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**Valentina Rapetti**

**Staging Slavery through Historiographic Metatheatre: Lorena Gale's *Angélique* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus***

**Abstract I:** Il saggio analizza due opere teatrali riconducibili al genere del metateatro storiografico. *Angélique* dell'attrice, regista e drammaturga afrocanadese Lorena Gale ripercorre la storia di Marie-Joseph Angélique (1705-1734), la schiava nera processata e giustiziata con l'accusa di aver appiccato l'incendio che nel 1734 distrusse gran parte dell'insediamento coloniale francese di Montréal. *Venus* della drammaturga afroamericana Suzan-Lori Parks verte attorno alla figura di Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), la donna nera originaria dell'attuale Sudafrica che venne esibita in Europa con l'appellativo di "Venere ottentotta". Sebbene sia Gale sia Parks operino nell'ambito del metateatro storiografico, la rimodulazione che ne propongono è influenzata dal ruolo assegnato alla schiavitù nelle narrazioni dominanti del Canada e degli Stati Uniti d'America.

**Abstract II:** This essay discusses two plays ascribable to the genre of historiographic metatheatre. *Angélique* by African Canadian actress, director, and playwright Lorena Gale focuses on Marie-Joseph Angélique (1705-1734), the black bondswoman who was tried and executed for starting the fire that destroyed large parts of the French colonial settlement of Old Montreal in 1734. *Venus* by African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks centers on Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), a native of what is now South Africa, who was exhibited in Europe as "The Hottentot Venus". Though equally invested in historiographic metatheatre, Gale and Parks employ distinct dramaturgical strategies that attest to the different ways in which slavery has been inscribed in the national narratives of Canada and the United States of America.

**Keywords:** historiographic metatheatre, Lorena Gale, *Angélique*, Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*.

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?  
(Douglass 2012: 1254).

**1. Staging Slavery through Historiographic Metatheatre**

This article offers a comparative reading of two plays ascribable to the genre of "historiographic metatheatre" (Feldman 2013: 2): *Angélique* (2000) by African Canadian actress, director, and playwright Lorena Gale and *Venus* (1997) by African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. Written and first performed in the late 1990s in Canada and the United States respectively,

the two plays dramatise both documented and imagined episodes in the lives of two black women who experienced the dehumanising power of white colonialism and anti-black racism. Gale's *Angélique* presents the story of Marie-Joseph Angélique (1705-1734), an enslaved woman born on the Portuguese island of Madeira, who in 1734 was accused of and executed for starting the fire that destroyed a large part of the French colonial settlement of Old Montreal. Parks's *Venus* centres on Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), a native of what is now South Africa, who was exhibited in freak shows in Europe as "The Hottentot Venus" and whose skeleton, brain, and genitals were displayed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until the mid-1970s.

By supplementing the sparse and partial archival records that document the existence and exploitation of the two women with their own dramatic imagination, Gale and Parks perform a theatrical enactment of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "critical fabulation" (Hartman 2008: 11), a practice of scholarly investigation that juxtaposes archival mining and imaginative interpretation to rescue black subjects from historic oblivion and epistemic violence. While researching their plays, Gale and Parks realised that the archival records relating to the lives of Angélique and Baartman were nothing more than evidence of their encounters with white power. This impelled them to employ a counter-historiographic dramatic strategy to dismantle the protocols of the archive and foreground its fictions. In formulating "a series of speculative arguments" based on archival sources, they advanced a "critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history" (Hartman 2008: 11). Both *Angélique* and *Venus* dramatise "a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical" (Hartman 2008: 12) to illuminate the suppressed stories of their titular characters from a black feminist perspective. In doing so, they expose the epistemological limits of official historiography and the fallacies of its white Western ontological foundations (Foucault 2002; Mbembe 2002). Throughout the plays, Gale and Parks employ a series of metatheatrical devices that reveal the narrative character of historical accounts, thus inviting readers and spectators to actively acknowledge the performance of power within the archive and the inherent performativity of the history-making process.

I contend that Gale's and Parks's dramatic treatment of the dynamic interaction of historiography and metatheatre allows for a critical reading of *Angélique* and *Venus* mediated by Alexander Feldman's notion of "historiographic metatheatre", a dramatic genre "in which self-reflexive engagements with the traditions and forms of dramatic art illuminate historical themes and aid in the representation of historical events" (Feldman 2013: 2-3)<sup>1</sup>. While injecting into their plays a distinctive set of thematic and formal features ascribable to historiographic metatheatre, Gale and Parks also draw upon divergent structural and rhetorical strategies that attest to the different ways in which slavery has been inscribed in the

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman's terminology is derived from Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, the distinctive genre of the postmodern novel. By positioning historiographic metatheatre as the dramatic counterpart to the narrative form, Feldman acknowledges its relationship to Hutcheon's field-defining theoretical work (Hutcheon 1984, 1988, 1989). Prior to Feldman, theatre scholar Richard Knowles had deployed historiographic metadrama as an analytical category for the critical assessment of Canadian playwrights, plays and performances (Knowles 1987, 1999).

national narratives of their respective countries. In other words, Gale's and Parks's national affiliations oriented their subjective adaptation of the manifold dramatic possibilities offered by the genre.

According to Feldman, a play can be described "as *historiographic* rather than simply *historical*" when it deals not only with the events of the past but also with "the way in which they are constituted in the discourse of history", that is, when the play deals with "how history is written and how one conceives of history, in philosophical and ideological terms, prior to and during the process of writing it" (Feldman 2013: 3, emphasis in original). The metatheatrical element of the genre has to do with the playwright's ability to render "the theatricality *within* theatre", thus "provok[ing] questions as to the artifice, the spectacle, and the dramatic constructs of the world beyond" (Feldman 2013: 3, emphasis in original).

