2:266).

eliminate the porousness between these realms. Reading the line differently, we might also say that he wears the stone threshold like a protective garment, a hardened boundary that will block out “the voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money.” It is telling, moreover, that this shielding threshold manifests in the frontispiece as his own body desperately curling into itself.

### ***Blake’s Black Venus and White Pathology***

Most readings assume that Theotormon’s internal struggle is prompted by Oothoon’s despoiled virginity and her transformation into a harlot.<sup>95</sup> Here “harlot” is understood within a binaristic domestic discourse of female virtue. However, the context of Oothoon’s designation as a harlot within Bromion’s preceding rant about hereditary slavery suggests that it is the commercialization of her sexuality within an expansive colonial economy, rather than strictly her loss of virginity, that so torments Theotormon. After all, the circuit of inheritance that brings Oothoon home to Theotormon brings with it the violent intimate commerce of slavery by which Bromion claimed her as his property. The cave Oothoon inhabits as enslaved captive, as wife, and as haunting instrumental figure are the very unhomely space of Lewis’s *Voyage*, the archive as home and hold.<sup>96</sup> Theotormon’s rejection of Oothoon and her subsequent efforts to win him back through cleansing self-mutilation are not strictly a moral response to her tainted virtue, but also a desperate effort to disavow the intrusion of slavery into the domestic spaces—both England and the English home—believed to be guarded against it.

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<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Erdman, “Blake’s Vision of Slavery,” 247.

<sup>96</sup> Layered beneath it is Yarico’s cave, too.

Attending to this material layering of slavery and domestic intimacy brings to light an alternative reading of the disturbing scene of Oothoon's gory rending by Theotormon's eagles. In an eerie parallel of the enslaved woman's flagellation in Stedman's *Narrative*, Oothoon calls "Theotormon's Eagles to prey upon her flesh":

I call with holy voice! Kings of the sounding air,  
Rend away this defil'd bosom that I may reflect

The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast. (5:14-16)

Superficially, Oothoon seems to endorse both Bromion and Theotormon's conclusions that she is tainted. She endeavors to remove that stain at its source—her defiled body—and reveal the pure soul she shares in common with Theotormon. However, Blake's virtual network undermines a reading of "defil'd bosom" here as spoiled virginity. His proclamation in *Marriage* that "the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd" seeps into the early plates of *Visions*, where the prophetic flower of Leutha's vale urges Oothoon to set aside her "virgin fears" and pursue her love. The flower reassures her that "the soul of sweet delight can never pass away," and Oothoon places the flower between her breasts (plate 4). In other words, Oothoon's bosom marks the impossibility of defilement through the loss of virginity.

Oothoon's rending, then, serves not to clear *her* sin, but rather Theotormon's. After all, if we interpret Oothoon's "defil'd bosom" in the same context as her transformation into a "harlot," we might imagine that what defiles her breast is the brand with which Bromion marks as chattel "the swarthy children of the sun." In this scenario, Oothoon is endeavoring to rend away the material reminder of Theotormon's complicity, his literal inheritance of slavery's intimate commerce. Both Bromion and Theotormon seek to benefit from Oothoon's rending—once as rape and again as absolution—and the repetition of the term conjures the phonetically similar (if

contradictory) one “render.” While “rend” means to tear apart, “render” means, variably, to reproduce artistically, to give over (as in money), and to melt away. Like branding, rendering evokes both the business and the mechanisms of reproductive printing.<sup>97</sup> Rend and render form a material link between slavery and printing in the intertext of Stedman’s *Narrative*: a Bromion-like villain brutally rends (lacerates by flogging) an enslaved women to mark his absolute claim to her as property, and the Theotormon-like Stedman profitably abstracts (or renders) that brutalization into a vehicle for cleansing pity in his mass-reproduced memoir.

At first, the scene of Oothoon’s rending seems to follow the affective logic of its parallel scene in Stedman’s *Narrative*. As if drawn by the centripetal pull of the Black Venus figure’s reiterative use, Oothoon presents Theotormon with an escape hatch, an opportunity to domesticate the violent intimate commerce of slavery through the cleansing intimate commerce of sensibility. Oothoon’s self-mutilation should, in theory, provoke Theotormon’s performance of pity, at which point Theotormon’s pure image might be projected back to him on her “pure transparent breast.” Theotormon’s performance would, in other words, obscure through abstraction his complicity in the violent commerce upon which his very selfhood depends.<sup>98</sup> But this is not quite what happens. Instead, Blake interrupts this circuit of sympathy, exposing its pathological collusion with the overtly violent intimate commerce of slavery it sets out—albeit performatively—to amend:

The Eagles at her call descend and rend their bleeding prey:

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<sup>97</sup> "rend, v.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2021, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/162382](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162382). Accessed 16 February 2022; "render, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2021, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/162386](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162386). Accessed 16 February 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Here I differ from Mellor who sees in this scene Blake’s transformation of “the literal atrocities of slavery in the West Indies (recall Stedman’s description of the male slave hanging from a hook, his putrefying breast eaten by vultures) into a visual metaphor, into a rhetorical figure of heroic Promethean suffering” (“Sex, Violence, and Slavery” 369).

Theotormon severely smiles; her soul reflects the smile,

As the clear spring, muddied with feet of beasts, grows pure and smiles. (5:17-19)

Instead of cleansing tears, the rending of Oothoon's breast raises Theotormon's grisly, uncanny smile, a vivid expression of the mind-forged manacles of white pathology Blake indicts throughout his illuminated books. *This* is what Oothoon's pure transparent breast reflects. As Stephen Vine puts it, "Theotormon's beloved self-image returns to him soiled with its own violence, for the 'clear spring' in which he sees himself is indistinguishable from Oothoon's bloodied bosom."<sup>99</sup>

It is in the context of this scene, and its rhetoric of reflection and transparency, that I understand the poem's opening motto: "The eye sees more than the heart knows" emerges as a critique of performative sensibility which shows more than the performer necessarily feels. Debbie Lee highlights a telling parallel between these opening lines in *Visions* and Stedman's concluding concession in his *Narrative*: "I must have hurt both the Eye and the heart of the Feeling reader," he admits (2:168).<sup>100</sup> While Stedman frames this as an apology, it is precisely his hurting of the reader's eye and heart that enable them to demonstrate that they are, in fact, "feeling reader[s]" set apart from the overseers and planters whose vicious disregard for their victims gives Stedman's English readers cathartic suffering to consume. According to Vine, Oothoon's rending reveals to her that Theotormon's love "is inseparable from his self-love, and she herself becomes a mere cipher through which Theotormon accumulates his own value."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Stephen Vine, "That Mild Beam": Enlightenment and enslavement in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*" in *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, eds. Carla Plasa and Betty J. Ring (London: Routledge, 1994), 49-50.

<sup>100</sup> See Lee, "Intimacy as Imitation," 107.

<sup>101</sup> Vine, "That Mild Beam," 57.



The same is true, I would argue, for Stedman's paying readers. By refusing to replicate the performative sentiment prompted by *Flagellation* or of Inkle's reformation in response to Yarico's heart wrenching prostration, Blake also refuses the cathartic resolution they secure.

Once again, Blake's *Visions* aligns with Lewis's *Voyage* by indicting the commodified reproduction of Black bodies in the Atlantic slave market and in the London print market as linked mechanisms constructing pathological whiteness and the domesticity that houses it.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, Blake extends his critique of commercialized sentiment in the print marketplace materially outward beyond *Visions* and into his other illuminated books. On plate 13 of *America*, for example, the Angel of Boston declaims against any God or Angel that would "keep the gen'rous from experience till the ungenerous/ Are unrestrained performers of the energies of nature:/ Till pity is become a trade, and generosity a science/ That men get rich by" (13:8-11). The linked rendering here of pity and generosity as a self-serving form of commercial exchange—"a trade...That men get rich by"—is inseparable from the insincere performativity of these supposed virtues. And it seems no accident that the thirteen Angels representing the rebelling colonies "rend" off their robes and that an explicit visual echo of Oothoon's rending by Theotormon's eagles appears at the culmination of this speech (see fig. 21). The preying of birds upon human flesh proves an aptly grotesque metaphor for the consumptive impulse of commercialized sentiment. In a rare study of Blake and sentiment, Dennis Welch suggests that for Blake, "'feast[ing] on the consciousness of our own virtue'" in response to the suffering of

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<sup>102</sup> We find one relevant example of the way Blake denaturalizes whiteness and Blackness in different iterations of "The Little Black Boy" from *Songs*. The poem's apparent glorification of whiteness and naturalization of Black subservience is undermined by the changing skin tone of its narrator across different copies of the poem—the little Black boy is very dark in some copies and as fair as his white counterpart in others. Rather than simply abstracting Blackness as a figurative category, though it certainly was a fungible one even in the Romantic period, Blake foregrounds the relations of material and figurative dependency and contingency in which racial categories of whiteness and Blackness are forged.

others “was both self-centered and self-righteous, making pity an ironic form of consumption in that it sickens and devours not only the receiver but also the giver.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, if Theotormon dominates the poem as a figure of white moral purity to which Oothoon initially aspires, Blake, like Lewis, repeatedly recodes that whiteness in terms of pathological consumption—of literal bodies in slavery and abstracted bodies in abolitionist print culture.

Whereas Yarico’s touching performance of suffering had secured her absorption into white domestic space, thus overwriting the violent foundations of that space in plantation slavery, Oothoon’s suffering brings to light that which had been repressed, namely the mutual constitution of slavery and white domesticity. As the poem spins—“for it does not progress”—Oothoon’s echoing laments and inexorable presence in Theotormon’s cave as both enslaved property and wife/mother amplify the “voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money” to haunt this space, to make it and the white subjectivity it houses profoundly unhomey. Oothoon asserts, “I am white and pure to hover around Theotormon's breast,” but her increasing exasperation with Theotormon's selfish weeping leads her to realize the incongruity of whiteness and purity with the infinite she now begins to grasp:

Because the night is gone that clos'd me up in its deadly black.

They told me that the night & day were all that I could see:

They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up.

And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle. (5:29-32)

The narrow circle Oothoon describes above recalls Blake’s assertion in *Marriage* that “man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern,” even as it reimagines this cavern of self-enclosure as both Theotormon’s cave and his mind (39). Theotormon’s efforts

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<sup>103</sup> Welch, “Blake and the Web of Interest and Sensibility,” 48.

to escape into himself, signaled by his self-grasping posture in the frontispiece, repeatedly fail precisely because the unhomeliness of his cave is both a manifestation and a reflection of the mind-forged manacled interiority it shelters. Indeed, as many have noted, the cave in Blake's frontispiece to *Visions* even looks uncannily like a skull, the sun an ominously peering eye. Here, Oothoon laments, she has been captive, where the morning sun is transformed into a "bright shadow, like an eye/In the eastern cloud" and the night sky into "a sickly charnel house" (5:35-36).

Like "The Ship's Inventory" in Lewis's *Voyage*, Blake's *Visions* reveals how spaces of domestic intimacy blur perilously into sites of the Atlantic slave trade's intimate commerce, not metaphorically, but materially, in the Black Venus figure. This is most apparent in Oothoon's final deluge of a monologue about the violence of the "frozen marriage bed," which, we are led to assume, is inhabited by the white middling Daughters of Albion. In a series of rhetorical questions, Oothoon asks, must such a woman be prohibited from free expressions of sexual desire, must she be locked into a financially motivated and loveless marriage,

Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixèd lot, is bound  
In spell of law to one she loathes? And must she drag the chain  
Of life in weary lust? Must chilling, murderous thoughts obscure  
The clear heaven of her eternal spring; to bear the wintry rage  
Of a harsh terror, driv'n to madness, bound to hold a rod  
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day, and all the night  
To turn the wheel of false desire, and longings that wake her womb  
To the abhorrèd birth of cherubs in the human form,  
That live a pestilence and die a meteor, and are no more;

Till the child dwell with one he hates, and do the deed he loathes,  
And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe birth,  
Ere yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day. (8:21-32)

Feminist readings of this moment understand its linking of bondage and marriage in strictly domestic terms—where women are constrained as the property of their husbands and self-constrained by suffocating prohibitions against non-generative sensual pleasure. In his lucid reading of this particularly tortuous passage, Essick concludes that Oothoon’s “exceedingly harsh critique of marriage as a system of psychic and economic exploitation *likens* it to the representations of rape and slavery earlier in the poem” (56 emphasis added).

I propose, however, that Oothoon’s verbal tirade gives material form to the ways slavery’s violent intimate commerce literally intrudes into—is constitutive of—the domestic space of middle-class marriage. And Oothoon, the return of the repressed Black Venus as enslaved property and wife, haunts this space across generations with her echoing lament. For example, in the context of marriage to Theotormon, Oothoon may now find herself “bound/ In spell of law to one she loathes,” a man unwilling to look beyond himself and his Urizenic principles. The word “bound” weighs heavy at the end of the line, its enjambment interrupting the metaphorical meaning—stuck or trapped in marriage—to conjure first its physical reference to the captivity of the enslaved. It reminds us that that the “spell” of English property law links coverture with hereditary slavery, such that Oothoon and her child are bound between their status as Theotormon’s kin and the chattel he inherits from her rapist and enslaver, Bromion. She drags “the chain/ Of life,” not just metaphorically but materially in both the frontispiece and in plate 7. She is also “bound.../To turn the wheel of false desire, and longings that wake her womb/ To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form.” Essick argues, compellingly, that Oothoon’s

violent imagery surrounding childbirth in the latter half of the passage—“even the woman’s ‘womb’ (8:27) becomes a cog in [the] mechanism” of interested marriage—reflects the way “psychic distortions” of psychological and economic exploitation “can be passed from generation to generation” (56). However, if we attend to the ways in which these lines layer palimpsestically onto the Sable Venus texts, these linked forms of exploitation come into clearer focus.

Edwards’s *History* had abstracted those most dispossessed by Atlantic commerce—enslaved women of African descent—into figurative agents of dispossession: the Sable Venus embodied the unstoppable wheel of Atlantic commerce subjecting colonial and metropolitan Britons alike to its whims. Through Oothoon, Blake pushes back against the abstractions used to naturalize the commodification of human kinship, replacing the wheel of commerce with “the wheel of false desire,” the mechanized womb of enslaved women. Relatedly, and even more explicitly, Blake transforms the beloved mixed-race Cupid child of Stothard’s Neptune and Sable Venus into a grotesquely unnatural progeny of Oothoon’s rape by Bromion—the “abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form.” It is the violence of hereditary slavery—the most extreme commodification of intimacy and the bitter center of slavery’s unhomeliness—which haunts across generations. The abhorred child will himself be similarly bound to “dwell with one he hates,” his enslaver-father, and will, like his mother, be bound to forced reproduction. The “impure scourge” that will “force his seed into its unripe birth” recalls Bromion’s earlier claim to it as a tool of violent reproduction. Given all that Oothoon’s lament brings to light, it seems reasonable to read *Visions* as a redemptive recontextualization of the Sable Venus texts, as Gourlay does. “Theotormon and Bromion still have their say in Blake’s version of the old story of rape and reprehension,” he concedes, “but they blither loudly, self-contradictorily and

pointlessly while Oothoon achieves prophetic volubility, the opposite of the ‘silence’ that Teale’s speaker thinks is ‘consent.’”<sup>104</sup> Oothoon has a voice where the Sable Venus, the hanging girl, and the “Female Samboe Slave” did not.

For all her voluble critique and growing awareness of the linked systems that oppress her, Oothoon nonetheless remains locked in the reiteration of a lament framed by the Daughters of Albion. These are, after all, *their* visions. And, as the final words of the poem remind us in their reiteration of Blake’s refrain, “The Daughters of Albion hear her woes. & echo back her sighs,” we can never rest assured that it is Oothoon’s lament we are hearing (11:13). Indeed, we don’t hear it. We read it along “preexisting channels of reiteration.”<sup>105</sup> Much like the affective short-circuiting of Lewis’s palimpsestic figures, the uncertain origin of Oothoon’s lament, and the indecipherable effect of its filtration through the Daughters of Albion who echo it back, thwart the desire for the recoverable subject and redemptive closure which Gourlay articulates. The syntax and punctuation of the poem’s opening lines obscure from the start the source of the lament: “Enslav’d, the Daughters of Albion weep; a trembling lamentation/ Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs toward America” (4:1-2). While “weep” and “lamentation” undoubtedly link these utterances of despair, the semicolon after “weep” and the subsequent positioning of “lamentation” as the subject of the following phrase untether that lament from the Daughters of Albion. The fact that this disembodied lament imbricates Oothoon and the Daughters of Albion casts doubt on whether or not Blake’s Black Venus continues to operate here as an instrument of whiteness, whether or not the women deemed Black Venuses can escape

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<sup>104</sup> Gourlay, ““Art Delivered,”” 547.

<sup>105</sup> Makdisi, *Impossible History*,” 175.

the matrix of material and symbolic currency that has defined the deep channel of the figure's reiteration.

