

CHAPTER FOUR

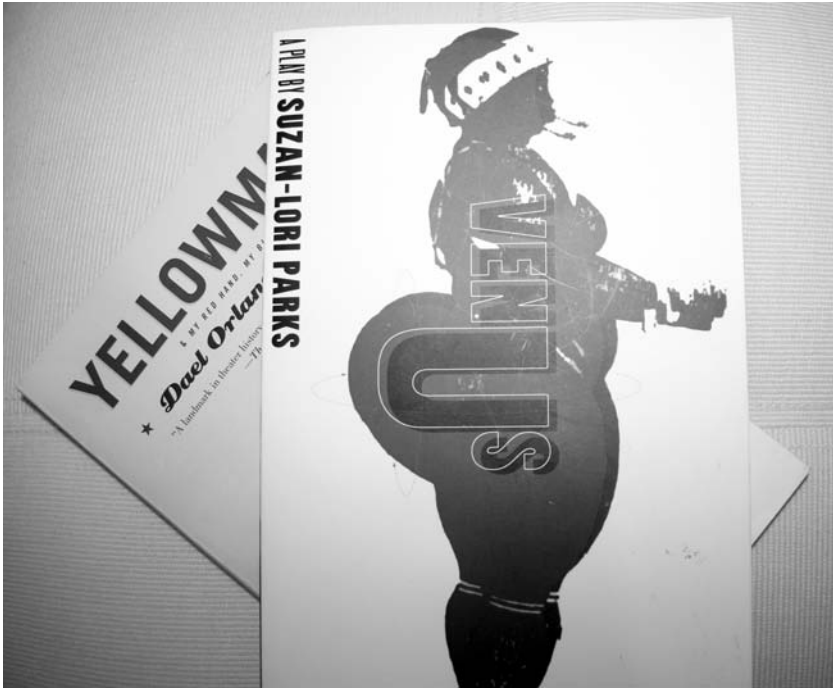
Touching History: Staging Black Experience

The cover of the Theatre Communication Group's (TCG) edition of Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* features a silhouette of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who gained European celebrity status as the "Hottentot Venus" in the early nineteenth century.¹ Her ample backside, a condition known as steatopygia that endowed her with a shape that the bustle attempted to approximate four decades later, made her famous. The cover emphasizes this feature—this main attraction—by centering the figure against a white backdrop against which the black bottom of Baartman appears even more pronounced. Superimposed and vertically running down her silhouette, the name of the play—*V-E-N-U-S*—appears. The letter *U*, located at her midsection, has been scripted in a font that is nearly three times larger than any other letter and, in turn, emphasizes her steatopygia. The *U* attracts the eye and subtly encourages a reading of "Us." TCG draws additional attention to Baartman's midsection by incorporating latitudinal and longitudinal lines around her lower torso. The confluence of these design elements suggests a play that not only centers a black body within (and, perhaps, as) the world but also locates "us," the viewers, within the experience of the black body.

The cover gestures toward the play's ability to reenact and flesh out the experience of the black body. A blue silhouette of the Hottentot Venus stands against the black one. The misalignment of the images—blue overlapping black—hints at the ways in which Saartjie Baartman has been approximated in both life and art. In *Venus*, an actor plays "Venus Hottentot" and/as Baartman. In real life, Baartman simultaneously was and was not this role. The slippage between her willing role-play, the enforced projection of the role across her body, and her relative silence within the historical record

appear within the opening moments of the play. *Venus* begins with Venus Hottentot standing upon a rotating platform. Similar to the TCG cover, she appears in profile. Her pronounced backside, enabled by the adornment of a prosthesis, is on display. She “revolves” until she “faces upstage,” thus enabling spectators to continue to gaze upon her body without having their looks challenged by her. Her movements followed by her stillness are reminiscent of Alfred, Fassena, and Jem, among others, who, as Alan Trachtenberg has noted, performed “the role of specimen” before Joseph Zealy’s camera. As Venus stands still and silent, the other company members in the production introduce themselves to the audience. Following the last introduction, they point to the black body on the platform and name her as the Venus Hottentot. The actor, playing the title role, repeats after them: “Venus Hottentot.” She confirms the label and, in so doing, appears to consent to her new identity. On the heels of Venus’s acceptance of their projection of the black body, a character declares: “The Venus Hottentot iz dead.” Another adds: “There wont b inny show tonite.” Despite these proclamations, the viewer suspects that there will be a show tonight but may wonder whether the silent figure on display, the black body, will speak again.