Despite being equally invested in the process of re-presenting history through a self-reflexive engagement with the medium of theatre, Gale privileges the historiographic aspect and relies largely on dramatic realism to stage a revisionist, black-centred counter-narrative that questions the erasure of Canadian slavery from hegemonic historical accounts, while Parks favours the metatheatrical element and resorts to an overtly parodic style to make American audiences aware of their perverse and protracted participation in the spectacle of racial and sexual exploitation. As the next two sections will show, these differing approaches are manifest in paratextual elements such as the title, the book cover, and the list of characters, and are further evidenced by the formal features of the two dramatic texts.

## 2. Reinscribing Slavery in Canadian History: Lorena Gale's *Angélique*

Gale's counter-historiographic play *Angélique* challenges a hegemonic narrative that portrays Canada as the North American land of freedom, a place of refuge, tolerance, and equality vis-à-vis the neighbouring United States. Sustaining this dominant narrative are two longstanding national myths that hinge on the popular images of the North Star and the mosaic. According to the North Star myth, Canada's only link with slavery was as the terminus of the Underground Railroad<sup>2</sup>, that is, as the geopolitical locus of safety and salvation for runaway slaves of African descent fleeing the southern United States. This self-absolving version of Canadian history entails the erasure of slavery, a legal and vigorously practiced institution in the French and British colonial settlements between 1628 and 1833<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The term "Underground Railroad" refers to several semisecret networks that helped slaves escape from the southern to the northern United States and Canada along predetermined routes. The earliest networks appeared in the first decade of the nineteenth century, but organized escapes became much more common from the mid-1830s through the Civil War years (1861-1865). Because slavery was outlawed in the territories of the British Empire in 1833, former slaves in Canada were formally free and relatively safe, although they faced forms of *de facto* segregation and discrimination that also existed in the northern United States.

<sup>3</sup> The first recorded black slave in Canadian history, a nine-year-old Madagascan boy, was sold by an English pirate to a Quebec clerk in 1628, approximately twenty years after Samuel de Champlain established the colonial settlement of New France in the name of King Henry IV. Although French settlers complained of chronic labor shortage and appealed to the Crown for the introduction of enslaved blacks, it was only in 1689 that Louis XIV granted permission to bring them into the colony from the West Indies and Africa. After the British conquered New France in the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the Treaty of Paris of 1763 provided for the legal protection of the institution of slavery and British settlers began to migrate with their black slaves from the

As members of a New World society, European settlers and their descendants were actively involved in the transatlantic slave trade and the exploitation of both enslaved Indigenous and black peoples as a free labour force. In New France first and later in British Canada, members of the clergy, the military, and the mercantile class regularly bought, held, and sold slaves who worked as house servants, farm labourers, or in skilled occupations. However, as Cooper remarks in her historical study *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*, “slavery is Canada’s best-kept secret, locked within the national closet. And because it is a secret it is written out of official history” (2007: 68).

Between 1834 and 1982, caught between the dual forces of British colonialism and US capitalism<sup>4</sup>, Canadians engaged in what Northrop Frye in his study of the Canadian collective imagination *The Bush Garden* termed “the quest for the peaceable kingdom” (1995: 251), an ideological process of nation-building aimed at mitigating the import of imperial influence by emphasising on the one hand the virtues of British rule – including the abolition of slavery in 1833 – and on the other the vices of American democracy, comprising its belligerent revolutionary spirit, brutal practice of slavery, and legalised racial segregation. The cultural construction of Canada as “peaceable kingdom” was reinforced by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s official 1971 multiculturalism policy<sup>5</sup>, which contributed to the more recent mythology of the mosaic, a metaphor for a composite society in which citizens of different origin and ancestry constitute a harmonious whole. Notwithstanding the assertions of equality among all Canadians, multiculturalism diverted attention from social inequities and implicitly espoused an essentialist view of cultural difference. This resulted in the confinement of black Canadians and other historically marginalised groups to separate enclaves and the failure to acknowledge the fluidity of the nation’s diasporic identities and their multiple interactions in a modern intercultural society shaped by “the afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2007: 6) and the transatlantic slave trade, the legacy of colonialism, and old and new migration flows<sup>6</sup>.

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American colonies to the Canadian territory. The American Revolutionary War (1776-1783) led to a further expansion of the slave population in Canada, as thousands of Loyalists left the American colonies and fled to British Canada with their enslaved property. When the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, *de jure* slavery was ultimately outlawed in Canada and all British territories. On the institution of slavery in New France, see Trudel (1960, 2004). On slaves of African descent in colonial Canada, see Winks (1997), Elgersman (1999), Cooper (2007) and Mackey (2010).

<sup>4</sup> With the 1867 British North America Act, the three British North American provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick were united into the Dominion of Canada, a self-governing polity of the British Empire. Canada gained full sovereignty and became an independent nation-state with the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Queen Elizabeth II, though it remained part of the British Commonwealth. As the country gradually shed its legal status as a British colony, American capitalist colonialism exerted an increasing economic, political, and cultural influence.

<sup>5</sup> In a statement to the House of Commons on 8 October 1971, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced multiculturalism as an official government policy (Trudeau 1971). In 1982, multiculturalism was recognized by section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was entrenched in the Constitution of Canada that same year. Multiculturalism was further enshrined into law in 1988 through the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which was adopted unanimously by Parliament during the government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

<sup>6</sup> For critiques of Canadian multiculturalism, see Bissoondath (1994), Bannerji (2000), and Gunew (2004).