We might read something else in the lament's lack of an authoritative original, however. Like Blake's illuminated books, its meaning is grounded in its reiteration, in the ongoing modes of reading it demands. The refrain and lament are not circular, after all, but cumulative. Just as the original contours of the copper plate for the frontispiece of Copy F are buried beneath layers of paint, Oothoon is, like the ghostly figure from the Clark, "a shadow on the verge of non-entity," a figure legible through but only vaguely beyond the accumulation of her instrumental uses, material but absent, unhomely (7:15). Makdisi's notion of Blake's illuminated book as a performance is apposite here. He suggests that its "pattern of possible repetitions" reveals "a new layer of meaning" otherwise "inaccessible and inscrutable at the level of text as object or the book as a 'good for nothing commodity.'"<sup>106</sup> When we encounter these layers of meaning cumulatively, as we do in the figure of Oothoon, however, they become deliberately, meaningfully inscrutable. They are inscrutable because they are unfinished, which is to say, they are not finished with *us*.

### ***Conclusion***

Soon after my encounter with the haunting figure in Stedman's *Narrative*, I found myself combing through Lewis's poem in search of her. I was certain I would recognize her, and I knew that she would facilitate a fruitful connection between the historical moments I was attempting to bridge. More than this, I hoped she might live on, might haunt, elsewhere. But the dense tangle of Lewis's poem resisted my efforts to make its contents legible, to single out this one figure. So

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<sup>106</sup> Makdisi, *Impossible History*, 175.

too, it turned out, does Blake's *Visions*. Oothoon's rendering as an amalgam of Native American, enslaved African, and white English women emerges through Lewis's refusal as something other than an allegorical deferral. Instead, it is a revision and refusal of the instrumental *legibility* of the Female Samboe Slave, of the Sable Venus, and of the hanging girl in *Abolition*. The ghostly figure's capaciousness, its shared contours with Cruikshank and Stothard, and the superimposition of Stedman's text through nothing but the material manifestation of time is itself a potent figure for the Black Venus as she is re-forged time and again in Blake's *Visions*. Ultimately, it was Lewis's poem which primed me to touch the archive differently, to appreciate these connections, and to, as Lowe suggests, replace traditional chronologies of archival order with a temporality that moves forwards and backwards simultaneously. And it was Lewis's poem which alerted me to the archival regimes of order that mediate and even resist such efforts.

To touch a hand-colored copy of *Visions* required navigating a dense network of curation: applying to be a reader at the Huntington Library in Pasadena which houses Copy E; obtaining a letter of recommendation from my thesis advisor; scheduling a reading appointment; requesting the materials through an online database—all of this before setting foot on the grounds. Then, obtaining an ID card; filling out six pages of paperwork detailing the various ways in which I cannot handle the illuminated book; and waiting in a crowded but deathly silent reading room while my pre-ordered documents pass through special “restricted materials” curatorial approval protocol. I went through a similar process to examine Copy F at the Morgan Library in New York City. For many eighteenth-century scholars, this experience is familiar, just part of the work. As I examined Oothoon, I could not stop thinking about the haunting sea of embodied Black female figures that make up Lewis's *Voyage*, and the concluding “Notes” that overwrite their institutional provenance.



In this long, disordered list of her archival sources, Lewis offers no roadmap to original materials, no call numbers, no list of titles we can separate from the dense narrative outside of which they no longer exist because she has re-forged them. She includes no details about what works came from where or when they were created, or how they were housed alongside what other works, in what exhibitions, or who came to see them or how often or why. Lewis's list is not a mode of citation, a reference that libraries like the Huntington require when you cite a rare material they house, but a refusal of the structures of power and arbiters of taste that have dictated what forms and subjects of representation are exalted as high art, as worthy of inclusion in a canon, as representative of the nation or age that issued them, because they are the same structures of power and arbiters of taste that have dictated which human lives and kinship bonds are commodifiable, which bodies can circulate and how and for whose benefit. We cannot touch the figures in Lewis's poem in the way those of us trained to navigate complex networks of curation can touch Blake's hand-colored prints. And yet, their visceral embodiment demands new ways of seeing, reading, and touching an eighteenth century that has not yet ended.

## Appendix of Images



Fig. 8 W. Grainger after T. Stothard, *Voyage* layered over I. Cruikshank, *Abolition*

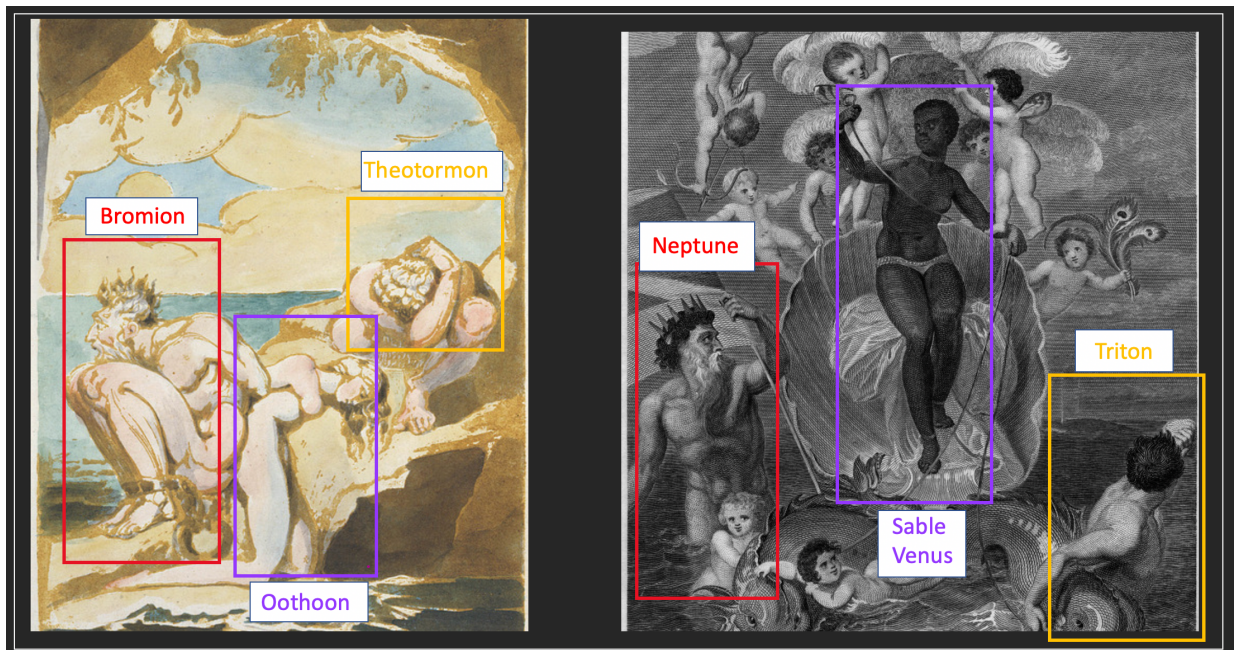


Fig. 9 Annotated detail of William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, Copy E, plate 1, <http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.e?descId=vda.e.illbk.01> (left) and Grainger, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, 1794 (right).

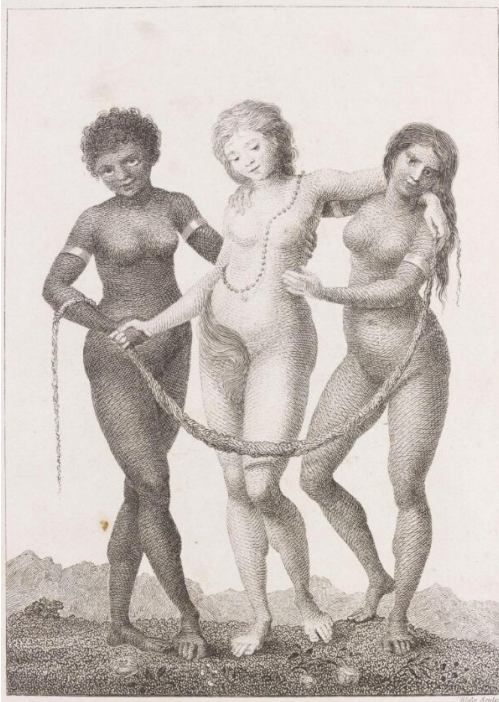


Fig. 10 Blake, *Europe Supported by Africa and America*, 1796. Engraving, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. From: Victoria and Albert Museum, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>.



Fig. 11 Detail of J.M.W. Turner, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, Oil on Canvas, 1840, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/31102>.

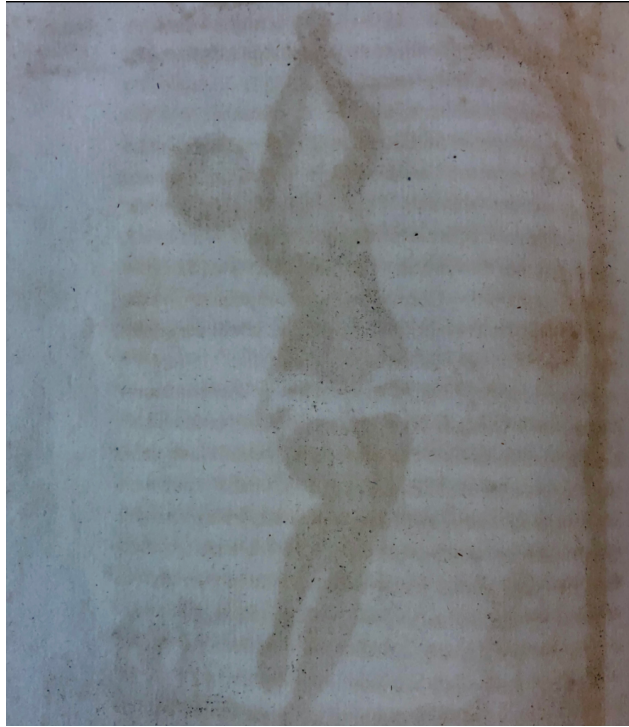


Fig. 12 Reverse of Blake, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*, in Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, (London: Printed for J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church Yard, & J. Edwards, Pall Mall, 1796, 2:328.

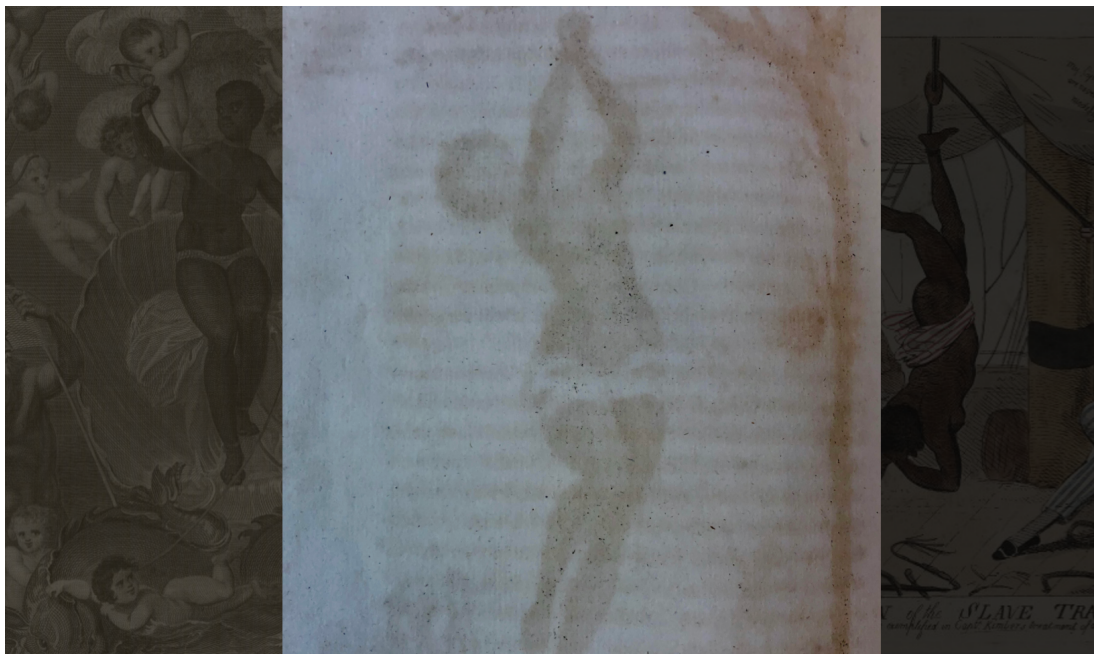


Fig. 13 Reverse of Blake, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave* (center) layered over Grainger after Stothard, *Voyage* (left) and Cruikshank, *Abolition* (right).



Fig. 14 Kara Walker, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, MoMa 1994.



Fig. 15 Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793 Copy E, plate 3.  
<http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.e?descId=vda.e.illbk.03>

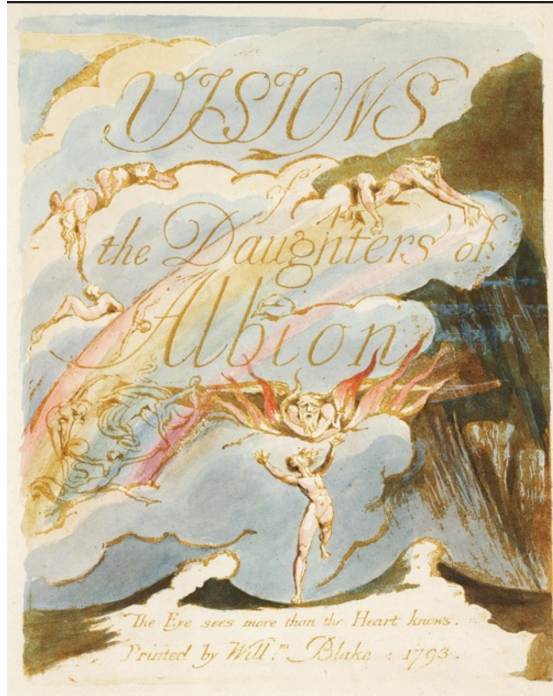


Fig. 16 Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793 Copy E, plate 2.  
<http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.e?descId=vda.e.illbk.02>



Fig. 17 Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793 Copy E, plate 1.  
<http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.e?descId=vda.e.illbk.01>



Fig. 18 Detail of Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, copies a, G, R, F, I, J, and A, plate 7. <http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.i?descId=vda.i.illbk.05>

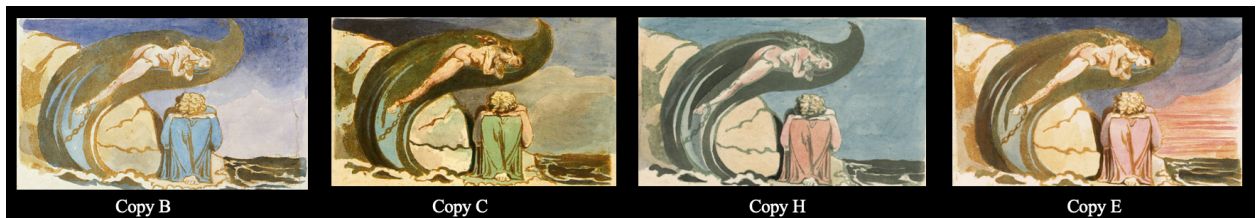


Fig. 19 Detail of Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, copies B, C, H, and E, plate 7. <http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.i?descId=vda.i.illbk.05>

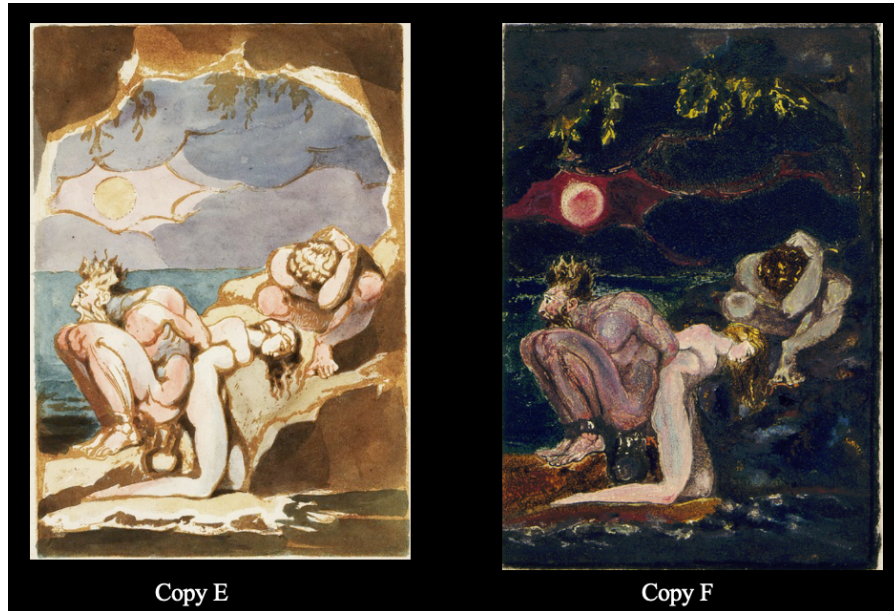


Fig. 20 Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, copies E and F, plate 1.  
<http://blakearchive.org/copy/vda.f?descId=vda.f.illbk.01>



Fig. 21 Detail of Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), copy E, plate 6 (left) and *America, A Prophecy* (1793), copy A, plate 15 (right).



## Chapter Four

### **“Scene[s] of Love”: Performing Radical Recovery in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus***

Sara entered Europe’s psyche, modernity’s psyche, not as a woman, a living, breathing, person with emotions and longings, but as a metaphor, a figment, a person reduced to a simulacrum. That figment subsumed the person. We will always know more about the phantom that haunts the Western imagination, a phantom so complete that it has nearly become a living, breathing person, than we do about the life of Sara Baartman, the human being who was ultimately destroyed by an illusion.