Reconstructed from the surviving historical documents that feature Baartman—the lectures of George Cuvier, the doctor who dissected Baartman and paraded her remains around the world; the recorded, eyewitness accounts of spectators who paid to see Baartman on display in various carnival circuits; and the court proceedings, prompted by many of those negative accounts that sought to determine whether Baartman was being exhibited against her will—Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *Venus* re-creates not only the experience of the “Hottentot Venus,” but also the environment within which she lived. In her historical revisitation, Parks encourages her audience to ask several questions. Can historical documents represent the experience of a black body? Can the experiences of the displayed black body get reclaimed by theater? Or does the representation of the body, as centered and central to the dramatic narrative, replay or reenact its previous experience of being the exhibited body, but before a different audience? How do the repeated similar experiences of passed/past (historical) black bodies touch the black body in the present and in the future? In the following pages, I explore each of these questions by looking at how three playwrights—Parks, Robbie McCauley, and Dael Orlandersmith—use theatrical reenactment to gain access to the experience of select historical figures. Parks stages Baartman. Robbie Mc-



Venus. Photograph by author.

Cauley mines her dreams to represent the sexual assault of her great-great-grandmother. Dael Orlandersmith, despite viewing her play as nonhistorical and not autobiographical, tells a story that reflects the treatment of her own body. In bringing the bodies of the characters Baartman, Sally, and Alma within their respective performance projects—*Venus*, *Sally's Rape*, and *Yellowman*—to the stage, each playwright activates black memory and gives voice to embodied black experiences.

“She'd Make a Splendid Freak”

Born in 1789 into the Griqua tribe, a part of the Khoi-Khoi (or Khoisan) people who lived on the Eastern Cape of South Africa, Saartjie Baartman worked as a field hand on a Dutch colonial farm.² By the age of nineteen or twenty, she had attracted the attention of William Dunlop, a visiting ship's

doctor. According to rumor recorded as history, Dunlop convinced Baartman that she could greatly profit by returning to England with him and exhibiting herself as an oddity in the English carnival circuit. “With stars in her eyes,” Baartman scholar and South African anatomist Phillip Tobias notes, she “accepted his offer.”³ Arriving in Piccadilly in 1810, Baartman appeared on a “stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper and exhibited like a wild beast, being obliged to walk, stand or sit as he ordered.”⁴ Naked with the exception of face paint and a flimsy apron of feathers tied around her waist, Baartman was paraded throughout the greater London area over the next four years. In addition to these public displays, Baartman was also exhibited in private sessions. While these sessions certainly suggest the likelihood that the young woman was prostituted, recorded history resists such conclusions. Sold to an animal trainer in 1814, Baartman was taken to France, where she continued to appear as an oddity on display for both public and private consumption. As the entertainment at a social event for French politicians, Baartman attracted the attention of George Cuvier, Napoleon’s surgeon and Louis Agassiz’s future mentor, who claimed a “scientific interest” in her and initiated an association that lasted well beyond Baartman’s death less than a year later. Despite the close scrutiny of Cuvier, who experimented with Baartman’s body while she was alive and eventually dissected her following her death, the actual cause of her death remains unknown. It is generally felt that syphilis, tuberculosis, and the consequences of alcoholism were the primary culprits.

In death, Baartman remained on display. Cuvier created a plaster cast of her body, dissected her body—preserving her genitals and brain in a glass jar—and reassembled her skeleton. The results of his autopsy served as the basis of a series of lectures that he delivered around the world and were later published. The physical remains of Baartman’s body were shipped to the Musée de L’Homme (Paris) and placed on display until the middle of the twentieth century. While the preserved brains and genitals and the reassembled skeleton were the first items to be shelved—literally taken off display and put on a shelf in a back storage room—by the museum curators, the plaster cast remained on exhibit until the mid-1970s. According to several museum guides, the cast was removed not because of public protest but because it was creating problems for the museum staff. Apparently, the image of Baartman awakened the sexual desires of tourists that occasionally erupted in the form of visitors groping the cast, masturbating in the (public) presence

of the cast, or attempting to sexually assault tour guides after having seen Baartman.⁵ The cast was removed to maintain decorum. In February 2002, the cast, skeleton, and jarred remains were returned to Baartman's native South Africa. Six months later, they were buried. Between the homecoming and burial, Suzan-Lori Parks won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.⁶