Over the past four decades, black Canadian women playwrights, such as Gale, Djanet Sears, ahndri zhina mandiola, and Lisa Codrington, have questioned self-indulgent national mythologies by exploring the tensions between hegemonic narratives and subjugated histories. Their artistic practice serves a dual purpose: the representation of the historic struggles of black Canadians over their place in the nation, and the performance of heterogeneous black identities with ties to “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), both national and diasporic. The late anglophone Montrealaise writer Gale is among the black playwrights who most effectively reclaim forgotten pages of Canadian history to tackle the interplay of colonial slavery and present racial oppression through staged enactments of cultural memory. With *Angélique* she addressed the persistent amnesia regarding the institutionalized practice of slavery under French and British rule and integrated uneasy memories into the Canadian collective consciousness, thus challenging the seemingly untarnished image of Canada as “peaceable kingdom” and reinscribing blackness in the national narrative.

*Angélique* dramatises the story of its eponymous protagonist, Marie-Joseph Angélique, colonial Canada’s best-known bondswoman and one of the few “martyr-heroes” (Clarke 2002: 31) in black Canadian culture. Born in 1705 on the Portuguese island of Madeira, off the coast of Morocco, Angélique was owned by Nichus Block, a Flemish man, who sometime before 1725 took her across the Atlantic Ocean to New England. There he sold her to François Poulin de Francheville, a thirty-three-year-old Montreal merchant involved in the fur trade, founder of the Canadian iron industry, and husband of Thérèse de Couagne, who was from an influential mercantile family that had links to the colonial elite. Angélique entered the Francheville household in Old Montreal in 1725 at the age of twenty and served as a domestic and agricultural slave for nine years. In 1731 she gave birth to her first son, who died a month later. Jacques César, a Madagascar-born black slave owned by Ignace Gamelin, Francheville’s neighbour and business partner, was named as the father. In 1732 she gave birth to twins. The boy, whose father was registered as César, survived two days, while the girl, whose father, oddly, was listed as unknown, lived five months. In 1733, the year her master died, Angélique started a relationship with Claude Thibault, a white, French indentured servant who worked for the Franchevilles. The following year the couple attempted to flee Canada but were caught and brought back to Montreal. Prior to their escape, Thérèse de Couagne had sold Angélique to a business associate who in turn planned to sell her to the West Indies. On April 10, 1734, a fire that started on the Franchevilles’s roof engulfed forty-six buildings; there were no victims, but most of the merchant sector of Old Montreal was destroyed. Accused of being the arsonist, Angélique was subjected to a two-month trial, tortured into confessing, and executed by hanging. Her corpse was dismembered and burned, and her ashes scattered to the winds<sup>7</sup>.

Drawing on the trial transcripts from both the lower court in Montreal and the Supreme Court of Quebec, where an unsuccessful appeal took place, Gale dramatises a black-centred counter-narrative that questions the North Star mythology by evidencing the brutality of

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<sup>7</sup> For the most comprehensive study of Angélique’s life in the broader context of the transatlantic slave trade, French colonialism in Canada, and the urban settlement of Old Montreal, see Cooper (2007).

institutionalised slavery in the colonial settlement of New France. While the French archival documents on which the play is based attest to the power that white settlers and slaveholders exerted over those they subordinated, Gale's play foregrounds the embodied experience of an eighteenth-century black bondswoman in Old Montreal to assert an alternative truth that exposes the "invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts [...] and fantasies that constitute the archive and determine what can be said about the past" (Hartman 2008: 9). To support her counter-historiographic intent, Gale draws upon what Patricia Schroeder calls "the feminist possibilities of dramatic realism" (Schroeder 1996) and employs paratextual and textual elements that align with the tenets of the genre.

The title of the play is the baptismal name that the Franchevilles imposed on their black slave in 1730 in place of her previous, unrecorded name. The cover of the Playwrights Canada Press edition shows a realistically drawn, stern-looking black woman in period dress staring directly at the reader while in the background flames consume the buildings of Old Montreal in an equally realistic representation of the 1734 fire. This mimetic approach is reflected in the chronotope of the play, which is set in eighteenth-century Montreal, as well as in the *dramatis personae*, which include: Marie-Joseph Angélique, a "slave, in a Canadian history book" (Gale 2000: 2); François Poulin de Francheville, owner of the St. Maurice Ironworks and the slave Angélique; Thérèse de Couagne, Francheville's wife; Claude Thibault, Francheville's indentured servant and Angélique's lover; Ignace Gamelin, Francheville's business partner; César, Gamelin's black slave and lover to Angélique; Manon, an Indigenous slave owned by the next door neighbours of the Franchevilles, and six eyewitnesses who testified at the trial. The characters, all drawn from archival records, are listed with their real names and ages at the time of historical events and are assigned the same rank and status that they held in the strict social hierarchy of eighteenth-century New France. As the play realistically shows, this was a colonial outpost where settlers of both sexes subjugated enslaved Indigenous and black peoples, and white men exercised patriarchal power over women irrespective of their race. Period costumes, set, and props suggest the mimetic staging and style of acting required in production and performance.