—Clifton Crais & Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story*

On August 9, 2002, Sarah Baartman’s remains were repatriated to South Africa and laid to rest after almost two hundred years of exposure as a sexual spectacle and scientific oddity.<sup>1</sup> On the same day, a small American production team led by director Cynthia Croot performed Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *Venus* (1996) in Cape Town to commemorate Baartman’s homecoming. Like countless artists, authors, and scholars since, Croot’s team strove to retrieve the *real* Baartman from the objectifying colonial type that had so long overwritten her, and to restore her dignity as a form of historical restitution.<sup>2</sup> “The text felt elegiac and momentous,” Croot recalled of the event.<sup>3</sup> However, anyone familiar with Parks’s irreverent approach to history’s tragic figures—and with *Venus* in particular—would be surprised by this characterization, because

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed and historically sensitive discussion of Baartman’s exhibition and legacy, see Sadiya Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus,’” *History of Science* 42.2 (2004): 233–257.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Alexander, *The Venus Hottentot: Poems* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990); Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (New York: Random House, 2007); and Deborah Willis, *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Croot, “Venus Embodied: Performing the Role of Sartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks’ Play *Venus*,” *Theatre Forum* vol. 49 (1 January 2016): 71.

Parks's play willfully refuses the rhetoric of homecoming so integral to the recovery efforts of Croot's production.<sup>4</sup> Although *Venus* remains largely true to what we know of Baartman's life, its tone is darkly comical and its portrayal of Baartman is shockingly brazen. In it Parks replays the grotesque circus of Baartman's degrading display but paints Baartman as a willing participant in her own exploitation. Her character even refuses to return home when given the opportunity. Where audiences expect recovery and a restoration of Baartman's interiority, Parks gives them garish metatheatre and a hall of mirrors.

When *Venus* first opened at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York City (1996) under avant-garde director Richard Foreman, some theatregoers and critics were troubled by its farcical treatment of such an obviously tragic subject.<sup>5</sup> Two were vociferous in their objections: American theatre critic Jean Young slammed the play as a "re-commodification and re-objectification of Saartjie Baartman" that "*diminish[ed]* the tragedy of her life."<sup>6</sup> Even cultural critic and performance artist Coco Fusco—who is known for her own provocative transmissions of colonial history—expressed shock that "in the 1990s, Suzan-Lori Parks could create a play about the Hottentot Venus in which the protagonist appears not only to be complicit in her exploitation but enjoying it—and receive accolades for doing so."<sup>7</sup> These visceral responses are understandable because Parks's portrayal risks subsuming Baartman once again within a racist and sexist stereotype. And yet, Young and Fusco misapprehend Parks's project. Her play is

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sarah Warner, "Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment," *Theatre Journal* 60.2 (May 2008): 181-199.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Michael Feingold, "Carnival Knowledge," *Village Voice* (14 May 1996): 81 and Abiola Sinclair, "Notes on Venus," *New York Amsterdam News* 87.18 (4 May 1996), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," *African American Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 700.

<sup>7</sup> Coco Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 10.

certainly inspired by Baartman's life, but it makes no pretense of being a realist historical drama aimed at recuperating Baartman's dignity. Instead, Parks constructs her heroine, Venus, as a layered palimpsest of fact, fiction, projected desires, and speculation to reject the illusion that we can disentangle the *real* Baartman from "the phantom that haunts the Western imagination."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Parks does appropriate Baartman in ethically questionable ways, but so do well-meaning recovery projects. Where Parks differs is that her radical approach to recovery immerses the playwright, performers, and audiences alike in the ethical complications of its project.

*Venus* depicts its heroine not as an individual historical subject, but as an adaptable figure who performs a variety of symbolic roles—some demeaning, some emancipatory—for the benefit of paying audiences. By resisting the temptation to reconstruct Baartman's interiority from her fragmented appearances in the colonial archive, Parks preempts the cathartic satisfaction that a historically authentic portrayal of her life might generate. Instead, Parks uses metatheatre to layer her contemporary audiences onto Baartman's nineteenth century ones. In doing so, she relentlessly emphasizes the complex ethics and economies of spectatorship embedded in any effort to access or inhabit Baartman's inner life.<sup>9</sup> Parks's open-ended portrait of Venus has garnered much critical attention, but most scholarship interprets this enigmatic rendering as an end in its own rather than evaluating the text's function in performance as what

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<sup>8</sup> Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> See Stacie McCormick, Witnessing & Wounding in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, *MELUS*, vol. 39, iss. 2 (1 June 2014): 188–207 and Brandi Wilkins Catanese, "Transgressing Tradition: Suzan-Lori Parks and Black Performance (as) Theory" in *Problem of the Color Blind: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 112-142.

Parks calls “a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history.”<sup>10</sup> For example, analyses of the play largely assume a singular audience response because they neglect the diverse ways in which directors or actresses in the title role employ Parks’s vast interpretive latitude to convey their own messaging.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, because nearly every critical analysis of *Venus* has limited its evidence to the play’s text and Foreman’s debut production, they collectively have overlooked a striking anomaly—Croot’s elegiac recovery is not the outlier; Foreman’s refusal of recovery is.

In this chapter, I set out to show that Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* is less a retelling of Baartman’s life than a living history of her figuration as a Black Venus. I argue that to understand the profound challenges the play poses for its fans and critics alike, we must approach it as a living text whose meanings and significance emerge and mutate in performance, at the intersection of its production and reception. In addition to Foreman’s New York and Croot’s Cape Town versions, I analyze three professional productions of *Venus* over the last twenty years—ranging from New York City to Liberty City (Miami, FL) to Johannesburg, South Africa. I assert that in these productions, audiences, theatre critics, directors, and actresses in the title role all engage in a recovery project that Parks’s play, in its textual form, persistently attempts to undermine. These productions do not misinterpret Parks’s text as such. Instead, the flexible forms and figures that scaffold Parks’s account of Baartman’s story create a critical space in which diverse productions (like Croot’s) may adapt *Venus* to speak meaningfully to

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<sup>10</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, “Possession” in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theater Community Group Inc, 1995), 4. One exception includes Deborah Geis, “Anatomizing Venus” in *Suzan-Lori Parks* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008): 75-96.

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Croot’s article “Venus Embodied” is a rare exception. In it, she incorporates feedback from several different actresses who have played the role of Venus to examine how each embodied the part differently, how Baartman resonated with their own experiences of objectification, marginalization, or body shaming, and how it shaped the trajectories of their professional careers.

Baartman's resonance for their individual contexts. Ultimately, the palimpsestic Black Venus that emerges from these productions not only reinforces that the *real* Baartman is irrecoverable, but also demonstrates that our recovery efforts, the history we continue to make and remake about her, implicate us in the ethical compromises of keeping her in circulation and demanding that she be useful.

### ***Recovering Sarah Baartman: from South Africa to the United States***

Post-apartheid South Africa's campaign to repatriate Baartman's remains from France marks one of the most public and influential examples of efforts to rescue her from centuries of objectification and to restore her individual humanity.<sup>12</sup> She received worldwide attention in the 1990s when president of the newly democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela, urged the French government to return Baartman's remains to her homeland where she could be afforded a dignified burial denied her for so long. France ultimately conceded to this request "in exchange for amnesty," a kind of international catharsis with Baartman at its center, that would bury the past and enable both nations to move forward from the dark histories they shared.<sup>13</sup> In April 2002, France relinquished Baartman's remains to a contingent of South African delegates in a heartfelt ceremony at the South African embassy in Paris. Here Khoisan poet Dianna Ferrus

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<sup>12</sup> The protracted struggle over Baartman's remains and claims to her as a French or South African national treasure signal Baartman's symbolic significance as an embodied contact zone not only at the height of nineteenth century European colonialism but also in its wake two centuries later. For France she represents a unique artifact of the nation's colonial and scientific history. For South Africa, she is "a symbol of our national need to confront our past and restore dignity to all our people" in building a non-racist and non-sexist future (South Africa's ambassador to France, Thuthukile Skweyiya, qtd. in Warner 185). While France and South Africa are invested in the symbolic significance of Baartman to their national identity as it emerges from histories of empire, their ability to move on from the violence of these histories and to define themselves nationally in the wake of that violence depends upon a cathartic release or amnesty bound up with Baartman not only as a symbol but as a material body.

<sup>13</sup> Warner, "Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment," 186.

recited a poem for Baartman which had been instrumental in securing support for her ancestor's repatriation. It described a ritual burial that would incorporate Baartman into the collective memory of her people, past and present: "I have come to take you home/ where I will sing for you,/ for you have brought me peace,/ for you have brought us peace."<sup>14</sup> Similar themes of homecoming and recuperation formed the through-lines of South African President Thabo Mbeki's commemoration speech at Baartman's internationally televised burial ceremony. Mbeki enjoined South Africans "to carry out the historic mission of restoring the human dignity of Sarah Baartman," claiming that the nation's future as a "truly non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous country" depended upon the rejection of Baartman's objectification.<sup>15</sup>

Across the Atlantic, Black feminist recuperations of Baartman interpolate her into American legacies of racism and sexism. Deborah Willis's anthology, *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her Hottentot*, captures the broad spectrum of such recoveries through its collection of poetry, visual culture, and critical essays on Baartman. Curator Debra Singer analyzes several of the visual and performance art pieces reproduced in *Black Venus 2010*, explaining that each artist "reclaims the story and image of [Baartman] not only to commemorate [her] suppressed past, but also to construct an alternative, empowering legacy for [black women in] the present." The particular legacy these artists seek to reconfigure, Singer elaborates, is the "continuing fetishization of the black female body within the white imagination of Western culture."<sup>16</sup> In one

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<sup>14</sup> Dianna Ferrus, *I've Come to Take You Home* (Kuils River, South Africa: Diana Ferrus Publishers, 2011), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Thabo Mbeki, "Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Baartman," (9 August 2002), [www.sahistory.org.za/archive/speech-funeral-sarah-bartmann-9-august-2002](http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/speech-funeral-sarah-bartmann-9-august-2002). Khoisan chief Joseph Little told dignitaries around the grave: "We are closing a chapter in history. I feel her dignity has been restored." See "'Hottentot Venus' Laid to Rest," *BBC News: World Edition*, (9 Aug 2002), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2183271.stm>.

<sup>16</sup> Debra Singer, "Reclaiming Venus: The Presence of Sarah Baartman in Contemporary Art" in *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 94.

example, Singer describes a performance by Joyce Scott who “step[s] into Baartman’s skin,” putting on “a costume modeled after Baartman’s naked silhouette,” to recite a “monologue about the public conditions of Baartman’s life.” The performance is one of a series of short vignettes titled *Women of Substance* (1985) in which Scott and Kay Lawal probe the contemporary resonance of Baartman’s story for Black women in the United States. While some of their engagements with Black female stereotypes are humorous, their portrayal of Baartman is “sobering and contemplative.” Giving Baartman a voice bears the larger symbolic burden of contesting a “historical precedent” in which Black women appear as “silenced subjects.”<sup>17</sup>

The commitment to restoring Sarah Baartman’s voice leads many Black feminist writers to draw from and reassemble the historical details of her life. Elizabeth Alexander’s 1990 poem “The Venus Hottentot” reanimates Baartman and the French anatomist who dissected her, George Cuvier. Although Cuvier is given the first word, Baartman’s voice dominates the remainder of the poem to depict an inner life beyond the scope of her display and the comprehension of her captors: “Since my own genitals are public/ I have made other parts private./ In my silence I possess/ mouth, larynx, brain, in a single/ gesture... My flexible tongue/ and healthy mouth bewilder/ this man with his rotting teeth.”<sup>18</sup> As Alexander explains in an interview, her Baartman is no uncomprehending victim, but rather a keen observer with “an intellectual range...a rich and textured inner life that belies the surface exploitation and presentation.”<sup>19</sup> Alexander approaches the historical facts of Baartman’s life with suspicion,

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<sup>17</sup> Singer, 88-89.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, *The Venus Hottentot*, 100-04, 111-13.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “An Interview with Elizabeth Alexander,” Interview by Christine Phillip, *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 502.

rendering what we “know” about Baartman little more than a container for the woman she imagines into being, a woman whose voice resonates with a resistant sense of dignity.

In *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003), Barbara Chase-Riboud similarly allows Baartman to tell her own story on her own terms. Best known for her first novel, *Sally Hemmings*, in which she dramatizes the intimate life of a bi-racial woman whom Thomas Jefferson enslaved and who bore his children, Chase-Riboud consistently harnesses her historical fiction to restore the voices of marginalized figures silenced by history’s dominant narratives. *Hottentot Venus* pieces together extensive archival research to reconstruct Baartman’s life from her calamitous youth in the Dutch-controlled Eastern Cape of South Africa, to her exhibition in England and France, and finally to her death and dissection. Delivering this sutured archival narrative through Baartman’s perspective as a first-person narrator, Chase-Riboud labors to grant readers access to a consciousness she ultimately invents and projects through an act of troubling ventriloquism.<sup>20</sup> These recovery efforts by Scott, Alexander, and Chase-Riboud collectively inhabit Baartman to emancipatory ends, but in “masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves,” these recoveries endeavor to overwrite their own mediation.<sup>21</sup>

Such reconstructions become especially problematic when they assume for themselves the disciplinary authority of historical fact and promise authenticity. In so doing, they unwittingly naturalize the colonial logics of archival value responsible for Baartman’s silencing in the first place. The two scholarly biographies of Baartman, both written by white scholars, are frequently cited as authoritative sources about her life, but are similarly guilty of speculating her

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<sup>20</sup> See Rebecca Peabody, “The Pop of Racial Violence” in *Consuming Stories: Kara Walker and the Imagining of American Race* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 62-64.

<sup>21</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 292.



interiority into being. For example, Rachel Holmes's biography, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus*, seems to deliver the intimate history that its title promises. Beginning *in media res*, Holmes recreates the site of Baartman's display, placing readers amongst a nineteenth-century London audience eager to lay eyes on the star performer: "Saartjie Baartman, stage name the Hottentot Venus, emerged from behind a crimson velvet curtain, stepped out onto the three-foot-high stage in pointed green ribboned slippers, and surveyed her audience with a bold stare." More troubling than Holmes's seductive introduction to the protagonist of her biography is her subsequent inhabitation of Baartman's consciousness and her assumption of how Baartman must have perceived her audience:

Light and dark faces peered back up at her. Saartjie saw their eyes dilate with wonder, then narrow again speculatively, as if uncertain of how to evaluate the vision of an African Venus...The illuminated auditorium enabled Saartjie to see her audience almost as well as they could see her. She observed with great interest two men of distinctive appearance who entered the theater.<sup>22</sup>

Although Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully's biography, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story*, is more self-reflexive than Holmes's, and is full of invaluable original research on Baartman's life and afterlife, these biographers are similarly guilty of indulging their desire to speak over the silences in her history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Holmes, *African Queen*, 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> As one scathing review of Crais & Scully's work articulates, "[a]vid research pieces together a tale full of 'perhaps,' 'likely,' 'probably,' 'we think,' and 'we can imagine' statements that, once written down and published, will become 'convincing' and authoritative. The scholars' own fantasy is thus naturalized as sensational fact." See Greg Thomas, "Review of *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, by Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully," *American Historical Review*, vol. 115, iss. 3 (1 June 2010), 923.

While they diverge in method and medium, these recoveries largely perform the same two rhetorical moves: they seek to restore Baartman's individual humanity and position her as symbolic of much larger systems of disempowerment that convene at the intersection of race and gender. Baartman's uniqueness as an icon rests largely in the extensive documentation of her time in England and France. Consequently, she is called upon to stand in for the countless victims of slavery and colonialism, and their racist legacies in the Atlantic world, who have been reduced to saleable objects or excised altogether from the colonial archive. As the aforementioned recoveries demonstrate, investments in restoring Baartman's dignity as an individual woman are linked with the status of her suffering, documented in the colonial archive, as evidence of collective and ongoing injury. The point here is neither to equate recoveries by white scholars and Black artists, nor to dismiss the value of their contributions. Instead, my aim is to put pressure on the ethical limits of recovery projects—political, artistic, or scholarly—whose efforts at authentic representation tend to obscure their own mediation of that representation. The desire to alleviate white guilt, to give voice to ongoing suffering under racial and gendered violence, and to unify a long divided postcolonial nation are all motivations for recovery that continue to subsume Baartman's individuality within a broader history of slavery, empire, power, and violence that she, as a Black Venus, has come to symbolize.

### *Theorizing Radical Recovery*

Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" models a radical mode of recovery more attentive to the impulses driving it and the potential dangers of pursuing it uncritically.<sup>24</sup> Hartman recounts both her desire and reluctance to flesh out the scant record of a girl called Venus, whose murder aboard the slave ship *Recovery* registers as little more than an incidental occurrence in the legal document through which she "enter[s] history."<sup>25</sup> Venus's inner life, like Baartman's, is an absence, a gaping wound in the archive. As their collective "[l]oss gives rise to longing," Hartman suggests that the stories we may generate to reclaim their individuality serve "as a form of compensation or even as reparations" (3). For her part, Hartman tries to repair this wound by imagining a tender friendship between Venus and the other enslaved girl murdered on the same ship, the anonymous hanging girl depicted in Cruikshank's *Abolition* (1792). Impeding her reclamation, Hartman realizes, is the very name Venus, which simultaneously affords this girl an individual identity beyond her value as chattel and denies that identity by reducing her to a trope. However, as Hartman goes on to show, the absorption of Venus the individual by Venus the figure is not merely a problem of the past as we encounter it in the archive; it is also a problem of archival recovery itself.