Parks's *Venus* restages and to a certain extent remembers Saartjie Baartman. Written nearly a decade before Baartman's remains were returned to South Africa, the play succeeds in gathering up the material remains of Baartman's life, as recorded in history and science and repeated in myth and legend, in order to reinvent Baartman. Before our eyes, the woman who had spent over 150 years as a series of parts on display becomes whole again. While the play does take liberties with what is known about Baartman—chief among them is the suggestion that Cuvier and Baartman developed a romantic relationship—the portrait of Baartman accords with extant historical and legal accounts. Within the frame of the theater, as within the frames of history, myth, and science, she remains an object of curiosity, an exhibit of otherness—a woman with magnified proportions (emphasized in the play through the use of prosthetic accessories)—at whom we look.⁷ The question of whether or not Parks's play repeats the objectification of Saartjie Baartman and, more generally, the black body is worth considering. Does the play empower her or merely recast her in the role of exhibit of otherness? The most cited and critiqued opinion on this matter belongs to Jean Young, who rails against both Parks's play and Richard Foreman's 1996 production of it. Young's argument is relatively straightforward. As its title, "The Re-objectification and Re-commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," suggests, the article details the author's belief that the play restages Baartman again (and again) as a freak or oddity. She remains an object of otherness to be gawked at, pointed to, groped, and abused. Young most strenuously objects to the play's suggestion that Baartman was "an accomplice in her own exploitation," assuaging white male guilt over her exhibition not only through Baartman's complicity but also through the casting of a black male actor as the Baron Docteur in the Foreman production.⁸ With note to this latter theatrical-historical inversion, Young writes, "This attempt at multicultural casting by director Richard Foreman suggests that Black men are the primary exploiters of Black women, further distancing white males from a recognition of Baartman's (i.e., the Black woman's) exploitation and dehumanization."⁹ In short, Young as spectator of the theatrical text,

played and replayed, witnessed and rewitnessed on recorded video, objects to the fact that at no point in the text does the playwright or the director point a finger of blame at the individuals who brought her from South Africa to England, who caged and exhibited her, who profited from her exhibition, who paid to see her, who dissected her, and who ultimately participated in her dissection by attending the museum exhibitions of her displayed remains. The play merely stages a woman who wants to be staged. This is Young's complaint.

Michele Wallace, in her review of the live performance for the *Village Voice*, takes a different tack. To her, the play, as well as Foreman's production, fuses multiple elements so as to distance the audience, bring them into history, and ultimately entertain them. Reading Wallace's review, I find that there is not the slightest hint of frustration. After offering a brief historical introduction of the real Saartjie Baartman, she writes:

But don't waste your precious brain cells trying to correlate the tale I've told with the one Parks tells of Baartman as a lusty, lovely lady who falls in love with the mad scientist who will ultimately dissect her. Just sit back and enjoy Parks's outrageous script and Richard Foreman's deft staging and directing. Don't be afraid to laugh at the plentiful humorous sight gags. Parks's point is at once archeological and devilishly playful, a Brechtian process of familiarizing what is ordinarily considered a mundane body part in order to plunge us backward into a period of history we've chosen to forget.¹⁰

For Wallace, Parks deftly takes her audience backward in time to consider the political ramifications of the backside. More than a mere meditation on the mundane, the play encourages us to seriously consider the representation of the black body. Wallace's most profound insights on the play are introduced in the final sentence of her review. Wallace observes that *Venus* "actually draws upon a wide range of divergent, comparatively new and unexplored discourses: stereotypes of race and gender in Western culture, the plight of the black female body in representation, and the ethnographic subject of the social sciences as a by-product of colonial power, wherever there were inconveniently located indigenous populations who couldn't or wouldn't get with the program."¹¹ Despite the lack of elaboration, the author, contrary to Young, seems to suggest that a not so subtle critique of colonialism

and representational histories exists within the play. The play is more complex than Young's initial assessment.

W. B. Worthen continues Wallace's argument in both point and style. Having introduced Young's review, Worthen challenges it by referring to an unpublished article by Irma Mayorga and Shannon Steen: "[The authors] undertake a fully-developed challenge of Young's essay, citing both inconsistencies in Young's article and making a case for the play's strategic representation of Baartman; they argue that *Venus* challenges the fiction of identification with Baartman, or the sense that her subaltern subjectivity is recoverable, especially in the visual dynamics of theater."¹² Faced with the difficult task of imagining a "fully-developed challenge" from a single sentence summary, we can only pretend to know what the argument is. Does the Brechtian style mentioned by Wallace prevent any sort of identification with the title character? Are we deliberately kept at a distance in order to understand Baartman as an object of otherness? Rather than reobjectifying her, does our abeyance reveal the workings of the colonialist structure? Does the framework of theater and the spectatorial relationships that it engenders prevent the audience from doing anything but looking at Baartman? Is the goal of the piece to become aware of one's look? Is this why the play operates as a meditation on the mundane? As the mundane gains interest (becomes more interesting to us), do we enter history and encounter the race-based representational practices of nineteenth-century science (e.g., the workings of Cuvier and Louis Agassiz)?