The play is divided into two acts, the first comprising eighteen scenes, the second twenty-four. The dramatic action progresses chronologically, following a conventional arc of exposition, complication, and rising action that culminates in the execution scene. However, the falling action and resolution that follow the climax in traditionally structured plays are deliberately avoided to deflect cathartic release. Act One encompasses the period between 1725 and 1733, from Angélique's entry into the Franchevilles's household as a chattel slave up to her master's death. The central scenes chronicle salient episodes in Angélique's life as recorded in archival documents, including her two pregnancies, the deaths of her three children, and the overtly contentious relationship with her mistress. However, they also depict what is supposedly missing from historical records, including Francheville's repeated sexual assaults and outbursts of patriarchal rage, Couagne's regular beatings and fits of jealousy, and a scene in which Angélique and César are forced by their respective slaveholders to engage in sexual intercourse to cover Francheville's repeated rapes while increasing their masters' moveable possessions. By exposing the power dynamics and interlocking systems of oppression at work in the Franchevilles's household, these scenes

provide a graphic illustration of the physical and psychological violence perpetrated against enslaved individuals in New France, and particularly the dehumanising ways in which black bondswomen were routinely exploited for both productive and reproductive purposes. In a rapid succession of increasingly fast-paced scenes, Act Two chronicles Angélique and Thibault's growing intimacy and escape, Couagne's decision to sell her rebellious slave, the Montreal fire and ensuing trial, and Angélique's capture, torture, and execution.

Overall, the play juxtaposes documented and imagined episodes of Angélique's life within a realist framework to present two competing truths: one, sanctioned by a sentence and inscribed into hegemonic historiography by white male colonial authorities; the other emerging from the subjugated story of a black bondswoman. Gale's recourse to "the feminist possibilities of dramatic realism" is thus consistent with her "commitment to understanding the cultural construction of 'truth' – the way material conditions such as economic status, class background, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation combine and recombine to [...] shape what we call reality" (Schroeder 1996: 26).

The opening image of the play eloquently conveys Gale's counter-historiographic intent: "The sound of African drumming. The featureless silhouette of a woman dancing with a book against a backdrop of red, oranges and yellow, suggestive of flames" (Gale 2000: 3). The book that the woman – Angélique? Gale? – is holding as "the crackling sound of fire" (Gale 2000: 3) engulfs her is the repository of hegemonic historiography. As such, it must be immolated in order for Angélique to rise from her own ashes and tell her story on her own terms, a story that was silenced by the judges who formulated the dreadful death sentence and subsequently omitted her from dominant national narratives. This historical omission is highlighted in the opening line of the play, spoken by a voiceover emanating directly from the book: "And in seventeen thirty-four a Negro slave set fire to the City of Montreal and was hanged" (Gale 2000: 3). The statement is repeated twelve times, with the first word dropped at each repetition until only the word 'hanged' is left, suggesting that Angélique existed only to be progressively exploited, consumed, and systematically erased, her existence eroded by toil and time.

Throughout the play the voice of the book – that is, the silencing voice of hegemonic power disguised as neutral archive evidence – repeatedly asserts itself in a series of ostensibly objective statements in which Angélique is referred to in the third person as a "a negro slave" or "negresse" (Gale 2000: 5, 41). These archival excerpts have a twofold function, historiographic and metatheatrical, which directly aligns Gale's play with Feldman's theorisation of historiographic metatheatre. In Act One, the information reported in the trial transcript from the deed of sale, and the birth and death certificates and baptism records of Angélique's children is delivered in the form of direct address, as the following excerpt from scene fifteen shows:

- CÉSAR: Eustache. Natural son of Marie Joseph Angélique and Jacques César. Baptized, January 11, 1731. Buried, Feb. 12. 1731. Age ...
- ANGÉLIQUE: One month.
- CÉSAR: Louis: *filis naturel de la meme negresse* and brother of the previous. Born and baptized May 26, 1732. Buried the next day. Age ...

- ANGÉLIQUE: Two days.  
 CÉSAR: Marie Françoise, twin sister of the preceding. Buried October 29, 1732. Age ...  
 ANGÉLIQUE: Five months.  
 CÉSAR: Father – unknown. Though the mother declared it to be Jacques César (Gale 2000: 30).

These lines serve the clearly didactic purpose of informing and instructing the audience as to the historicity and veracity of Angélique's existence, while the brutal scenes scripted by Gale concomitantly reveal the unrecorded truth of her embodied experience, thereby reinforcing the testimonial value implied by the historiographic nature of the play. If in Act One the spectators are witnesses to the forms of depraved violence that marked Angélique's life and the institution of slavery in New France, in Act Two they are implicitly cast as jurors and judges of a diachronic appeal, a call to participate actively in the truth-seeking process of the original trial as dramatised by Gale. As the depositions of eyewitnesses to the 1734 Montreal fire are staged, a trial within the theatre unfolds before a court of contemporary spectators. This accounts for the metatheatrical dimension of the play, compelling the audience to acknowledge the performativity of the criminal justice system and the history-making process.

The conflicting realities of legal, historical, and embodied truth converge and resonate in the theatre-turned-court, until the voice of the book pronounces the final judgment, condemning Angélique, "the arsonist", to be tortured, "taken to the public place of the [...] city of Montreal, [...] hanged and strangled to death from the gallows erected for that purpose, her body burned at the stake, the ashes scattered to the wind and her belongings seized in the name of the King" (Gale 2000: 69). Gale, however, uses the final lines of the play to resist the historical objectification of Angélique sanctioned in the trial transcripts and to rehabilitate her subjectivity through a scripted act of embodied memory. The direct address that Angélique delivers during the execution scene is a climactic moment in which she metaphorically tears down the fourth wall to speak her own truth in the first person:

My name is Marie Joseph Angélique. / I am twenty-nine years old. / I came from Portugal, from the island of Madière / Where I was sold to a Flemish, / Who brought me to this New World / And sold me to Monsieur de Francheville. [...] There is nothing I can say to change what you perceive. / I will from twisted history, / be guilty in your eyes. / If thought is sin / then I am guilty. / For I wish that I had fanned the flames / that lead to your destruction. / But though I am wretched, / I am not wicked. / Take my breath. / Burn my body. / Throw my ashes to the wind. / Set my spirit free. / The truth cannot be silenced. / Someday, / Someone will hear me / And believe ... / I didn't do it (Gale 2000: 71-72).