While contemporary recuperations may give voice to individual enslaved women silenced by the archive, their urgency is driven most by a need to "describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present" and to give voice to those whose suffering under the racist legacies of slavery and empire has failed to register as explicitly in a liberal present when racist

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<sup>24</sup> See Lisa Lowe, "Race, Blackness, and Romanticism: Dialogues with Professors Simon Gikandi and Lisa Lowe," University of Buffalo, 10 March 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2008): 6. All subsequent citations are in the text.

entrenchments often churn beneath the surface (13). Drawing a troubling parallel between past and present uses of the Black Venus, Hartman explains that “the stories that exist are not about them,” about Baartman, or the girls aboard the *Recovery*, or even the Female Samboe Slave. Instead, they are “about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes” like Hottentot Venus (2). Despite the potential for her recovery of Venus to amend the violence of the archive and that of the institution that normalized it, Hartman’s “account replicates the very order of violence that it writes against by placing yet another demand upon the girl, by requiring that her life be made useful or instructive, by finding in it a lesson for our future or a hope for history” (14). The same is largely true for contemporary engagements with Baartman, which are “really discussions of how we—critics, historians, artists, audiences—need her to figure in our understanding of the raced, gendered workings of the past,” and the ways in which they shape our present.<sup>26</sup> Hartman’s reticence about constructing a romance of recuperation asserts that such an invented story, in serving as “a lesson for our future,” is not about Venus [or Baartman], but about those who would use her as a vehicle for political agency in the present. The same is true for nearly all the recoveries I traced above: although they collectively assume that restoring Baartman’s interiority will remove her from circulation—as a spectacle, a stereotype, a commodified body—their efforts simply alter the form in which she circulates.

Hartman does not abandon recovery altogether, but rather models in her essay a more ethical alternative through the double gesture of *critical fabulation*. This method “strain[s] against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time,

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<sup>26</sup> Catanese, “Transgressing Tradition,” 117.

enact[s] the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (11). In other words, Hartman *does* invent a story of hope and solidarity in a history and historical account devoid of both. She narrates a “romance of resistance” that “unsettle[s] the arrangements of power by imagining Venus and her friend outside the [historical] terms of statements and judgments that banished them from the category of the human” (9). Even as she utters it, however, Hartman concedes that this romance of friendship, a balm to the wound that is the archive of slavery, cannot escape “replicating the order of violence that it writes against” without asserting its own impossibility and revoking the story at the very moment of its delivery. In the end, Hartman cannot *untell* the story of friendship she has imagined on the page; it remains legible beneath its negation.

### ***Suzan-Lori Parks’s Theatre of History***

The palimpsestic logic of critical fabulation makes it a fitting hermeneutic for examining Suzan-Lori Parks’s own radical recovery: like Hartman, Parks implies that since our engagements with histories of slavery are necessarily confrontations with its haunting grip on our own moment, any ethical narrative restitution must record our use of it to articulate slavery’s legacies in the present. Parks’s radical approach to recovery is deeply embedded in her radical understanding of history. Parks explains:

since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been

unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to...locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.<sup>27</sup>

Parks's method here is not simply to recover voices silenced by the American historical archive, but to radically alter the form that history itself assumes.

A famously enigmatic artist, Parks has become one of the most influential American playwrights in the last thirty years. In addition to earning a prestigious MacArthur Genius Grant and multiple Obie Awards, Parks is also the first African American woman dramatist to win a Pulitzer Prize. Her avant-garde experiments with language and form have distinguished her from the direct political critiques of the Black Arts movement and the dramatic realism through which those critiques have been typically transmitted "to escape the painful distortions of minstrelsy."<sup>28</sup> Instead, Parks confronts and inhabits those painful distortions through an absurdist theatre influenced by Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, and by postmodern Black feminist playwrights Ntozake Shange and Adrienne Kennedy, whose *Funnyhouse of a Negro* "showed Parks that she could do anything she wanted on stage."<sup>29</sup> Throughout her career, Parks has

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<sup>27</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession" in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theater Community Group Inc, 1995), 4. See also Suzan-Lori Parks, "Making History: An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks," Interview by Tom Sellar, *Theatre Forum* 9 (1996): 37-9.

<sup>28</sup> Shawn-Marie Garrett, "The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks: One of Today's Most Challenging Playwrights Resurrects a Lost and Dangerous History," *American Theatre*, 17 (2000): 24. Parks is adamant in her essay "Elements of Style" that her choice to "explode" the form of dramatic realism is not a critique of its use by earlier playwrights: "Most playwrights who consider themselves avant-garde spend a lot of time badmouthing the more traditional forms. The naturalism of, say, Lorraine Hansberry is beautiful and should not be dismissed simply because it's naturalism. We should understand that realism, like other movements in other artforms, is a specific response to a certain historical climate...those structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me." See Suzan-Lori Parks, "Elements of Style" in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 8. For a discussion of the move away from realism in theatre of the African Diaspora, see Paul Carter Harrison, "Praise/Word" in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, ed. Victor Leo Walker (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 5-7 and Henry D. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Garrett, "The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks," 22. For more on Parks's dramatic and literary influences, see Jonathan Kalb, "Remarks on Parks I: A Hunter College Symposium on the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks," in *Suzan-*

asserted her autonomy as an artist by pushing the boundaries of what constitutes “Black theatre” and provocatively redefining the scope of its influence. She openly condemns its tendency to replay the same agonistic themes that reduce Blackness to experiences of racial victimization.<sup>30</sup> In an effort to challenge the logic of these practices, Parks ascribes to them a kind of faux mathematical formula in her essay, “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” where “‘BLACK DRAMA’” = the presentation of the Black as oppressed.” Parks vehemently rejects the “insidious essentialism” this equation has naturalized as a “fucked-up trap [intended] to reduce [African Americans] to only one way of being.”<sup>31</sup> Parks herself is known for resisting labels and the identity politics that attend them, explaining that being classified as “a ‘woman writer of color’ is [also] a trap. It’s why there are ‘slots’ for certain kinds of plays in every season” which “limit the theatre, and underestimate the audience, in every possible way.”<sup>32</sup>

Parks takes it upon herself to redefine “Black theatre” in a follow-up essay, entitled “The New Black Math.” Through her characteristically paradoxical logic, Parks inverts the tokenism of “Black theatre” within American theatre to suggest that “Black theatre” is actually the broader category within which all American drama is subsumed:

A black play knows the real deal.

A black play is told that it is about race and a black play knows it's really about

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*Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. Phillip C. Kolin (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 151-74.

<sup>30</sup> Parks asserts, “The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature. Saying that ‘Whitey’ has to be present in Black drama because Whitey is an inextricable aspect of Black reality is like saying that every play has to have a murder in it, is like saying that every drama involving Jews must reference Treblinka.” See “An Equation for Black People on Stage” in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 19-20.

<sup>31</sup> Parks, 21-22.

<sup>32</sup> Garrett, “Possession,” 26.

other shit.

A black play knows that racereactions sell.

A black play knows that racereactions are a holding cell.

[...]

A black play is written by a black person.

A black play has black actors.

A black play is written by a white person and has white actors.

A black play doesn't have anything to do with black people. I'm saying

The Glass Menagerie is a black play.

SAY WHAT?

EXCUSE ME?!?!

Cause the presence of the white suggests the presence of the black. Every play that is born of the United States of America is a black play because we all exist in the shadow of slavery. All of us. The Iceman Cometh is a black play. Angels in America is a black play and Kushner knows he's a brother. It's all black.<sup>33</sup>

Here Parks frames her categorical dismantling of “white” and “Black” theatre within the broader historical intervention so pervasive in her work: redefining Black theatre as expansively open-ended rather than narrowly political enables Parks to demonstrate how profoundly American History is shaped by the Black histories it has tried to sublimate.

Parks's plays compulsively resurrect and reinvent larger-than-life American historical figures alongside equally enduring American racial stereotypes to show that the most ingrained and well-worn narratives of the nation are constructed around inhabitable myths rather than flesh

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<sup>33</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, “New Black Math,” *Theatre Journal* 57.4 (2005): 580.



and blood people. Both *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2002) feature Black characters who impersonate Abraham Lincoln and repeatedly reenact his assassination, and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) features a character named Black Man With Watermelon.<sup>34</sup> By conflating historical figures and stereotypes, Parks undermines History as a realistic and temporally linear narrative populated by discrete individual personages who can be authoritatively reassembled by piecing together biographical facts from the archive. Instead, these figures inhabit the present and evoke a temporality of haunting that “jams together the past and present, interrupting the teleological drive of what Édouard Glissant has famously called ‘History with a capital H,’ or history conceived as a singular master narrative.” In Parks’s plays, “the past breaks into the present like a ghostly intruder, and the distance between then and now dissolves into a disorienting sense of simultaneity.”<sup>35</sup> However, in Parks’s formulation—much as in Robin Coste Lewis’s—the present also intrudes into the past.

As Parks puts it, history “is not ‘was,’ history is ‘is.’ It’s present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past... so you can fill in the blanks.”<sup>36</sup> Parks’s notion of history as immanent and of its temporality as bi-directional puts greater pressure on the ways we interpret and marshal history (and historical figures) to serve our own ends.<sup>37</sup> Parks acknowledges the contingency of that history by positioning herself as a

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<sup>34</sup> Parks challenges the narrative authority of capital “H” American History by situating *The America Play* within “an exact replica of the Great Hole of History,” which contains those narratives of Black life willfully excluded from national histories of democracy, liberty, and equality for all (159). *Death of the Last Black Man* also features characters named Yes and Greens Blackeyed Peas Cornbread, and Black Woman with Fried Drumstick.

<sup>35</sup> Madhu Dubey, “Speculative Fictions of Slavery,” *American Literature; a Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography*, 82.4 (2010): 789.

<sup>36</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, “Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks,” Interview by Shelby Jiggetts, *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 316.

<sup>37</sup> This approach to history is evocative of Johannes Fabian’s argument in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* that asserting coevalness between the ethnographer and their interlocutors implicates the former in their representation of the latter (30).

medium through which history passes and emerges in her process of digging for bones, hearing them sing, and writing it down. However, the role of historical medium is not the sole purview of the playwright; this responsibility extends also to directors, actresses, and audiences. Parks insists that in the process of digging up and through these histories, all must come to terms with the dirt such an endeavor leaves on their hands as well as the smudgy prints their efforts leave on the histories they unearth.

As Parks's only play to feature a *non*-American figure, *Venus* offers unique evidence of the playwright's radical historiographic methods. Although Baartman never touched American soil, Americans still live in the shadow of her scientifically sanctioned dehumanization as the Hottentot Venus, which generated enduring and mobile myths about Black womanhood.<sup>38</sup> Recognizing this, Parks re-makes Baartman's history into a living and embodied narrative of her ongoing figuration. This history extends beyond the imbrication of Baartman herself and the racist trope thrust upon her to include the Black women who inhabit Baartman—her experience of gendered and racial violence as well as her unrecorded desires—in the present. Put differently, the bidirectional temporality of *Venus*'s historical project opens space for the playwright, directors, actresses, and audiences alike to inscribe their own stories upon Baartman's in intimate and cumulative layers. Like Hartman's *critical fabulation*, this project is governed by “[n]arrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure;” Baartman's fragmentary life remains fragmented (3). Parks, like Hartman, uses speculation to open up the past and articulate its eruptions into the present, but in endeavoring to “tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling,” Parks insists that this process is ongoing (11).

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 61-77.

Ultimately, Parks's *Venus* refuses to relate a stable history of Baartman from which a reader or audience can discover a concrete moral lesson while residing in the temporal safety of the present. This is why Parks refuses to make *Venus* a "two-hour saga with Venus being the victim" and instead presents her as "multi-faceted," "vain, beautiful, intelligent and yes, complicit."<sup>39</sup> By "multi-faceted," I argue that Parks refers *not* to the Venus's complex interiority, but rather to the unevenly legible layers of her palimpsestic constitution.

Parks lays the foundation for such a reading in her designation of Venus as a *figure*, a term that is central to Parks's dramaturgy. As she has emphatically asserted, her plays do not have characters, or "people just like people we know."<sup>40</sup> To "call them [characters] could be an injustice. They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers* maybe, *speakers* maybe, *shadows, slips, players* maybe, maybe *someone else's pulse*."<sup>41</sup> Her definition of *figure* is intentionally cryptic because, like the Black Venus herself, Parks's figures are never stable. As ghosts, they transcend time, and they haunt. As lovers, we are intimately intertwined with them. As shadows, they both reflect and obscure what lays behind and ahead of us. As the various "maybes" of Parks's definition suggest, her figures are contingent upon those who see, hear, love, and make them. Parks thus impresses upon directors, actors, and audiences of *Venus* that the only Baartman they can access in her play is the one they construct in the present by and through their own investments in her symbolic value—as helpless, as resistant, as complicit, as someone with whom they identify, as someone for whom they feel pity, and any combination thereof. Here I

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<sup>39</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks and Monte Williams, "At Lunch With: Suzan-Lori Parks; from a Planet Closer to the Sun," *New York Times* (17 April 1996), [www.nytimes.com/1996/04/17/garden/at-lunch-with-suzan-lori-parks-from-a-planet-closer-to-the-sun.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/17/garden/at-lunch-with-suzan-lori-parks-from-a-planet-closer-to-the-sun.html).

<sup>40</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks," Interview by Lee A. Jacobus in *Bedford Introduction to Drama* (Boston: Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 2001), 1633.

<sup>41</sup> Parks, "Elements of Style," emphasis in original 12.

depart from scholars who read Venus as a character caught between the real Baartman and the *static stereotype* of the Hottentot Venus.<sup>42</sup> Taking seriously Parks's designation of Venus as a contingent figure allows us to see the Hottentot Venus as one of many roles that the Venus performs both within Parks's play and in the diverse contexts of its various productions.

### ***“A Blueprint of an Event”***

Based loosely on Baartman's life, *Venus* recounts the story of a servant in South Africa we know only as The Girl who travels to London to perform as an exotic dancer on the assurance of her master (The Man) that she will keep half the profit. Instead, she is sold to the Mother-Showman who capitalizes on her striking figure and makes her the star of a freak act under the billing of the Venus Hottentot. She is displayed to the Chorus of the Spectators—an audience within the play—who sexually violate, ridicule, and objectify her. Venus is then *rescued* (purchased) by the Baron Docteur—Parks's version of Georges Cuvier—who whisks her off to Paris and studies her with the help of his colleagues, the Chorus of the 8 Anatomists. The Docteur and The Venus<sup>43</sup> engage in a warped love affair until mounting pressure to publish his anatomical findings convince him to expedite her demise so he can dissect her. This devastating narrative of Venus's life is frequently interrupted by the introduction of archival fragments about Baartman, such as newspaper editorials, broadside ballads, anatomical notes, and diary entries. Many of these are recited as “Historical Extracts” by the play's troubadour narrator, The Negro

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Catanese, “Transgressing Tradition;” Harry J. Elam Jr. and Alice Rayner, “Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks” in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, eds. Jeanne M. Colleran and Jenny Spencer (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1998), 265-82; McCormick, “Witnessing and Wounding;” and W. B. Worthen, “Citing History: Textuality and Performativity in the Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks,” *Essays in Theatre/Etudes Théâtrales* 18, no. 1 (1999): 3–22.

<sup>43</sup> The figure's name is listed in Parks's script as The Venus. Sometimes I refer to her this way, and sometimes I simply call her Venus.

Resurrectionist. Interspersed throughout the play are also scenes from the farcical love story, “For the Love of the Venus,” a parody of the 1814 French vaudeville “The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen.”<sup>44</sup>

The formal structure of *Venus* shatters any illusion that Baartman’s tragic exploitation is a relic of the past, or that audiences can restore her dignity through a cathartic witnessing of that tragedy. Instead, Parks implies that tragedy’s ostensibly redemptive temporal and affective closures only conceal Baartman’s ongoing use as a figure for someone else’s agenda. For example, The Venus’s death—easily construed as a tragic event—is repeatedly emptied of its affective weight and temporal finality. We learn of her death in the play’s Overture, but Venus never remains dead. In fact, Venus is one of multiple characters to announce her death: “(I regret to inform you that tuh Venus Hottentot iz dead./ There wont b inny show tuhnite).”<sup>45</sup> This jarring proclamation places audiences in an uncomfortable position by situating Venus’s death squarely in their present and labeling it a temporary impediment to their entertainment rather than a somber, tragic event. Luckily for her audiences, Venus revives and lives on until the play’s penultimate scene, when she dies *for real* (sort of). True to form, Parks subverts closure once again in the play’s final scene which repeats the Overture complete with the once-more-revived Venus’s announcement of her death. Through metatheatre and farcical circularity, Parks avoids “constructing history as tragedy,” which would risk “separat[ing] the past from our historical moment,” and thus mistakenly position contemporary audiences as “survivors with

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<sup>44</sup> This vaudeville was staged concurrently with Sarah Baartman’s exhibition in Paris. See Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 126.

<sup>45</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus: A Play* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 3. All subsequent citations are in the text.

greater insight and the possibility of transcendence.”<sup>46</sup> Instead, Parks implicates her audiences in the ongoing consumption of Baartman as a spectacle and performer.

She does so most forcefully by aligning her audiences with the play’s grotesque Chorus of the Spectators. Unlike the Chorus in a Greek tragedy, who traditionally mediate the action of the play to ensure the audience’s catharsis, Parks’s various Choruses thwart catharsis in every one of their iterations by confronting audiences with the parallels between nineteenth-century and contemporary forms of exploitative spectatorship.<sup>47</sup> One member of the Chorus of the Spectators extols Venus’s “bottoms” as “[m]agnificent. And endless. An ass to write home about./ Well worth the admission price./ A spectacle a debacle a priceless prize, thuh filthy slut./ Coco candy colored and dressed in au naturel / she likes when people peek and poke” (7-8). Contemporary audiences are retroactively implicated in Baartman’s commodification because the Chorus and the play’s audiences alike pay an “admission price” to see Venus perform, whether as a freak or a victim. The degradation Venus endures is unbearable to watch (or read), but when the Mother-Showman instructs her to “Look extra pitiful” to make the show more compelling, she exposes the entertainment value that audiences in *and* out of the play derive from witnessing Venus’s abjection (45).<sup>48</sup> The artifice that the play constructs around her

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<sup>46</sup> Irvin J. Hunt, “‘There Wont Be Inny Show Tonite’: Humoring the Returns of Scopic Violence in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*” in *History and Humor: British and American Perspectives*, eds. Barbara Korte and Doris Lechner (Germany: Transcript Press, 2014), 176.

<sup>47</sup> The more traditional Chorus, in serving as *official* witness, relieves audiences from active involvement in the action of the play, and, by extension, in the structures of power it depicts. See Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 25-27.

<sup>48</sup> The Mother-Showman explicitly markets Venus’s abjection to “Ladies and Gents” who are “feeling lowly...Perhaps yr feelin that yr life is all for naught? Come on inside and get yr spirits lifted./ One look at thisll make you feel like a King” (45)! As Desiree Lewis points out (and as I have demonstrated in previous chapters), “black women’s bodies have often been the subject of voyeuristic consumption, the consumption not only of black women’s sexuality, but also of black women’s trauma and pain.” See Desiree Lewis, “Against the Grain: Black Women and Sexuality,” *Agenda* 63 (2005): 15.

victimization not only precludes catharsis, but also erodes the moral high-ground that a tragic portrayal of Baartman would presume to occupy. Instead, Parks implies that labeling Baartman an uncomprehending victim merely appropriates her to serve progressive political agendas where her value as a symbol exceeds her value as an individual. During Baartman's lifetime, abolitionists condemned her exhibition, arguing that she was a captive being displayed against her will. Capitalizing on the timing of her exhibition—just three years after Britain had abolished the slave trade—their humanitarian cause had the most to gain by diminishing Baartman's humanity through a total negation of her agency, regardless of what she may have actually desired.<sup>49</sup>

By depicting Venus as a sometimes-enthusiastic participant in her own commodification—including her calculated performance of the victim—Parks also thwarts audiences' desires to see Baartman as unequivocally resistant to degrading herself for money and thus morally unassailable. Parks's Venus exchanges her dignity for the prospect of a better life over which she can exercise some control and seems less concerned with her own commodification as a "Coco candy colored" prize than her ability to accumulate commodities like the cliché heart-shaped boxes of chocolates she consumes throughout the play. In this role—that of a woman making the best of a horrific situation—Parks's Venus appeals most forcefully to those who aim to recover Baartman's humanity by refusing to reduce her either to a figure of abject victimization or superhuman resistance. In other words, Parks reveals that Baartman's figuration does not persist in negative stereotypes alone but also in positive reclamations and

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<sup>49</sup> Warner, "Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment," 192. As Jean Fagan Yellin explains, the enslaved woman and the tragic mulatta were strategically deployed by feminists and abolitionists alike as types aimed at securing white women's empathy for Black women. However, these types encouraged "white readers to identify with the victim by gender while distancing themselves by race and thus to avoid confronting a racial ideology that denies the full humanity of nonwhite women." See *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 71.

recoveries. By suggesting that Venus performs all of these roles for the benefit of her paying audiences, Parks repositions those audiences as complicit actors in, rather than innocent bystanders of, the history unfolding onstage.

Venus's role(s) as a lover are the most difficult to parse but also the most pivotal example of Parks's palimpsestic approach to recovery: they grant audiences simulated access to Baartman's complex personhood while simultaneously implicating them in Baartman's continued entrapment within the figure of the Black Venus. Although there is little historical evidence that Baartman and Cuvier had more than a brief, formal interaction during her lifetime, Parks invents a love story between them and makes it the center of her play. I contend that Parks's layering of this particular fiction upon the archive constitutes a radical act of critical fabulation governed by a double gesture similar to Hartman's. On the one hand, the fictional love story between the Baron Docteur and Venus draws upon dramatic realism to (re)imagine Baartman's interior subjectivity. On the other hand, the farcical double of this love affair in "For the Love of the Venus," the play within the play, "amplifies the impossibility" of that endeavor by reasserting Baartman's inescapable instrumentality as a figure inhabitable by both white and Black women (Hartman 11).<sup>50</sup>

Framing the Venus and the Baron Docteur's relationship within a love story removes the historical figures they embody from the easy dichotomy of victim/victimizer and repositions them within the more complex dynamics of a kind of reciprocal intimate commerce. By (re)imagining Baartman through this invented affair, Parks makes her more than a sexually

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<sup>50</sup> Venus's liminal position between beloved and figure is a potent reminder that Black female desire and sexual agency are haunted by the spectacular fiction of assumed consent, rendering it difficult to ascertain whether we are witnessing a moment of Venus's genuine agency or a farcical repetition of discursively violent stereotypes. See, for example, Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39.



exploited object of others' desires; she becomes also a self-possessed subject for whom sex provides both pleasure and security. Venus submits her body to the Docteur as both a scientific specimen and a sexual companion in exchange for "new clothes," "good meals," and "100 a week" (88). They also seem to genuinely care for one another: Venus sighs, "hhh/ I love him" and daydreams of their future wedded bliss (135). And the Docteur reciprocates Venus's affection, echoing her desire for a shared, legitimate future: "Shes my True Love./ She'd make uh splendid wife" (140). Of course, the relative reciprocity they share is dwarfed by the grossly asymmetrical relations of power which give the Docteur control over her life and afterlife. The play issues frequent reminders that the Docteur's overwhelming interest in the Venus is scientific: "A Scene of Love?" in which they first meet is immediately followed by the Docteur's reading of her autopsy, and between affirmations of his love for her, he discusses the imminent maceration of her body amongst his colleagues.

The Docteur's racist, colonialist dehumanization of Venus notwithstanding, Parks is invested in making the intimacy between them real. Following a mostly linear narrative, the "scene[s] of love" between Venus and the Docteur are also the least metatheatrical and the most realistic in the play. They occur outside the spectacles of the freak show and the anatomical theatre, and thus imagine Baartman "outside the terms of statements and judgments that banished [her] from the category of the human" (Hartman 9). In fact, they occur within the simulated spaces of bourgeois domesticity from which the Black Venus had so long been excluded, except as an object. Within these scenes, the Docteur's tortured ambivalence and Venus's devastation by her lover's ultimate betrayal offer some of the most recognizable instances of psychological

complexity in a play otherwise populated by caricaturish figures.<sup>51</sup> The absence of the Chorus from these scenes also heightens the audiences' illusions of unmediated access to Venus's interiority by eliminating the visual reminder of her performativity and their spectatorship. However, Parks never allows this realistic narrative or its seemingly naturalistic Venus to cohere.

Instead, she repeatedly interrupts it with fragments of the play within the play—"For the Love of the Venus"—whose farcical love story transforms the erstwhile fleshed-out individual Venus into pure exteriority, a literal costume inhabitable and disposable by white women.<sup>52</sup> Performed by the Chorus of *Venus*, "For the Love" boasts a single audience member, the Baron Docteur. It depicts The Young Man, who, titillated by his uncle's adventures in colonial Africa, has lost interest in his fiancée, aptly named the Bride-to-Be. Desperate to "love something Wild," he convinces his uncle to find him a Hottentot (49). In an effort to win back her Young Man, the distraught Bride-to-Be disguises herself as the Hottentot Venus he desires. The Young Man is entirely convinced by the dissemblance and proposes to his incognito fiancée whose revelation of her true inner whiteness at the conclusion of this strange spectacle only reaffirms his devotion to her.<sup>53</sup>

The predictable plot of "For the Love" makes Parks's omission of most of its scenes incidental until we realize that its fragmented, hackneyed narrative is actually sutured together by

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<sup>51</sup> None of the play's figures are given proper names, but it is notable that the Docteur never calls Venus by that name; he only calls her "Girl," which is the name Parks gives her in the first scene of the play, before she becomes The Venus Hottentot. In scene 14, he proclaims, "I love you, Girl" (108).

<sup>52</sup> Henceforth "For the Love."

<sup>53</sup> In putting on the allure of the black female body, only to shed this exterior and embrace her pure white core at the end, the Bride-to-Be invokes a trans-Atlantic literary tradition of appropriating blackness for its presumed implications of sexual agency, only to disavow it when no longer needed. For a discussion of this practice in nineteenth-century white Southern feminist sentimental fiction, see Janet Gabler-Hover, *Dreaming Black/Writing White: The Hagar Myth in American Cultural History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

the ‘real’ love story between Venus and the Baron Docteur. In fact, “For the Love” structurally frames its more naturalistic counterpart. At about the time that the Baron Docteur enters the central play and purchases Venus from The Mother-Showman, “For the Love” disappears, and its romantic narrative is inhabited by its former spectator—the Baron Docteur himself. Once “For the Love” resumes, however, the Baron Docteur’s projected desires have become his reality—he has found himself “something Wild” to love—and so he no longer attends to the play within his play (49). However, after the Docteur has facilitated Venus’s death, exhumed, and dissected her, he returns to watch the inset play’s happy conclusion, having sacrificed his own to professional ambition. Starkly divergent in tone, these love stories are nevertheless indivisible layers of a single narrative in which Venus is an expendable vehicle for the realization of someone else’s desires. Parks’s critical fabulation thus reaffirms the inextricability of Baartman’s subjectivity from her contingency as a figure. In neither case does Parks allow readers or audiences to imagine Venus as abstract; instead she is embodied in the flesh the Docteur desires—both erotically and scientifically—and in the costume the Bride-to-Be dons.

By presenting appropriations of Baartman as corporeal, rather than allegorical alone, Parks recasts efforts (including her own) to access Baartman’s interiority as an inescapably violent intrusion with opportunistic ends. In the “Dis(re)memberment of Venus,” the only scene to actively combine the play’s two love stories, Parks likens contemporary desires to witness Baartman’s inner life to earlier dehumanizing forms of her exploitation. Set in the “Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen” and enacted during the play’s intermission, this scene reproduces eight graphic pages of the archival record of Baartman’s dissection. As the Baron Docteur’s reading of the autopsy report alternates with The Bride-to-Be’s reading of love letters from her fiancé, the

overlapping monologues reframe the report's dehumanizing empiricism as morbid intimacy with Baartman's literal interior:

**The Bride-to-Be**

"My love for you, My Love, is artificial

Fabricated much like this epistle."

**The Baron Docteur**

The height, measured after death,

was 4 feet 11 and ½ inches.

The total weight of the body was 98 pounds *avoirdupois*.

As an aside I should say

that as to the *value* of the information that I present

to you today there can be no doubt.

Their significance

will be felt far beyond our select community...

[...]

**The Bride-to-Be**

"My love for you, My Love, is artificial

Fabricated much like this epistle."

Constructed with man's finest powrs

Will last through the days and the years and the hours." (92, 95)

The Bride-to-Be's emblems of Love—her letters, but also her Hottentot Venus disguise—"last through the days and the years and the hours" precisely because they are synthetic,

“[c]onstructed with man’s finest powrs.” Both their constructedness and their longevity are explicitly linked, here, with the Docteur’s similar claims for the endurance of his scientific “Dis(re)memberment of Venus.” While Baartman the individual does not endure—her mortal flesh is the very centerpiece of this horrific scene—the broad reach of her discursive significance is “felt far beyond [the] select community” of the anatomical theatre and extends into the physical space and time of the play’s audience.

The reading of Baartman’s autopsy during *Venus*’s intermission breaches the performative boundary between the play and its audience, particularly because The Docteur addresses his “Dis(re)memberment of Venus” directly to the audience, whom he identifies as his scientific colleagues. He states, “I do invite you, Distinguished Gentlemen,/ Colleagues and yr Distinguished Guests,/ if you need relief / please take yourselves uh breather in thuh lobby” (91).<sup>54</sup> Parks’s positioning of the audience here conflates their desire to gain intimate access to Baartman’s interiority (and thus re-member her) with the gruesome intrusiveness of the anatomical theatre (that dis-members her). In so doing, she challenges the notion that a dignified recovery of that interiority can ever be disinterested or complete. As Elam and Rayner argue in their reading of this scene, “[t]he anatomical detail is horrific and fascinating. An audience, hungry for reality, is fed information about the ‘real’ Baartman. But the information is what placed the Venus in a scientific taxonomy that served to confirm the belief that blacks were a

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<sup>54</sup> Audiences are not sure whether to take him at his word, for theatrical conventions tell us both that we may leave during the intermission and also that we must *not* leave while the play is in progress. Thus, even as Parks seems to provide the audience with a way out, “[n]either staying nor going, the play implies, absolves anyone of the sin of [...] complicity in voyeurism, in exploitation, in theatricality,” and in the imaginative construction of Venus. See Shawn-Marie Garrett, “‘For the Love of the Venus’: Suzan-Lori Parks, Richard Foreman, and the Premiere of Parks’s *Venus*” in *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*, ed. Philip Kolin (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 79.

primitive and inferior class of humans.”<sup>55</sup> Neither a literal nor a figurative dissection, Parks implies, yields “anything about [Venus] that hasn’t already been stated,” because, like the Docteur, audiences ultimately sacrifice the individual they want to love for the instrumental figures into which they fashion her (Hartman 11). *Venus* leaves no escape hatch from the ethical compromises of either spectatorship or recovery, however well-intentioned its audiences.

### ***A Figure Made in Performance***

The temporal and affective open-endedness of Baartman’s history in *Venus* dramatizes the possibilities of critical fabulation by staging the haunted present through the unique temporalities of performance and its reception. However, as I indicated earlier, the most striking evidence of Parks’s critical fabulation *in action* is also the least studied. While several scholars illuminate the play’s resistance to closure and its liminal rendering of Venus, most restrict their analysis to the text of the play and its debut production at the NYC Joseph Papp Public Theatre in 1996 under the direction of Richard Foreman. This production provides compelling evidence for interpretations of *Venus* because its adherence to the text’s distancing strategies successfully conveys the hypermediation of its heroine. However, Foreman disrupts the balance so fundamental to Parks’s method of critical fabulation by dismissing Venus’s humanity and the intimate implication it invites.

Foreman is a world-renowned experimental director and playwright whose work is thoroughly steeped in the alienating techniques of Brechtian theatre. He “constitutionally loathes” any “empathetic identification of spectator with actor,” and intentionally preempts this phenomenon by committing fully to the distancing impulses in Parks’ text, even amplifying them

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<sup>55</sup> Elam and Rayner, “Body Parts,” 277.

with his own repertoire of avant-garde elements.<sup>56</sup> For example, in his production of *Venus*, Foreman erects a network of parallel wires separating the actors from the audience, places a pulsing red light above the proscenium stage, and blares jarring sound effects at seemingly random moments throughout the play. These literal distancing strategies mediate the space of the theatre and prevent audiences from immersing themselves in the world of the play's characters, especially its heroine. When Foreman's production first opened, reviewers criticized its failure to portray Venus as a realistic and fully human recreation of Baartman. Even fans of Parks and Foreman's unconventional dramaturgy found their absurdist version of Baartman's story frustrating.<sup>57</sup> *Village Voice* theatre critic Michael Feingold lamented the way Foreman's approach kept "a maddeningly rigid distance from the life and times of a woman who was, in the first instance a human being, and whose humanity is presumably the source of Parks's interest in her."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Foreman's inscription of the play's *dramatis personae* upon the physical structures of the set effectively undermined any notion that the words Venus spoke emerged organically from a character who is "just like people we know."<sup>59</sup> Instead, like many Black Venus figures before her, Parks's Venus remained circumscribed within textual mechanisms of her representation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Garrett, "For the Love," 80.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Alexis Greene, "Venus," *Theater Week* 9.42 (20 May 1996): 18 and Irene Backalenick, "'Venus' Plays Yale Rep before Going Public," *Westport News* (27 March 1996): 31.

<sup>58</sup> Feingold, "Carnival Knowledge," 81.

<sup>59</sup> Parks and Jacobus, "Interview," 1633.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the role of the printed name in constructing Venus's figurative subjectivity, see Jennifer Johung, "Figuring the 'Spells'/Spelling the Figures: Suzan-Lori Parks's 'Scene of Love (?)'" *Theatre Journal*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2006): 45-6.