By having Angélique proclaim her innocence in the public space of the theatre, Gale authenticates an alternative version of history that rectifies the "twisted" (Gale 2000: 71) one articulated by androcentric archival authority. Her iconic representation of the heroic



martyrdom of an eighteenth-century black bondswoman disturbs and dismantles Canada's idealised memorialisation of white explorers, pioneers, and settlers. It reinscribes an enslaved figure in the national narrative, thus correcting collective amnesia regarding the institution of slavery in colonial Canada and rewriting its history from a black feminist perspective that "fill[s] in the gaps in the histories of black women" (Anderson 2008: 115). Gale's heroic portrayal of Angélique anchors her black-centred, revisionist dramatisation of Canadian historiography to a "mnemonic icon" (Cuder-Domínguez 2021: 332), a hagiographic image of subjugated and yet resilient blackness that is reminiscent of those generated in the United States by the representational apparatuses of the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements. As the next section will discuss, the glorifying effect of Gale's finale is nowhere to be found in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*. Instead, its counter-historiographic intent is manifested through a metatheatrical demystification of the rhetorical repertoires of both anti-black and anti-racist discourses.

### 3. Refracting Slavery in American Theatre: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*

The institution of slavery was a determining factor in the ascendance of the United States as an economic world power, and it played a crucial role in the formation of the country's constitution and legal structure (Finkelman 1993) as well as in the development of its national identity. Constructed conceptually as an original sin exorcised through the moral and political efforts of the abolitionist movement and the collective sacrifice of the Civil War (1861-1865), the end of the so-called "peculiar institution" (Stampp 1956)<sup>8</sup> became an essential building block of a progressive narrative arc bending towards the "liberty" and "pursuit of happiness" envisaged in the Declaration of Independence (1776). The transition of enslaved people of African descent from property to personhood and then citizenship nurtured the foundational mythologies of American exceptionalism and upward social mobility, contributing to the ideological construction of the "more perfect union" enshrined in the Constitution of the United States (1787).

Since the end of the Civil War in 1865, when institutionalised slavery gave way to *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, disenfranchisement, and persisting forms of economic and physical abuse, African American citizens have contested liberal narratives that celebrate the progressive incorporation of former slaves and their descendants into the democratic body politic and avert any discussion of the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007: 6) and the ways in which systemic anti-black racism has impeded the advent of a truly egalitarian society. Throughout the twentieth century, the perpetual deferral of equal rights and opportunities resulted in the formation and insurgence of activist groups that adopted both assimilationist and separatist, non-violent and belligerent positions to protest permanent second-class citizenship and the persistence of structural racism.

Historical anti-racist organizations such as the Civil Rights and the Black Power

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<sup>8</sup> The euphemistic expression 'peculiar institution', chosen by historian Kenneth M. Stampp as the title of his seminal 1956 book on slavery in the antebellum South, was used by white anti-abolitionists, most notably statesman John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), to portray Southern slavery as a relatively mild system compared to more brutal forms of forced labor found in foreign countries and in the northern states.

movements decried the dominant discourse of continual progress promoted by liberal democracy while concurrently formulating oppositional counter-discourses hinging on heroic images of black resistance that became part of a recognisable rhetorical repertoire. If white abolitionists had pursued their pedagogic intent through sensational displays of “spectacular violence” (Hartman 2022: xxix) exerted on the enslaved, black activists chose to represent Americans of African descent not as victims but as agents, highlighting self-determination against oppression, and embracing the narration of stories that resonated with a sense of empowerment rather than the “social death” (Patterson 1982; Wilderson 2020: 17) deriving from historical exploitation. This race-conscious representational strategy was employed in both the political arena and the artistic realm, leaving a significant and enduring legacy in African American theatre.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement regarded theatre as a tool for black liberation and playwrights as activists who were directly involved in the political struggle of the African American community. The cultural wing of the Black Power Movement operated within an ideological framework where ethics and aesthetics overlapped, and art and activism intertwined. In their politically oriented manifestos, militant dramatists such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal urged audiences to take action against racial oppression and underscored the importance of staging plays and performances that reflected black pride and power. However effective in challenging the dominant narratives of liberal democracy, this overtly oppositional aesthetic entailed an essentialist view of blackness and a dogmatic approach to theatre-making that paradoxically paralleled the didactic intent of the white-dominated abolitionist movement. If white abolitionists, in their efforts to advance American democracy, had concurred in reinforcing concepts of abject blackness while condemning slavery, the Black Arts movement, in combating anti-black racism, contributed to the cultural production of what George Elliott Clarke referred to as “a model blackness” (Clarke 1998), a dominant notion of black identity derived from the history of US slavery and the African American struggle for emancipation and social justice.

Since the beginning of her career, Parks has been unequivocal in her stance against a prescriptive theatre aesthetic and the monolithic representation of a single black experience. In her essay “An Equation for Black People on Stage” she maintained that African American playwrights “should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being” while “there are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage” (Parks 1995: 19-21). In declining to portray what Black Arts Movement founder Neal called “the viewpoint of the oppressed” (Neal 1968: 30) in a deliberate or didactic way, Parks broke away from the ideological and artistic legacy of her theatrical forebears, opting for a self-reflexive rather than instructive approach to the art and practice of stagecraft. Rather than dramatising black-centred counter-narratives that directly address and rectify hegemonic historiography, Parks takes a sideways look at history to draw attention to the narrative nature of the historiographical process itself, focusing on the ways in which the black subject has been constructed as abject and how this construction has contributed to the ongoing marginalisation of black people in what Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer refer to as the US “racial order” (Desmond & Emirbayer 2015).

In *Venus*, she juxtaposes ordinary displays of brutal violence with what Hartman identifies as less obvious “scenes of subjection”, including the “blows delivered [...] on the popular stage”, the “simulation of will in slave law”, and the “fashioning of identity”, thus illuminating both the “habitual violence that structured [the] everyday life” (Hartman 2022: xxx) of the enslaved and more subtle practices of domination. Parks’s examination of the role of black subjects as entertainers for white audiences aligns her experimental theatre practice with Hartman’s groundbreaking research, pointing to the performative dimension of slavery as an important element in understanding the workings of the institution.

Baartman, “the most globally overexposed figuration of black women’s [...] sexual subjection” (Pinto 2020: 105), and the pivotal character of Parks’s *Venus*, represents the ideal figure to explore “the performance of subjection” (Hartman 2022: 7) and the domineering power of the white gaze during slavery and in its aftermath. A member of the Khoi-San peoples born under Dutch colonial rule in what is now South Africa, at the age of twenty-one Baartman was taken to Europe, where her black skin, protruding buttocks, and genitalia were read as signifiers of black inferiority and turned into objects of popular spectacle and scientific knowledge. From 1810 to 1815 she was exhibited as “The Hottentot Venus” in freak shows in London and the English provinces as well as in the circus and in private shows in France. As a black African in early nineteenth-century England and France, she possessed a liminal legal status between enslaved and free. Although slavery was formally outlawed on British<sup>9</sup> and French<sup>10</sup> soil at the time, it was fully legal in the colonies, and those who had acquired human property abroad could retain or return it at their will. Indeed, after the English court recognised Baartman’s capacity to consent to performative labour and enter a contract, she was sold by the same enslavers-turned-managers with whom she had negotiated a supposedly consensual agreement. As Sharpe (2010) and Pinto (2020) have pointed out, the legal vacuum that entrapped Baartman – neither a consenting citizen, nor a coerced captive – heightened her physical and economic vulnerability and it also serves as a means for considering her exploitative treatment within, but also beyond, the framework of enslavement. In Paris, the animal trainer who had bought and exhibited Baartman also rented her to Georges Cuvier, Napoleon’s surgeon general and the founder of comparative anatomy. Eager to prove that the Khoi-San peoples were the missing link between humans

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<sup>9</sup> In the 1772 case of *Somerset v Stewart*, Judge William Murray ruled that it was unlawful for Charles Stewart, a British citizen, to forcibly take James Somerset, an enslaved African he had purchased in Virginia, out of England. Although Murray was careful to avoid offering a ruling on the legal status of enslaved people and their rights in England, his decision was interpreted as indicating that slavery was illegal in England, and this proved to be a landmark contribution to the abolitionist cause.

<sup>10</sup> In 1791, two years into the French Revolution, the Constituent Assembly issued a decree that declared all persons residing in France, regardless of race, were free and possessed the rights associated with French citizenship. In 1794, the decree abolishing slavery was extended to the French colonies, although it was only implemented in Saint Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Guyana. In 1802, Napoleon issued a decree confirming that slavery was to be maintained under the pre-1789 legal code in all French colonies where the 1794 decree had not been implemented. Additionally, the decree permitted local authorities to re-establish slavery in French colonies where it had been abolished. Slavery was definitively outlawed in all French colonies by the Abolition Decree of 1848, issued during the Second Republic.

and apes in the secularized Great Chain of Being, a hierarchical system of classification of life forms implying a linear and progressive understanding of evolution, Cuvier gathered a group of scientists to measure and examine Baartman's body. Upon her death in 1815, he obtained permission from the French government to dissect her corpse for scientific purposes. His seemingly objective anatomical notes, a telling example of scientific racism, were published and delivered as lectures in 1817, while Baartman's body cast, bones, preserved genitals and brain remained on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974. Her remains were eventually repatriated in 2002<sup>11</sup>.

Cuvier's dismemberment of Baartman's body is represented in the fragmented form of Parks's *Venus*, which combines historiographic and metatheatrical elements to stage a postmortem narrative of Baartman's dissection through the postmodern techniques of pastiche, parody, and intertextuality. By infusing the play with textual excerpts from early nineteenth-century historical records, court documents, anatomical notebooks, and academic lectures, Parks exposes the fictional nature of factual accounts and the dramatic qualities of historical and scientific discourse. Fully aware of the fallacies of official historiography, she treats archival sources as man-made artifacts enmeshed in a matrix of discursive and representational practices whose functioning is both regulated and legitimized by systems of knowledge and power structures that mutually sustain and reinforce one another.