Foreman's insistence on costuming Adina Porter, the actress playing Venus, with padded prosthetic buttocks reinforced Venus's status as a figure overdetermined by and irretrievable from her warped representations (see fig. 22). Parks's text does not offer any guidance on how Venus should be represented onstage, but theatre scholars largely share Catanese's opinion that a prosthetic bolsters Parks's project by "forc[ing] audiences to recognize the object of their desire as a projection rather than a truth."<sup>61</sup> As the caricaturish bodysuit only covered Porter from the waist down, leaving her upper body exposed, the visible distinction between the actress's body and the costume she wore reinforced the similar disjuncture between Baartman the individual and the role she inhabited as the Venus Hottentot.<sup>62</sup> While Catanese contends that a "bodysuit allows the actress to perform her distance from the Venus Hottentot and her identification instead with Saartjie Baartman's semi-invisible interiority," Richard Foreman sought to eliminate that interiority altogether.<sup>63</sup>

In Foreman's rendering, the farcical iteration of Venus as an inhabitable costume completely overwhelms any glimmer of her intimate life afforded by the central love story. Foreman even introduces a bizarre prop—a sort of Hottentot Venus rag doll—to tether the *real* Venus more forcefully to her figuration. This prop is inexplicably handed to the Bride-to-Be in Act II, Scene 12 of "For the Love," wherein The Mother convinces her future daughter-in-law to disguise herself as the Hottentot Venus to win back her fiancé. The doll reappears shortly after, in the play's most tender scene between Venus and the Baron Docteur. Here, in a gesture of intimacy beyond carnal desire, the Docteur gives the Venus a haircut and tends to her when she

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<sup>61</sup> Brandi W. Catanese, "Remembering Saartjie Baartman," *Atlantic Studies: Literary, Cultural, and Historic Perspectives* 7.1 (2010): 59.

<sup>62</sup> See Elam and Rayner, "Body Parts," 171-72.

<sup>63</sup> Catanese, "Remembering Saartjie Baartman," 59.



feels ill. Venus excitedly breaks the news that she is pregnant with the Docteur's child, inviting him to "Put yr hand here, Sweetheart," and "guess" what he's feeling (127-28). At this precise moment, Foreman's Venus reproduces the same Hottentot Venus effigy that appeared shortly before in "For the Love," where it marked the Bride-to-Be's resolution to inhabit the Hottentot Venus as a costume to secure her own domestic happiness. Here, in this comparatively heartfelt moment, the appearance of the effigy is jarring—and that seems to be Foreman's point. As Venus holds the doll against her abdomen, the prop reiterates that, as a figure, this Venus can only beget more simulacra. The Docteur's urgent demand that they abort the baby, a devastating moment in the text, is similarly evacuated of its affective potency because Foreman's imposition of the doll has forced the audience to see the child as a phony prop. Foreman's overwrought manipulations led critics, and even Parks herself, to regard the production as a failure: "All I wanted for 'Venus' was, you know, a temperature, a pulse," Parks lamented. "It just seemed cold to me."<sup>64</sup> By reducing the play's central love story to the farce of its counterpart, Foreman's production effectively eliminated half of the double gesture that defines Parks's critical fabulation.

The point here is not to romanticize Venus's love affair with the Baron Docteur but rather to recognize how imbricated it is—in both its tenderness and its exploitation—with the love affair Parks's play fosters between Venus, those who embody her, and those who watch her come to life on stage. When Hartman hesitates to write a romance about the girl Venus, she speaks not only of the love she would imagine into being between the two girls aboard the

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<sup>64</sup> Hilton Als, "The Show-Woman," *New Yorker*. 82.35 (30 Oct. 2006), [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/30/the-show-woman](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/30/the-show-woman). For a discussion of Parks's positioning as a relative newcomer alongside the avant-garde titan Foreman, and her decision to sacrifice some creative autonomy in the debut production of *Venus*, see Garrett, "For the Love," 83.

*Recovery*, but also her own love for and need of them. Parks's double gesture in *Venus* similarly frames the romance of recovery as one of intimate implication rather than distancing closure because it layers the needs and desires of those doing the imagining—the playwright, directors, actresses, and audiences—onto the figures being re-imagined. In the twenty years following Foreman's staging of *Venus*, four other professional productions of the play have labored to let audiences reach and love Baartman in ways that Foreman's did not. Although they are all ostensibly trying to recover the same woman, their divergent investments in her symbolic value inscribe themselves on the figures they revive. The layered versions of Baartman emerging from these productions, both individually and in aggregate, thus reframe critical fabulation as a collective and ongoing praxis.

### ***Bringing Sarah Home | Johannesburg and Cape Town***

White American director Cynthia Croot's 2002 productions of *Venus* in South Africa explicitly aimed to recover Sarah Baartman as part of a nationwide commemoration of her repatriation.<sup>65</sup> Croot's first production of *Venus* was staged at the Windybrow Arts Centre in Hillbrow, Johannesburg in a 300-seat theatre with a full complement of tech, costumes, and set design. Croot involved the local community in every aspect of the production process to ensure that it would reflect Baartman's unique significance for them and honor her return. The playbill advertised this mission in both text and image: it read, "After 188 years of exile, She's come home," and featured only an image of Baartman's face, unlike most playbills which depict Baartman's body in profile (see fig. 23). In a reversal of Foreman's approach, Croot did not

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<sup>65</sup> The two productions were mounted as part of "The Venus Project," produced by Bridgit Antoinette Evans and Rana Kazkaz. Evans and Kazkaz created the project specifically as a commemoration of Baartman's life.

outfit the actress playing Venus with a prosthetic because the restoration of Baartman's human dignity demanded that she be embodied as a flesh-and-blood woman rather than a warped projection of others' desires.

Unlike the text of the play, which emphasized the realism of the love affair between Venus and the Baron Docteur to imagine Baartman's inner life beyond her fragmented appearances in the colonial archive as the Hottentot Venus, Croot's Johannesburg production amplified Baartman's humanity through its contrast with a caricaturish representation of the Docteur as a symbol of colonial violence. Admittedly, the extremity of the Docteur's portrayal was largely an unintended consequence of having to navigate the persistent legacy of apartheid's racial inequality. When the white actor cast as the Baron Docteur "demanded four times the salary of the black Africans in the cast," Croot refused his request and decided to cast a dark-skinned local actor named Walter Chakela in the role instead.<sup>66</sup> Parks's text is in no way prescriptive about the casting of its characters, but this choice significantly altered the political and affective resonance of the play in Johannesburg. "[B]y not having a white South African in the role, we lost the sense of the Baron Docteur as colonizer, and that was really important to us," Croot lamented. As a corrective, the production team costumed the actor in whiteface, which had the "unexpected effect of being [both] menacing and strangely comic" (see fig. 24). As a result, Croot reflects, "the audience was part of his endeavor, which was to reveal the white character as absurd as well as dangerous." Furthermore, "because he was a familiar performer in the community, the audience felt on that character's side, not in terms of his journey with Venus,

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<sup>66</sup> Croot, "Venus Embodied," 73.

but rather in terms of his dismantling of whiteness.”<sup>67</sup> The Docteur’s highly symbolic embodiment reinforced the Venus’s realism by contrast, but at the expense of the intimacy so central to Parks’s radical historiography. South African audiences eager to witness the true likeness of their ancestor may not have been persuaded that an invented love story between Baartman and her oppressor was an effective mechanism for uncovering that likeness.

Despite Croot’s efforts, extricating Baartman from the densely layered Black Venus figure proved more challenging than she anticipated. Baartman’s American resonance was sutured so deeply into Parks’s text that Croot and her American production team struggled to make this recovery of Baartman legible for her own people. During workshops in Johannesburg, students admitted outright, “this is not how we would tell the story of Sarah.”<sup>68</sup> Croot discovered that, “[t]o the South African ear, [the play’s] was a distinctly U.S. voice taking on the story of a [South African] national treasure.”<sup>69</sup> That distinctly American voice inhibited her audience’s ability to hear Venus speak as one of their own. According to Croot, it also hindered the South African actress’s ability to inhabit the role of Venus as Baartman. The director questioned whether Parks’s idiom “was ever entirely known in the body, [...] because [it is] rooted in an American understanding of race, and not a South African one” (“Croot Interview”).<sup>70</sup> As is true of many American appropriations of Baartman, Parks’s play overwrites South African systems

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<sup>67</sup> Cynthia Croot, “Personal Interview,” Interview by Lauren Dembowitz, 14 Feb. 2018. Henceforth cited in the text as “Croot Interview.” As I will discuss later, it is significant that Parks’s *Black Venus* becomes a vehicle for dismantling whiteness given her instrumental role in constructing it centuries earlier.

<sup>68</sup> Croot, “Venus Embodied,” 72.

<sup>69</sup> Croot, 73.

<sup>70</sup> Here Croot raises an important distinction between South African and African American (and other African diasporic) experiences of race that is often glossed over in Baartman’s rendering as a symbol of transnational Black injury.

of racial classification in which Baartman, as a Khoisan tribe member, would have been identified as “coloured,” with binary racial categories of Black and white.<sup>71</sup> Parks’s American idiom notwithstanding, the play’s circular temporality and farcical tone were likely discordant for South African audiences eagerly anticipating the long-awaited closure to Baartman’s protracted suffering and exploitation, which may explain why Croot chose to cut the Chorus scenes altogether from her subsequent production in Cape Town.

In her Cape Town staging of *Venus*, Croot made drastic alterations to the text in her effort to honor Sarah Baartman on the day of her burial. The performance was staged in the intimate setting of a small, multi-purpose room at The Saartjie Baartman’s Centre for Children and Women by a cast composed of mostly American actors from Croot’s production team.<sup>72</sup> Led by executive producer Bridgit Antoinette Evans in the role of Venus, they performed a largely redacted version of the play featuring only its major characters. “We were performing literally for her relatives,” Croot relates. “There was a reverence [and] a generosity to it.” In a stark reversal of Foreman’s debut production, Croot’s production entailed “a de-emphasis on entertainment and much more of an emphasis on immediacy and emotional connection. It was utterly different” (“Croot Interview”). To achieve this effect, however, Croot cut almost half of the play, including “For the Love of the Venus,” which so assiduously reinforced Baartman’s figuration. The need for such considerable omissions demonstrates how thoroughly the original text of *Venus* frames its telling of Baartman’s life through the kind of implicating distancing strategies that make a reverent recovery almost impossible.

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<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Kellen Hoxworth, “The Many Racial Effigies of Sara Baartman,” *Theatre Survey* 58.3 (2017): 275-299. To some extent, this recalls the ways in which Yarico’s identity as a Native American is frequently overwritten by a more politically salient African Blackness.

<sup>72</sup> The Saartjie Baartman’s Centre for Children and Women is a domestic violence survivor shelter.

It occurred to me during my interview with Croot that even without the Chorus and moments of high spectacle, *Venus* remains a provocative portrayal of Baartman. I asked Croot if she felt nervous about presenting this version of Baartman's story to her descendants on the day of her burial and in a center bearing her name. Her response struck me for how precisely and unexpectedly it aligned with Parks's commitment to "making history" on stage through the collective praxis of critical fabulation. Croot said:

The day was already what the day was. We were not going to change that. And the feelings that people had about that day [...], the things that people were feeling, they brought that to the room itself. So, we're in a context that is both celebratory and funereal at the beginning of the show, that is very tender and full of loss, and also sort of rejoicing and full of gratitude. In a way, I think that the actors brought that into the text. I think that we tried as much as we could to speak to the people in the room, and the people in the room were very moved by it. There was crying, a lot of thank yous and hugs at the end. I think that the emphasis in that telling of it, was that there was a woman who was lost. And she wanted to come home, and then she did, in reality. And I think that's what was alive in that version. ("Croot Interview")

As Croot concluded this heartfelt (and tearful) account, she laughed and admitted, "You know, if Suzan-Lori were sitting here with me right now talking to you, she might be losing her mind, because that is *not* her play!" I could hardly argue with her: Croot's extensive cuts notwithstanding, the cathartic effect of her production in the climactic moment of Baartman's concurrent burial seems to provide the kind of closure that Parks's text so vehemently resists. However, Croot's description of how profoundly the audience and actors shaped the events that unfolded onstage through their love for Baartman confirms that even this edited version of *Venus*

is a work fashioned through acts of radical recovery that “make history” as an *ongoing*, rather than a completed, narrative.

Croot’s adaptation of *Venus* is not without its ethical complications: her production’s participation in the theatricality of Baartman’s burial as a national (and internationally televised) event reveals that Baartman is still obliged to perform a variety of symbolic roles, even within the communities for whom her individual identity is most proximate. In South Africa, Baartman continues to circulate as a contested symbol. She is a figure of national cohesion in the wake of apartheid, colonialism, and slavery but also of past and ongoing Indigenous disenfranchisement.<sup>73</sup> As I indicated earlier, President Thabo Mbeki harnessed Baartman’s burial as a political tool to unify the post-apartheid nation. Baartman’s Khoisan descendants also capitalized on her transformation into a national icon in order to bring Indigenous identities and land rights to the fore of national policy.<sup>74</sup> Recent plans to turn Baartman’s gravesite into a tourist destination, complete with a museum of Khoisan history, demonstrate that her burial has

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<sup>73</sup> Baartman’s homecoming celebration has not been without its critics; many see Baartman’s allegorical mothering of the nation as just one more use of her for someone else’s gain. Biographers Crais and Scully argue that “Sara Baartman had become a commodity in three senses: as a body to be held, as a woman owned by others, and as economic capital that could generate additional resources, indeed, give birth to new identities in a post-apartheid South Africa.” See *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 158.

<sup>74</sup> See Warner, “Suzan-Lori Parks’s Drama of Disinterment,” 182. See also Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 149-63. Because the Khoisan continue to be marginalized and subsumed under rainbow nationalism, Baartman’s iconicity secured largely through the extensive publicity surrounding her repatriation granted political weight to Indigenous efforts to secure ethnic reparation. Although Baartman has become a national icon in South Africa over the past thirty years, the South African government under apartheid was complicit in pathologizing Baartman’s body to justify her treatment and sever her Khoisan descendants and other South Africans of color from the history Baartman embodied. Khoisan activist Jean Burgess recalls that “in government schools,” Baartman “was portrayed as an ugly woman with big bums, a prostitute, who deserved to die. [That] ensured the ruler that we would never claim the remains because we could not identify with the woman.” See Steven C. Dubin, *Mounting Queen Victoria: Curating Cultural Change in South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2009), 99. In this context, *Venus* affords South African—and especially Khoisan—audiences the opportunity to recover their ancestor’s body not only from the clutches of colonial France, but also from the more recent discursive violence of their own government.

not spared her the recommodification of her body.<sup>75</sup> Baartman's afterlife in South Africa, like Parks's circular representation of Venus's death, reveals that even after Baartman's body is laid to rest, people in and beyond South Africa continue to inhabit and reshape her corporeal story. As closely as Croot's production approached to closure and catharsis through its effort to restore a South African ancestor, the embodiment of that ancestor by an African American actress formed a potent reminder that while "Baartman [the individual] belongs to none of us," the Black Venus figure is claimed by many.<sup>76</sup>

### ***"Who Is She to Me?" | Liberty City***

African-American director Rachel Finley's 2017 production of *Venus* at the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center (AHCAC) in Liberty City (Miami), Florida sought to retrieve Baartman's humanity from within the figure of the Hottentot Venus in order to make her story more accessible to and resonant with her largely working-class, African American audience.<sup>77</sup> *Venus* appealed to Finley because it "draws so many parallels" between Baartman's experience two hundred years ago and "the ways in which [Black] women are fetishized and exploited today." Finley suggested that *Venus* has an added resonance in Miami, a city that "has for ages been the booty music capital of the world" and thus boasts a culture that naturalizes the

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<sup>75</sup> Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 163. Even during the televised ceremony marking Baartman's repatriation at the South African embassy in Paris, the solemnity of Khoisan poet Diana Ferrus's tribute to Baartman is interrupted when members of the French and South African contingents pose for photo ops around the painted cast of Baartman's mostly nude body. See Zola Maseko, and Gail Smith, *The Return of Sarah Bartman* (Black Roots Pictures, 2003).

<sup>76</sup> Warner, "Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment," 197.

<sup>77</sup> While Finley's audience was by no means homogenous, her directorial choices seem primarily informed by the local community surrounding the AHCAC, mostly African Americans with limited experience as theatregoers, having only attended church plays if any at all. The production was mounted in conjunction with an art exhibition entitled "Resurrecting Venus: The Cycle Continues" featuring work "artwork that spoke to the modern woman's relationship to the Sarah Baartman story."



objectification of (especially Black) women's bodies.<sup>78</sup> Like many of the Black feminist recoveries I examined earlier in this chapter, Finley's production responds to the "every day terror of [American] racism" whose "normative character...insures its invisibility" by "turn[ing] back to an era in which the reality of racial injury can be incontrovertibly established and [insisting] on the essential continuity of [Baartman's] past with the present."<sup>79</sup> Finley believed that "seeing how dehumanizing [Baartman's objectification] was might help [her audience] see how dehumanizing [Black women's objectification] is today" ("Finley Interview").<sup>80</sup> Like Croot, Finley's attempts to draw her audience closer to Baartman lead her to temper those metatheatrical elements of the play which render its heroine's inner life so elusive. As a result, however, Finley's desire to present Baartman as an individual historical subject is in constant tension with the political exigency to make her interiority legible to and inhabitable by African American women in her audience.

Like Croot, Finley opts not to costume Athena Lightburn, the actress playing Venus, with a prosthetic. Catanese's argument that a prosthetic "forces audiences to recognize the object of their desire as a projection rather than a truth" does not center an audience like Finley's, many of whom "have the body type that Sarah Baartman had."<sup>81</sup> Finley recounts how "[s]o many women came up to [her] after [the show] and told [her] how much they related to what Baartman was going through, to having people grope them and think it's okay," as if their body shape

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<sup>78</sup> Rachel Finley, "Interview," Interview by Lauren Dembowitz, 3 Feb. 2018. Henceforth cited in the text as "Finley Interview."

<sup>79</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.4 (2002): 770, 772; Dubey, "Speculative Fictions of Slavery," 795.

<sup>80</sup> See also Hoxworth, "The Many Racial Effigies of Sara Baartman," 276.

<sup>81</sup> Catanese, "Remembering Saartjie Baartman," 59.

authorized such violations (“Finley Interview”). By presenting Venus as a real, curvy woman, like many in her audience, Finley emphasizes Venus’s interiority rather than the spectacular character of her exterior form. In a reversal of Foreman’s approach, therefore, Finley emphatically distinguishes Venus from Parks’s more Brechtian figures, identifying her as a three-dimensional character endowed with psychological complexity. In doing so, she resists the text’s insistence that Venus and the Chorus *alike* are figures, “*signs* of something and not people just like people we know.”<sup>82</sup> Ironically, Parks’s rendering of Venus as a malleable figure rather than an individual subject is precisely what enables Finley to construct Venus’s humanity in ways that resonate with her particular audience.

For example, Finley embraces the fictional love affair between Venus and the Baron Docteur as the primary vehicle for conveying Baartman’s humanity to a contemporary audience, and vehemently dismisses accusations that it is an “affront against Sarah Baartman.” Finley explained it thus:

Love is such a basic human need that you’re going to get it wherever you can. And to me, if anything, that speaks more to her humanity, because if she was just staunchly [...] fighting it all the time, that’s not human. That’s superhuman. To say ‘I don’t need love! I just need freedom.’ I don’t think anybody’s like that. I think we all need love. We all want to be loved. (“Finley Interview”)<sup>83</sup>

In an echo of Croot’s Johannesburg production, however, Finley does not extend the humanizing realism which the play’s central love affair affords Venus to the Baron Docteur. In stark

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<sup>82</sup> Parks and Jacobus, “Interview,” 1633.

<sup>83</sup> Finley elaborated, suggesting that people who are offended by Parks’s inclusion of the love affair “don’t want to see her as human. They want to see her as something better than human. That would be equally unfair to the depiction of her. Human beings are fragile. Human beings do have needs [and] don’t always make the choice that’s the most ‘righteous.’ My feeling is that it humanizes her more than anything.”

juxtaposition with Venus's realistic embodiment, Finley costumes the white actor playing the Docteur in whiteface. In so doing, she severs the character from his historical referent, Georges Cuvier, and transforms him into a more politically potent signifier of the racist and sexist violence white men perpetrate against Black women. Unlike Parks, Finley seems less concerned with conveying the Docteur's love as real and genuine. Doing so may risk obscuring the primary concern motivating her recovery of Baartman's humanity, which is, ironically, to render her an allegory of the ways in which systems of racial and gender oppression continue to shape Black, female subjectivity in the United States.

Specifically, Finley capitalizes on the potential of the love affair, and Baartman's full personhood within it as a desiring subject, to dramatize how the ongoing history of African American women's sexual objectification shapes the intimacies to which they feel entitled. As Finley puts it,

Black women today can relate to this position of feeling like they're expected to take a little piece of love from a man that they might be sharing with other women, and they're supposed to view that as the most love they're ever expected to be able to get. [...] What we [as Black women] can expect to have is a man lust after us. That's close to love. That's how we're supposed to view it anyway. That that's the best compliment we can get from a man is for him to lust after you rather than to love you. I think there's an element of that for women in general, but there's definitely a heightened expectation of that for Black women. ("Finley Interview")

Through the dramatic example of Venus's spectacular exploitation, and Finley's emphasis on her real, psychological trauma, the director prompts the Black women in her audience to ask themselves whether they too internalize these warped notions of their worth and question their

potential to be loved. Ultimately the interiority that emerges from Finley's interpretation of this love story resonates less with Baartman's legacy in Europe as a scientific oddity than it does with the "monstrous intimacies" that underwrite histories and legacies of American chattel slavery.<sup>84</sup> The irony of using an exploitative, interracial love story to stage Venus's humanity is ever-present in Parks's presentation of Venus as a figure in the play's text but is somewhat lost in Finley's commitment to her realistic portrayal. Parks's metatheatricality, which Finley deemphasizes in her characterization of Venus, is just as critical to her double gesture as is the naturalism of Venus's intimacy with the Baron Docteur because it reminds us that this humanizing narrative is also inescapably trapped within the very violent fictions of the archive that circumscribed the sexual violence of slavery within the language of love and thus denied the Black women labeled Venus their humanity in the first place.

Finley does realize Parks's critical fabulation in other ways, however: while she strives to collapse the distance between Venus and her audience, she also uses that proximity to confront them with their own complicity in contemporary manifestations of Baartman's objectification. In the play's text, the Chorus of the Spectators most effectively mirror the way contemporary American culture continues to capitalize on the spectacle of commodified Black women's bodies, and scholars take for granted that this implicating strategy operates uniformly across productions. However, Finley reorients this strategy in ways that suggest that the Chorus as it stands—as Victorian-era French anatomists, members of an English court, and sideshow

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<sup>84</sup> Building upon Saidiya Hartman's argument that slave law "transformed relations of violence and domination into those of affinity," Christina Sharpe defines "monstrous intimacies" as "a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous." See Saidiya V. Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 87 and Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3. See also Hazel Carby, who similarly argues that the institution of slavery transposed the "racial and sexual domination of slavery into affection;" *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 39.

spectators—may be too distant to register as mirrors for her audience and may not adequately visualize their own participation in these forms of exploitation. Instead, Finley creates a visual backdrop for the Baron Docteur’s reading of Baartman’s autopsy during the intermission by projecting a videographic collage of popular hip-hop music videos featuring near-nude women dancing in ways that emphasized their butts. Finley’s intention was to impress upon her audience that “booty culture” similarly reduces Black women to “pieces of flesh,” and that “as long as we continue to consume this, we are contributors to it” (“Finley Interview”).<sup>85</sup> Rather than making this connection through a more analogous scene in the play—like one in which the Hottentot Venus dances for the Chorus of the Spectators—Finley uses the most historically specific negation of Baartman’s humanity in Europe to indict contemporary hip-hop culture for commodifying and dehumanizing Black women in the United States. In so doing, Finley’s projections create a new visual referent for the protracted reading of Baartman’s autopsy, fundamentally altering the resonance of the archival text and re-making history as the past not past.

As a corrective both to Baartman’s literal exposure and Finley’s replication of it in performance, the director tries to repair Baartman’s dignity through acts of physical and temporal closure at the moment of Venus’s *real* death in the penultimate scene of the play. In Parks’s text, this scene marks the climax of Venus’s vulnerability: having been abandoned by her lover, she lies “chained like a dog in the [prison] yard” and cowers from the inexorable cries of

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<sup>85</sup> For a discussion of the parallel between Baartman’s objectification and that of Black women in hip-hop culture, see William Jelani Cobb, “The Hoodrat Theory” in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her Hottentot*, ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 209-212. See also Elam and Rayner, “Body Parts,” 281. It is worth noting that some have taken the opposite position, interpreting some instances of “booty culture” as acts of reclamation and agency by Black women performers like Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. See, for example, Aria S. Halliday and Nadia E. Brown, “The Power of Black Girl Magic Anthems: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and ‘Feeling Myself’ as Political Empowerment,” *Souls*, 20:2 (2018): 222-238.

approaching crowds without even the shelter of the cage that once confined her (Parks 148). As the audience witnesses Venus's terror at the thought of more "crowds," they are confronted with the awareness that *they* are those crowds. Venus's death unfolds onstage as yet another spectacle through which the audience consumes her exposed and degraded body. However, Finley upends this implicating gesture by positioning the audience as witnesses to the restoration of Venus's dignity. As Venus delivers her final monologue—a curt account of her life—the other actors in Finley's production slowly wrap her body in a shroud-like cocoon of beautiful gold fabric (see fig. 25). Where the collage of hip-hop videos previously appeared, Finley projects an image of Baartman's face.<sup>86</sup> Through these extratextual interventions, Finley tries to conceal the over-exposed sign of Venus's body and affirms her individual interiority as, and through, Sarah Baartman.

Parks's sparse stage directions leave ample space for Finley's recuperative interpretation, but the play's subsequent and final scene makes these efforts to bring closure to Baartman's suffering and exposure impossible. As an echo of the Overture—in the announcement of Venus's death and the cancellation of her performance—the conclusion of the play and of Baartman's life manifests as another beginning, another show, and resists the catharsis that burying the past might afford. Ultimately, Finley's efforts do not offer the closure that Baartman's fragmentation and misrepresentation in the archive denied; instead, recreating Baartman's humanity onstage becomes contingent upon her ability to occupy and speak to the present through an embodied

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<sup>86</sup> Like the Windybrow program, this image forges a clear connection to Baartman's significance as an individual rather than the sign of her body in profile. Interwoven with Venus's monologue are two songs—the South African national anthem, and "Mya Si Grei," a Surinamese folksong. Finley chose both songs from an album by Pittsburgh native Madeleine Yayodele Nelson's percussion ensemble group, Women of the Calabash, who are world-renowned for their performance of music from Africa and the African diaspora. Despite its emphasis on Baartman's individual identity as a South African woman, Finley's interpretation necessarily filters through complex layers of diasporic identification and the ongoing circulation of Baartman that a dignified burial of her body belies.

form. By demanding that Baartman be useful in the present, and reconstructing her through that need, Finley and her audiences keep her in circulation. Once again, Parks's text allows for a recovery that simultaneously asserts its own impossibility.

### ***“The Way We Live & Love Today” | New York City***

Twenty-one years after the cold and loveless debut of *Venus*, Parks joined director Lear deBessonet to mount a revival of her play at the Signature Theatre in New York City. This time, Parks approached *Venus* with a Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur Genius Grant under her belt. She also took full advantage of the Signature Theatre's Playwright-in-Residence program which provided “unprecedented freedom and support” by encouraging the playwright's “complete engagement in the artistic process.”<sup>87</sup> The revival's billing as “an intense and devastating journey honoring the life of Baartman and examining the way we live and love today” reflects its competing impulses: like other recoveries, it aims to both restore Baartman's individual humanity and use her symbolic power to reflect on the present.<sup>88</sup> However, as its nebulously universal takeaway—“examining the way we live and love today”—suggests, this production of *Venus* refuses to narrowly circumscribe Baartman's story in service of a particular political agenda.<sup>89</sup> I conclude this chapter with an analysis of *Venus*'s 2017 revival because it returns us to

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<sup>87</sup> “Signature's core one-year Playwright-in-Residence program,” *Signature Theatre*, [www.signaturetheatre.org/About/playwrights-residencies/Residency-One.aspx](http://www.signaturetheatre.org/About/playwrights-residencies/Residency-One.aspx)

<sup>88</sup> “Overview” of *Venus*, *Signature Theatre*, [www.signaturetheatre.org/shows-and-events/Productions/2016-2017/Venus.aspx](http://www.signaturetheatre.org/shows-and-events/Productions/2016-2017/Venus.aspx)

<sup>89</sup> Director Lear deBessonet reiterates the revival's commitment to broad interpretive latitude: “there is an invitation in [*Venus*] that is completely genuine to receive in it whatever you receive...[T]here's not some secret mystery thing you're supposed to understand, or one message to be taken away. You're invited to inhabit this landscape with us, and to take from it whatever it brings up for you.” See “Director Lear deBessonet on Suzan-Lori Parks,” *YouTube*, uploaded by SignatureTheatreNY, 30 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEHYAA7KYv8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEHYAA7KYv8). In a separate interview, deBessonet identifies this interpretive latitude as its own intervention at a political moment in which “fighting for complexity is really a thing worth doing,” because it is only too “easy and tempting for all of us to

the enigmatic Venus of Parks's text by refusing to reduce Baartman to, or rescue her from, the figure that outlives her and haunts our present. Instead, Parks and deBessonnet embrace the potential of Baartman's figuration even as they recognize that this approach distances contemporary audiences from the real woman whose loss is the impetus of recovery in the first place. Examining the revival of *Venus* also demonstrates the enormous critical gains of interpreting Parks's drama in performance. In spite of its unique faithfulness to the vision of Parks's text, the revival's unscripted interpretive choices—including but not limited to costuming, casting, and set design—produce radically different affective dynamics than either the text or the original staging of *Venus*.

Whereas other productions used the costuming of Venus to portray her either as a real woman (Croot and Finley) or as a figure (Foreman), the revival does both. Before the official start of the play, the lithe, petite actress Zainab Jah comes center stage and dons a full nude bodysuit made to look like Baartman's curvaceous figure.<sup>90</sup> The metatheatrical gesture of putting on the suit in front of the audience alerts them to the fact that they are witnessing an actress *perform* Baartman. Unlike Foreman's production, which used a clearly artificial prosthetic to emphasize Baartman's captivity within a distorted projection, however, costume designer Emilio Sosa makes Jah's suit such a life-like replication of Baartman's body that audience members sitting more than five rows back could easily lose themselves in the illusion that they were looking at the *real* Baartman (see fig. 26).<sup>91</sup> Jah interprets the added scene as a reminder that

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reduce people, and even reduce works of art to a message, or something that is sort of unilateral." See "An Interview with *Venus* Director Lear deBessonnet," *Signature Theatre*, [www.signaturetheatre.org/News/Taking-a-Leap.aspx](http://www.signaturetheatre.org/News/Taking-a-Leap.aspx).

<sup>90</sup> Kevin Mambo, the actor playing The Negro Resurrectionist, assists her. It's not a quick thing. It takes about a full minute.

<sup>91</sup> Costume designer Emilio Sosa constructed the suit to blend as seamlessly as possible with Jah's own body and even painted shadows and creases to make it look like real skin. See "How to Build a Bodysuit with Emilio Sosa,"



Baartman herself was forced to “perform the role of the Hottentot Venus. [Her Victorian spectators] wouldn’t allow her to be human. They didn’t see her as a human being. And she put on this persona that they wanted to see.”<sup>92</sup> Parks pushes back against this history by emphasizing the subversive agency of performance within it. All of Baartman’s appearances in the historical archive—in the freak show, the court trial, the anatomical theatre—appear in *Venus* as absurd spectacles in which the *real* Baartman hides behind a savvy performance. Unlike Baartman’s nineteenth-century spectators, Jah’s twenty-first century audience desperately wants to see Baartman’s humanity affirmed, whether to assuage white guilt, identify with her marginalization, or more simply to see a wrong righted. And Jah, like Baartman, puts on that persona to satisfy her audience’s desires.<sup>93</sup> Jah’s donning of the suit, therefore, links her performativity with Baartman’s and reinforces to the play’s audiences that the *real* Baartman within that body(suit) is inaccessible. Unlike the play’s text, which designated Venus’s (and Baartman’s) body as the site of her dehumanizing objectification, the intertwined metatheatricality and realism of Jah’s costume transform the body into a source of performative agency. As Parks says, “[Sarah] wanted to be a star of a show and now she’s a star of a show.”<sup>94</sup>

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*YouTube*, uploaded by SignatureTheatreNY, 30 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=11&v=L4vvAwtyWbU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=11&v=L4vvAwtyWbU).

<sup>92</sup> See “Zainab Jah on Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus*,” *YouTube*, uploaded by SignatureTheatreNY, 30 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=9&v=vziko6bLAjY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=vziko6bLAjY).

<sup>93</sup> Theatre critic Jeremy Gerard captures Jah’s successful inhabitation of this persona in spite of the play’s distancing techniques: “Parks’s Brechtian flourishes – the use of academic jargon by a narrator introducing scenes by number; the interpolation of a mock-Beaumarchais comedy paralleling the main story – work effortfully to distance us from the tale. But Jah . . . plays [sic] against such archness, determined to bring us into Saartjie’s emotional world.” See Jeremy Gerard, “Review: ‘Venus’, Pulitzer Winner Suzan-Lori Parks’ Drama Revived,” *Deadline* (16 May 2017), <http://deadline.com/2017/05/venue-review-suzan-lori-parks-1202093828/>.

<sup>94</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks and Jenna Clark Embrey, “Interview with the Playwright,” “Signature Theatre Study Guide: *Venus*” (2007), 12.