Parks's ability in "provok[ing] questions as to the artifice, the spectacle, and the dramatic constructs" (Feldman 2013: 3) inherent in the history-making process is evident in the anti-mimetic style that permeates the play, as announced by its title. *Venus* is the stage name imposed on the already fabricated name of Sartjie Baartman to identify an African woman who was exhibited in freak and animal shows as an exotic curiosity. As Kornweibel points out, the title indicates "a focus not on the ability to recover an individual whose interior life is sadly lost to history, but rather on the ways in which western 'civilized' culture has written this figure into their own mythology" (Kornweibel 2009: 71). In the cover design of the Theatre Communications Group edition, the vertically displayed title is superimposed on two overlapping, slightly blurred silhouettes of Baartman, a replica of the hypersexualised image that was used to advertise the shows. Parks's use of the same stage name and promotion materials that were employed in the nineteenth century to economically exploit Baartman and position her as an abject Other signals a provocative alignment: by creating and consuming the show, the playwright and the audience are complicit in what Jean Young has defined as "the re-objectification and re-commodification of Baartman" (1997). By looking at both the book cover and at the billboard of the theatre production, readers and spectators are made aware of their own predatory gaze and willing participation in the perpetual consumption and exploitation of racialised images of blackness. In other words, the paratextual elements show that what Parks intends to dramatize is not Baartman's true story, but the spectacle that has been made of her body.

The play's anti-mimetic style is also signalled by the *dramatis personae*, which include

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<sup>11</sup> For a meticulously researched account of the life of Baartman set against the backdrop of Dutch colonialism in Africa, Britain's abolitionist movement, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars, see Clifton & Scully (2009).



four roles, five characters, and a chorus. The four roles are Miss Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot; The Man, later The Baron Docteur; The Man's Brother, later the Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum; and The Negro Resurrectionist, who acts as a master of ceremonies throughout the performance. The five characters appear in a play within the play entitled *For the Love of the Venus*, Parks's melodramatic parody of an 1814 one-act vaudeville written two months after Baartman's arrival in Paris to capitalise on her popularity<sup>12</sup>. The eight members of the chorus embody different ensembles as the play progresses, including the "Human Wonders" (Parks 1997: 19) from a freak show, a vaudeville audience, the judge and witnesses in the English trial, and a group of anatomists attending Baartman's dissection. All the roles and characters, except for Baartman, are listed by common nouns rather than proper names, a choice that overtly rejects any attempts at historical authenticity and psychological realism. In Parks's non-realistic cast list, all the actors, except for those playing Baartman and the Negro Resurrectionist, perform multiple functions in a rotating mode that mimics the circular construction of the play.

The structure of *Venus* comprises an overture and thirty-one scenes listed in reverse order, a downward arrangement that inverts the sequential chronology of realist drama to reflect Parks's critique of progressive historical narratives, social Darwinism, and the American myth of upward mobility. As the play opens, the Venus turns counterclockwise on a rotating platform. This image immediately establishes an inversion of centre and margin, positioning a historically marginalised subject at the centre of the stage and making her the gravitational pull of the show. In the circus that serves as the framing device of Parks's play, however, Baartman is physically displayed and linguistically constructed as a deceased object of spectacle for an audience of greedy necrophiliacs. Although in the overture The Negro Resurrectionist announces that "thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead" and "[t]here wont b inny show" (Parks 1997: 3), the performance continues in the form of a grotesque sideshow that dramatises the diasporic displacement of Baartman following her northbound journey from South Africa to Europe. The thirty-one "scenes of subjection" (Hartman 2022) illustrate Baartman's descent from human to animal to scientific object, until the circus reverts to the starting point. When The Negro Resurrectionist reannounces Baartman's death in scene one, the play ends where it began to potentially begin once again. This endless circular movement suggests what Sharpe (2010) sees as the impossibility of redressing Baartman's physical violation, simultaneously evoking the past and present cycles of violence inflicted on black bodies. It also points, however, to the incessant artistic and critical investment in Baartman as "the ur-subject of black feminist theorising around sexuality", an exhausting investigation that involves the repetition, reproduction, and revision of racist representations

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<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive examination of *La Venus hottentote, ou Haine aux Françaises*, the 1814 vaudeville show by French playwrights Emmanuel Théaulon, Armand Dartois, and Nicolas Brazier, see Sharpley-Whiting (1999). In her own time as well as in the years following her death, Baartman's racialised and hypersexualised body became the subject of newspaper cartoons, ballads, and other forms of popular art. Her iconic figure has inspired a rhizomatic range of contemporary visual art, poetry, drama, and fiction that extends far beyond the scope of this essay. In *Black Venus 2010: They Called her "Hottentot"* (2010), Deborah Willis and Carla Williams assembled an impressive survey of art, critical essays, and poetry that represent an exhaustive variety of responses to Baartman over the years, grappling with her historical presence and enduring legacy.

of her black female body, ultimately leading to what Pinto terms “black feminist fatigue” (Pinto 2020: 106, 126).

The play’s fragmented circularity and lack of closure eschew a linear narrative arc and formal resolution typical of dramatic realism in favour of an open-ended and unresolved finale that compels readers and spectators to reexplore the entire play to make meaningful connections between its various parts. This reflexive tension runs through the metatheatrical fabric of *Venus*, and its multiple performative settings and interior play combine to represent Baartman’s journey through different theatres of exploitation, from the Dutch colonial settlement in Africa to a supposedly civilised Europe. The overtly metatheatrical sections comprise the freak show, the trial, the play within the play, and the anatomical dissection-turned-lecture, during which Baartman is alternately transformed into an object of white entertainment, white saviourism, white lust, and white scientific racism. In staging diverse spectacles of race-based violence, Parks demonstrates that whether making Baartman play a savage animal in a stage cage, perform as the vulnerable victim in an English courtroom, take on a hypersexualised character in vaudeville, or pose in an anatomical theatre, white Europeans exposed her body to posit blackness as irrevocably inferior and affirm their supremacy through the disciplining and domineering power of the white gaze.