Jah retroactively endows Baartman with a degree of self-determination she was denied in her own time by layering her own empowered performance of Venus onto Baartman's performance of the Hottentot Venus. Jah, a black British woman from a former British colony, has a unique investment in taking on Baartman's story.<sup>95</sup> She recalls of her adolescence in England that her "new peers could hardly fathom that [she] spoke English—even more offensive yet, that [she] spoke the Queen's English better than most of them."<sup>96</sup> Jah does not invoke Baartman's experiences of discrimination to give voice to her own, however, as many recoveries have done. Rather, Jah brings her command as a respected Black female performer in the present to her embodiment of Baartman's past. In 2015 Jah garnered critical acclaim as the first Black, female Hamlet in a major theatre production at Philadelphia's Wilma Theatre. She later went on to win an Obie Award for her role as an AK-47 wielding sex slave turned mercenary soldier in the Broadway production of *Eclipsed* (2003). According to NBC New York theatre critic Robert Khan, Jah's performance of the "ferocious, *self-made* warrior" in *Eclipsed* was so memorable that audiences of *Venus* could not help but see its title character as "empowered," "feminist," and "in control."<sup>97</sup> Parks's theory of history as bi-directional thus manifests most forcefully in performance: the complex layering of Baartman, the Hottentot Venus, and Jah in the revival of *Venus* produces history that "is not 'was' / history is 'is' / It's present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past... so you can fill in the

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<sup>95</sup> Born in England, Jah spent her childhood in Sierra Leone with her grandmother before coming to live in England with her parents, who were both completing medical school. See Alexia Soloski, "Zainab Jah, 'Eclipsed' Star, Is Ready for Battle," *New York Times* (17 Feb 2016), [www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/theater/zainab-jah-is-ready-for-eclipsed-and-for-the-life-of-an-actor.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/theater/zainab-jah-is-ready-for-eclipsed-and-for-the-life-of-an-actor.html)).

<sup>96</sup> See Zainab Jah, "Eclipsed's Zainab Jah on Being an African Woman in American Theater," *Elle* (25 April 2016), [www.elle.com/culture/a35910/zainab-jah-eclipsed-star-essay/](http://www.elle.com/culture/a35910/zainab-jah-eclipsed-star-essay/).

<sup>97</sup> Robert Khan, "'Venus' Has a Point to Make About Sexual Exploitation," *NBC New York* (15 May 2017), [www.nbcnewyork.com/entertainment/the-scene/Review-Suzan-Lori-Parks-Venus-Signature-422175313.html](http://www.nbcnewyork.com/entertainment/the-scene/Review-Suzan-Lori-Parks-Venus-Signature-422175313.html).

blanks.”<sup>98</sup> Through this porous temporality of performance and reception, the actress and audiences alike play an active role in making the history that unfolds onstage.<sup>99</sup>

Through an increased emphasis on Venus’s performativity, this production dramatically redraws the play’s lines of identification, particularly between its audiences and the Chorus. For example, deBessonnet and Parks outfit the Chorus in neon wigs which visually reinforce their outlandish performance as over-the-top caricatures of nineteenth-century racism, whether in the guise of London’s fashionable society (Chorus of the Spectators), Paris’s scientific community (Chorus of the 8 Anatomists), or the arbiters of English justice (Chorus of the Court) (see fig. 27). Their heightened absurdity makes it nearly impossible for contemporary audiences to see themselves reflected in the Chorus’s reprehensible forms of spectatorship. Instead, Parks and deBessonnet invite audiences to identify with the Venus as acute readers of nineteenth-century London’s (clearly absurd) moral hypocrisies. This is most evident in their addition to the text of a line that fundamentally alters the culminating scene of the trial determining Venus’s consent to be displayed in the Mother-Showman’s menagerie. In the script, Venus pleads her case to stay in London:

Please. Good good honest people.

If I bear thuh bad mark what better way to cleanse it off?

Showing my sinful person as a caution to you all could,

in the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance

and I could wash off my dark mark.

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<sup>98</sup> Parks and Jiggetts, “Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks,” 316.

<sup>99</sup> While not without significant differences, this interplay between actress and audience echoes that of staged productions of *Oroonoko* and *Inkle and Yarico*, which I discussed in my first chapter. Then too did the roles of Black Venuses Imoinda and Yarico layer onto the personas of the actresses performing those roles.

I came here black.

Give me the chance to leave here white. (76)

Parks dramatizes Venus's consent to her continued exhibition but refuses to clarify whether Venus has internalized the racist ideologies that dehumanize her or whether she is simply working the system. On the heels of this plea in the revival, however, Jah steps away from the Chorus and whispers to the audience, "I'm telling them what they want to hear." In a startlingly uncharacteristic move, Parks resolves an ambiguity of her text and confirms that Venus knowingly manipulates the court and the white supremacy that it upholds.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, by inviting the audience to share in Venus's enlightened mockery of racially coded notions of virtue through a rupture of the fourth wall, Parks and deBessonnet allow Venus to occupy the present in which both she and the audience are intimate allies.

While Parks pushes audiences away from the Chorus, she draws them closer to the Baron Docteur in an effort to revive the fictionalized love story that grants Baartman an inner life beneath the Venus's performative and symbolic exterior. Whereas Foreman's metatheatrical elements overwrote the realism of the love affair and preempted the audience's empathetic identification with Venus, Parks and deBessonnet amplify that realism to such an extent that the lovers seem to emerge from the world of the audience rather than the absurd world of the rest of the play. For example, they set the intimate scenes in a luxurious Paris boudoir, whose vivid detail, subtle colors, and natural lighting provide a stark contrast with the lurid, hyper-color

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<sup>100</sup> The Signature production of *Venus* has a more heterogeneous audience than the other productions I analyze. The revival's interpretation of Venus (through Jah) tempers the text's indictment of white audiences for consuming the spectacle of Venus's display. It also allows Black female audiences to identify with her empowerment and subversiveness. Jah related an anecdote that confirmed this effect: "a young African American woman came up to me and said, 'I love your work. As a young black woman, we just want to be seen and heard, and this play...' and she faltered and began shaking. And up until then, I didn't know how it was affecting people. I didn't know that that was something that would be valued. And I thought, 'Oh, this is what I want. I want it to touch people and move people, and to [help them] see themselves and see others;'" see "Zainab Jah on Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*."

circus of Venus's display in the Mother-Showman's freak act (see fig. 28). The naturalistic set design and costuming in these scenes seduce audiences into the illusion that they are watching *real* people: Jah is no longer an actress in a bodysuit, but a real woman dressed in a silk negligée. Once out of the spotlight of her metatheatrical performances, Venus is no longer the sure-footed diva. Her repeated prompts to the Docteur—"Love me?"—demonstrate a vulnerable longing for emotional attachment that contrasts with her previous projection as a performer. The Docteur's seemingly genuine reciprocation of her affection makes his betrayal all the more devastating for the Venus and the audience alike.

Indeed, Parks and deBessonnet go to great lengths to temper the Docteur's villainy and portray his love for Venus as authentic. For example, the revival eliminates the Docteur's reading of her dehumanizing autopsy during the intermission which, in the text, immediately precedes (and thus sets the tone for) the unfolding of their love affair.<sup>101</sup> Unlike Croot and Finley, who costumed the Docteur in whiteface and outfitted him in formal attire to signal his dominion even in intimate spaces (see fig. 24), deBessonnet and Parks render him with the same naturalism as his surroundings. John Conlee, the actor playing the Docteur, seems disarmed in this space, where both he and Venus are frequently barefoot and in pajamas (see fig. 28). By refusing to reduce the Docteur to a symbol of colonial violence, scientific racism, and the white, male objectification of Black women's bodies—as Croot and Finley did—Parks and deBessonnet also resist the impulse to make Venus (or Baartman) a symbolic victim in the grip of that violence. In these moments, Venus is not a symbol of anything. She is simply a woman who

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<sup>101</sup> Apparently, a truncated version of the autopsy was included in some performances, but neither of the two performances I attended featured any action during the intermission.

“falls in love with the wrong person.”<sup>102</sup> In keeping with Parks’s double gesture, however, the revival’s successful effort to disentangle the re-imagined Baartman from her symbolic roles proves to be temporary.

Nagging reminders of Venus’s symbolic value repeatedly intrude upon the realistic and intimate interludes that stage Venus’s individual humanity in this revival. Both Venus and the Bride-to-Be inhabit the Hottentot Venus costume in the play’s metatheatrical spectacles. However, in the realistic world of the Paris boudoir, Venus cannot extricate herself from the body(suit) that increasingly represents the version of her that the Docteur cherishes most: not the fragile individual who would “make a splendid wife,” but rather the “splendid corpse” that will secure his renown by establishing the missing link between men and primates (148). Venus plays this role, too, when she agrees to make the Docteur an “anatomical Columbus” by allowing him to “discover” her body (108). Of all the roles Parks’s heroine is compelled to play, the most insidious is that of the Black Venus, for it overwrites her violent commodification in the very language of intimacy and love that makes her humanity visible in the first place.

Parks packages this tension between love as the site of Venus’s humanity and love as the site of her violent instrumentalization within tacky heart-shaped boxes of chocolates that appear ubiquitously throughout the play. The Docteur repeatedly bestows these cliché symbols of love upon Venus who consumes them “by the truckload,” but Venus herself is also frequently conflated with chocolate: a Chorus member calls Venus “Coco candy colored,” and her favorite

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<sup>102</sup> Garrett, “Possession,” 24. In this context, we can best understand Parks’s proclamation to her production team on the very first rehearsal, that *Venus* “is about love” and that she “want[ed] to put love for Sarah on that stage and give her love because that’s all she wanted.” When deBessonnet warned the cast that the material in their hands was heavy with the wounds of history, Parks redirected the emphasis away from Baartman’s oppression and exploitation explaining that “[b]eyond that wound is love. And that’s where we’re going. We’re going to find it, and we’re going to resurrect it, and bring it up to the light.” See “First Rehearsal of *Venus* at Signature Theatre,” *YouTube*, uploaded by SignatureTheatreNY, 7 Apr. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vD3s2xDqXkw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vD3s2xDqXkw) and “Zainab Jah on Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus*.”

sweets are Capozzoli di Venere—chocolates shaped like the nipples of Venus. Parks capitalizes on the doubled value of these props as analogs of Venus. Both chocolate and Venus are circulating commodities obtained through the operations of slavery and empire, but their symbolic purchase as fabricated emblems of love domesticates the violent means through which they were obtained and continue to be consumed. Even as Parks's (equally fabricated) love story grants her audiences brief glimpses of Venus's (if not quite Baartman's) interiority, there seems to be no place in Venus's history where intimacy can be free of instrumentality or violence. The proliferation of her name in the archives of slavery and empire evidence the inescapable "slippages between victims and sweethearts, acts of love and brutal excess" that mar her intimacies, even in the comparatively emancipated present that this revival's Venus so unrelentingly occupies (Hartman 5).

The double gesture guiding Parks's romance of recovery dictates that the audience's intimacy with Venus is similarly marred. For although Parks invites the audience to love Baartman through Venus, this invitation is far from exonerating or uncomplicated. As one review of the Signature revival argued, love is the most implicating dynamic of the play because it makes Baartman, and the audience's love for her, real in the present:

As to the veracity of the affection shared by Sarah and Le Docteur – who knows...Whatever the facts, it is this element of the story that brings us into Sarah's heart and makes the outcome all the more shattering. Without the love we could sit back in our first world seats and then tsk-tsk all the way out the door untouched by this tale. By

including it, Parks pulls us into the pool of emotion, where treading water is the only way to survive. Where Sarah's question, "Love me?" reaches us across the centuries.<sup>103</sup>

More precisely, Parks and deBessonnet reorient the text's implicating gestures by encouraging audiences to see themselves reflected in the conflicted love of the Docteur rather than the explicitly exploitative spectatorship of the Chorus. The revival's mission to "examine the way we live and love today" comes into troubling focus when audiences realize that they, like the Docteur, bear witness to Venus's humanity and share in her aspirations for a better life that is filled with love. Even audience members who identify most with Venus must recognize that although they offer her the love she asks for, their relationship is inescapably asymmetrical. Like the Docteur, contemporary audiences have power over her afterlife, how she is represented, remembered, and made to be useful. The model of love that frames the play and defines Venus's humanity—the central goal of recovery—is her affair with the Baron Docteur. His ultimate inability to value her interiority over her symbolically potent body poses the question of how ethical or exploitative, genuine or superficial, the audience's love will be.

Venus herself presses this point when she bestows the gift of chocolate upon the audience—not a heart-shaped box of chocolates, but rather a narrative of its symbolic history in a monologue titled "A Brief History of Chocolate." Speaking directly to the audience, she explains that chocolate was once decried for the heathen influence it bore by virtue of its contact with the savages who made it, but is now consumed largely by women, especially for pleasure, or as a balm in times of emotional distress (155-56). Venus zeroes in on the contingent valences of chocolate that recognizably echo her own: much like these chocolates, she continues to circulate,

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<sup>103</sup> Tulis McCall, "'Venus,' Review of Venus, by Lear deBessonnet, New York Signature Theatre," *New York Theatre Guide* (18 May 2017), [www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/venus](http://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/reviews/venus).



to stand in for something other than herself, even in the hands of those who desperately desire to restore that self. The symbol may have morphed into a construct with emancipatory ends, but it remains a symbol nevertheless. Love in *Venus* does not provide closure or absolution, but instead raises the stakes of how, even in recovery, we overwrite Baartman's humanity: we insert ourselves into her history as we re-make it time and again. Audiences of *Venus* are neither simply exploitative voyeurs nor are they intimate sympathizers, but rather they are both, and they have the potential to be more.

### ***Conclusion: A Kiss***

Parks's *Venus* is controversial and challenging because it refuses to circumscribe Baartman or the Hottentot Venus within the relatively narrow discursive roles they have played in Black feminist and postcolonial scholarship over the last three decades. Her open-ended portrayal of Venus as any number of "*figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else's pulse*" marks a sedimentation of the layered Atlantic paradigm I have been tracing and retracing throughout this project.<sup>104</sup> The invented interracial love story at the heart of Parks's *Venus* conjures up the eighteenth-century tale of the English merchant Inkle who, like the Docteur, betrayed his alternately Black and Indigenous lover and sacrificed her and their unborn child to his own self-aggrandizing ambitions.<sup>105</sup> As a Black Goddess thirsting for splendor, Parks's heroine evokes the Sable Venus on her luxurious shell throne. In her rendering of Baartman as a savvy entrepreneur and astute

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<sup>104</sup> Parks, "Elements of Style," 12.

<sup>105</sup> Correspondingly, performers like Jah, Lightburn, and Evans layer onto eighteenth-century actresses like Elizabeth Satchell Kemble and Fanny Kelly.

reader of nineteenth-century social norms, Parks recalls the Hottentot Venus of Charles William's 1811 graphic satire who laid bare the racialized dimensions of intimate commerce. In recording the dissection of Baartman's body as an act of white pathology, Parks recalls Oothoon's rending by the twisted Theotormon. By enabling Baartman to haunt us from the French museum where her fragmented body was so long imprisoned, Parks joins Robin Coste Lewis in summoning back those broken Black Venus figures populating the colonial archive.

Parks's text bears traces of all these deep-eighteenth-century Black Venuses, and her remaking of history through performances unbound by "a controlling principle designed to guarantee [their] outcome or meaning" opens space for more Black Venuses yet to come.<sup>106</sup> As such, Parks does not conclude Baartman's story with her death or a return to her origins, but rather with another intimate entanglement, another "Scene of Love." Venus's last words to her audience, "*Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss,*" invite us to seek out the women unevenly legible beneath the Black Venus, to "accept the ongoing, [implicating,] unfinished and provisional character of this effort," and to contend with the unhomeliness of the deep eighteenth century in which we find them (162).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 175.

<sup>107</sup> Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.

## Appendix of Figures



Fig. 22 T. Charles Erickson, Adina Porter as the Venus with the Chorus of Spectators in Richard Foreman's production of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* at the Yale Repertory Theatre (1996).

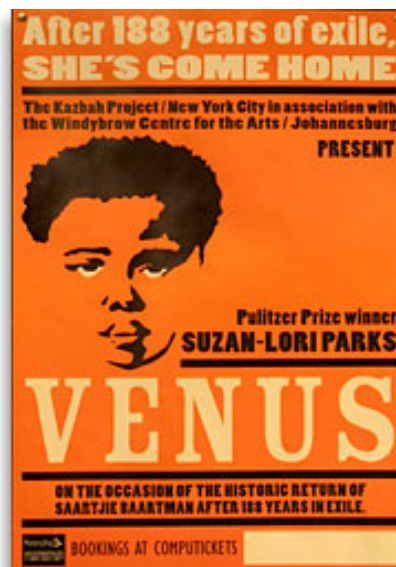


Fig. 23 Playbill for Windybrow production of *Venus*, “Interview with Walter Chakela,” *In Motion Magazine*, 16 March 2003. [www.inmotionmagazine.com/ac/wchakela.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/ac/wchakela.html)



Fig. 24 Venus and the Baron Docteur in Cynthia Croot's Johannesburg production of *Venus* at the Windybrow Theatre. August 2002. Photo courtesy of Cynthia Croot.



Fig. 25 Athena Lightburn and cast of Rachel Finley's production of *Venus* at the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center in Liberty City, Miami. 2017. Photo courtesy of Rachel Finley.



Fig. 26 Zainab Jah in Suzan-Lori Parks and Lear deBessonet's production of *Venus* at the Signature Theatre in NYC, May 2017. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Fig. 27 The Chorus of the Spectators in Suzan-Lori Parks and Lear deBessonet's production of *Venus* at the Signature Theatre in NYC, May 2017. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Fig. 28 John Conlee (Baron Docteur) and Zainab Jah (Venus) in Suzan-Lori Parks and Lear deBessonet's production of *Venus* at the Signature Theatre in NYC, May 2017. Photo by Joan Marcus.

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