In the metatheatrical scenes, as the audience of *Venus* watch the various onstage figures watching Baartman, Parks draws attention to the “spectacular violence” (Hartman 2022: xxix) entailed in the act of looking, shifting the gaze away from Baartman’s violated body and back onto itself. Through this self-reflexive dramatic device, contemporary audiences are made aware of their perverse participation in the spectacle of colonial, racial, and sexual exploitation disguised as popular entertainment, juridical discourse or scientific practice. By staging repeated acts of voyeurism in a distinctly metatheatrical framework, Parks implicitly casts the audience members as voyeurs themselves, thus extending complicity in the consumption of racialised images of blackness from the spectators onstage to those in the theatre. This is particularly evident in the intermission scene, when “[h]ouse lights should come up and the audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre, take their intermission break, and then return” while The Baron Docteur “stands at a podium and reads from his notebook” (Parks 1997: 91). Here, Parks turns a conventional moment of release into an uncomfortable scene of malign witnessing. In the playhouse-turned-anatomical theatre, the audience is invited to listen to a detailed account of the dissection and examination of Baartman’s corpse, a practice of such dehumanising proportions that some members might “need *relief*”, which the play intentionally denies. As the Baron Docteur points out after encouraging the audience to take a breath in the lobby, his “voice will surely carry beyond these walls and if not”, he promptly adds, “my finds are published [...] in *The Royal College Journal of Anatomy*” (Parks 1997: 92), from which he proceeds to quote extensive and gruesome excerpts. Cuvier wrote, published, and delivered his seemingly objective anatomical notes to prove that the Khoi-San peoples to which Baartman belonged were the missing link between humans and apes. In *Venus*, this vivid example of nineteenth-century scientific racism is removed from the context of the anatomical theatre and relocated in an actual theatre setting that foregrounds the artificiality and affectation of scientific discourse.

By injecting alienating anatomical terms in ancient Latin into a circus-like setting, Parks parodies and demystifies the authority of Cuvier's statements and of nineteenth-century pseudoscience, a vicious form of epistemic violence that legitimised the enslavement and subsequent segregation of black people by asserting their inferiority.

Through the disturbing dramatisation of Cuvier's lecture and other racist discourses that dehumanised Baartman, Parks forces the audience to acknowledge the subjugating power of both verbal and visual representations of abject blackness. In choosing to portray the story of a dissected black body in the form of a fragmented freak show, she reconciles content and form in a way that eschews both conventional and oppositional modes of racial, national, and theatrical representation. Her unapologetically playful and yet intensely political play employs elements of historiographic metatheatre to deride and dismantle the representational regimes of liberal democracy as well as the rhetorical repertoire of historical anti-racist movements. By privileging metatheatrical representation over historiographic revision, Parks advances her artistic argument that counter-narratives centred on heroic and essentialist portrayals of Black resistance may not be inherently effective in challenging hegemonic narratives of unending progress promoted by liberal democracy. It is only through acknowledging the role that spectacle has played in sustaining systemic racism that a transformative national reckoning about the aftermath of slavery can take place.

#### **4. Differing Dramatic Representations of Slavery**

The institution of slavery is dealt with differently in the official historiography and national mythologies of Canada and the United States. Although legal and vigorously practiced for over two hundred years in the French and British settlements of colonial Canada, slavery was subsequently removed from the country's consciousness as its political and cultural ruling class engaged in an ideological process of nation-building aimed at constructing Canada as a "peaceable kingdom" (Frye 1995: 251) whose only connection to slavery was as the destination of runaway slaves entering a land of freedom across its southern border. In the United States, slavery was a crucial factor in the accumulation of capital and the rise of the nation as a world power. Following its abolition in 1865, the "peculiar institution" was conveniently constructed as an original sin purged through the carnage of the Civil War, becoming part of a liberal narrative of democratic progress that continues to impede discussion about the enduring role of racism in US society.

These very diverse albeit equally self-indulgent national narratives have prompted Gale and Parks to dramatise slavery through historiographic metatheatre, adapting the genre to their respective national affiliations and theatrical traditions. The pervasive amnesia concerning slavery in colonial Canada led Gale to use the mimetic potential of dramatic realism to stage the life of the most renowned bondswoman in Canadian history, bear witness to the brutal violence that marred her existence and transform her into a beacon of black resistance. By redeploying Angélique as icon, Gale adopts a corrective counter-historiographic approach aimed at rescuing her from oblivion and righting the wrongs of history. While Gale's recourse to the oppositional potential of realist drama is particularly effective in dismantling hegemonic discourses of Canadian history, Parks's skepticism of the

political and aesthetic usefulness of conventional dramatic forms prevents her from writing a revisionist counter-narrative centred on an American slave. Rather than reinscribing an enslaved black woman into a national history replete with black icons, Parks reenacts the spectacle, the transnational display of Baartman's hypersexualised black body "to indicate not that she can be remembered correctly, but to condemn the ways she has been disremembered" (Kornweibel 2009: 73). Moreover, she employs a self-reflexive representational strategy that redirects attention from the exhibition itself to the perverse voyeurism of past and present audiences, thereby refracting the violence and power inherent in the act of looking at a racialised subject.

Despite their different approaches to historiographic metatheatre, both Gale and Parks draw on its dramaturgical and performative possibilities to advance a critique of official historiography, destabilise mythical narratives of nationhood, and enable the staging of subjugated black stories. In *Angélique* and *Venus*, their artistic practice aligns with a black feminist aesthetic that posits drama as a site of recovery and recognition of black subjectivities. Theatre becomes a subversive space in which remote and recent, colonial and postcolonial, racist and post-racial acts of physical violence, social injustice, and symbolic obliteration can be reenacted and resisted through embodied gestures of remembrance that foster national reckonings with the legacy of slavery and the continuing effects of racism in both Canadian and US society.

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