Rather than repeating the methodological approaches of Wallace and Worthen, who seem to point at the play and say that "there is something important there," without actually detailing what or where "there" is, it is necessary that we sharpen our analysis by separating Foreman's production of the play from the play text. Despite the fact that I would usually cringe at such a suggestion, *Venus* operates as one of the exceptional cases in which the original production actually creates an obstacle to a clear interpretation of the play text. Evidence of this appears in the fact that Worthen elects to read a Stanford production as the representative performance rather than Foreman's original staging at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Moreover, Young's negative review often makes reference to the heavy-handed intervention of the director and how his presence may have disrupted authorial intent. A quick perusal of the other reviews of the production reveals that Worthen

and Young are not alone in their critique of Foreman. These reviews consistently remark upon the presence of Foreman's signature décor—the network of strings, crisscrossing overhead—and how this imprint marred the production. Alvin Klein, a *New York Times* reviewer, offers the most critical reading of the Yale Repertory Theatre production: “That Richard Foreman, the revered playboy of the avant-garde, is the director for Ms. Parks's intense cause defeats it perversely, creating further distancing and reducing it to drivel and ostentation.” He later adds, “With style being all, ‘Venus’ comes off as snob theater, full of exclusivity, pretense and showy effects, signifying trendiness.”¹³ Several weeks later, a letter to the editor appeared in the *New York Times*. It echoed Klein. Having read another *New York Times* article on Foreman's style by Don Shewey, the letter writer, Murray Berdick, observes, “Some of the confusion I experienced a few weeks ago at the Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven has dissipated, now that Don Shewey has told me more about Richard Foreman . . . I understand now that the inexplicable features of the production are all mannerisms of Mr. Foreman's.”¹⁴ After outlining each of these features—the strings and a red light that remained blinking throughout the production, Berdick concludes his letter with the following: “The photo with the article suggests that the playwright and the director have a good relationship. But I think the director has put his personal and psychic needs ahead of his responsibility to communicate the playwright's message to the audience.” Although Berdick's conception of Parks's message remains unknown, it is evident that he found Foreman's directorial inventions to be distracting. These inserted elements stole attention away from the playwright, play, and the black body.

The Limit of Language

The need to sever the presence of Foreman and the spectral presence of his production of *Venus* from our analysis of Parks's play appears in Berdick's letter. Foreman's imprint obscures the playwright's message. While the phrase “playwright's message” dangerously elides with other equally problematic theatrical clichés such as “director's vision,” which ultimately mean nothing, we can, nonetheless, study the medium through which that “message” expresses itself: language.¹⁵ How does Parks utilize language and linguistic style within *Venus*? How does language and linguistic style comment on phenomenal blackness and the experience of Saartjie Baartman?

Every text on Suzan-Lori Parks—whether academic criticism or theatrical reviews of her work—discusses the playwright’s unique relationship to language. In one of the earliest major newspaper reviews of her writing, Mel Gussow, reviewing Parks’s 1989 production of *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* for the *New York Times*, likens Parks to Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange and notes that her play “has a playful sense of language.”¹⁶ Three years later in a *Boston Globe* profile, Patti Hartigan observes, “What she is about is language, the sheer sensuality and physicality of words. There are no stage directions in Parks’s script, she says she writes the movements into the dialogue so that actors inherently know what to do while speaking.”¹⁷ Alvin Klein, in his review of the 1994 premiere production of *The America Play* at the Yale Rep, notes that “the verbal acrobatics, perpetual punning and provoking subtexts” make the play “a cerebral workout.”¹⁸ David Richards, reviewing the play three months later, after it moved to New York’s Public Theatre, comments that it “relies heavily on wordplay, symbolism, and free association.”¹⁹ Two years later, Klein, writing about *Venus*, declared, “The playwright is on her customarily unstoppable word high.”²⁰ Shawn-Marie Garrett, in an October 2000 *American Theatre* profile of Parks, summarizes the playwright’s style in the following manner:

Like Ntozake Shange before her (though in a different style), she crafts a theatrical poetry that bears the same relation to black dialectical forms that, for example Joyce’s language bears to the speech of the Dubliners he heard and remembered. Meanwhile, Parks’s spelling, which can make her plays look impenetrable on the page, is part of a tradition in African-American letters of deliberately damaging and reshaping written English. Shange writes that African-American writers have to take English “apart to the bone / so that the malignancies / fall away / leaving us space to literally create our own image.” Parks’s approach is more playful, and the dangers (as well as the pleasure) of image-creation are major themes of *The America Play* and *Venus*.²¹

In the more academic treatments of Parks’s work, the playwright’s use of language remains central to commentary. Harry Elam and Alice Rayner contend that “it is precisely in words that Parks herself identifies the intersections that comprise her theatre: the intersection of ritual, language, gesture, history, and ethnic identity.”²² W. B. Worthen centers “the patterns of verbal and gestural echo that run throughout” Parks’s plays, particularly *Venus*.²³

Joseph Roach, reading *The America Play*, investigates Parks's use of liturgical silence to mine and restage history and historical figures. Comparing the play with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Femi Osofisan's *The Oriki of a Grasshopper*, Roach observes that these plays "share a memory of the Atlantic world that eludes conventional narrative. They must seek other languages for their retelling—languages of image, of gesture, of sound, and especially of silence."²⁴ Elizabeth Lyman chronicles how "Parks relies upon visual effects of typographical and page design to create a linguistic accompaniment to verbal dialogue and stage direction."²⁵ Contrary to what I will assert later in this section, Lyman maintains that Parks's language and linguistic style is visual and does not merely strive toward the visual. In sum, the volume of critical work that centers Parks's use of language points to an academic and "high-cultural" infatuation with the uniqueness of her prose. Parks, in a comment about the 2002 bidding war among publishers who sought the rights for her first novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, appears to comment on the frenzy her writing has generated within the theater community. She states, "They're excited about the writing. I love it. I love it, but it's weird, the reaction. What's going on? Did I sprinkle crack cocaine on the pages?"²⁶

I, too, wish to meditate on the use and function of language within *Venus*. Rather than highlighting its musical influences, "rep and rev" form, or non-standard use of English—all tenable subject matter for an analysis of the play—I will focus on the limitations and failures of Parks's "language." This focus should not be considered a critique. In fact, it is my contention that the playwright should be lauded—as she has been—for attempting to take the written word where it ultimately can never go. In striving to give the word a multidimensional visual presence, Parks takes her readers and audiences to the very ends of textuality. We can see this in the playwright's scripting of gestures and her stage directions, emphasis on nonverbal moments, and even the narrative history of the Hottentot Venus that fails to adequately represent the body of Saartjie Baartman.

Parks incorporates the gestural and physical into her words. Or, more to the point, her writing strives toward visual embodiment. In a 1992 *Boston Globe* article, the playwright is quoted as saying, "Language is about breathing. It's about teeth and mouth and spit in your mouth and how your jaw works and what your hands are doing. It's all there. It's in the lines and the actors can pick it up and do something with it."²⁷ Two years later, in "Elements

of Style,” Parks expanded her understanding of the physicality of words by noting:

Words are very old things. Because words are so old they hold; they have a big connection with what was. Words are spells in our mouths. My interest in the history of words—where they came from, where they’re going—has a direct impact on my playwrighting because, for me, Language is a physical act. It’s something which involves your entire body—not just your head. Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests—and through digesting creates a performance on stage. Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life. Look at the difference between “the” and “thuh.” The “uh” requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack.²⁸

Venus, as with all of Parks’s plays, is filled with the “physicality” of language. An example appears in the following moment taken from the play’s overture:

THE MAN, LATER THE BARON DOCTEUR.

I say:
Perhaps,
She died of drink.

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST.

It was thuh cold I think.

THE VENUS.

Uhhhh!

THE CHORUS OF 8 HUMAN WONDERS.

Turn uhway. Don’t look. Cover her face. Cover yer eyes.

In the preceding excerpt, the characters come alive and into being through the playwright’s use of the “uh” sound. Whether the “uh” requires the actor to employ a differing physical, emotional, and vocal attack may depend upon the actor playing the role, but it is clear that the “uh” creates and distinguishes the characters. The Baron Docteur, a representative of conventional, standardized, and successful Western education, remains “uh”-free. His speech is proper and punctuated. In contrast, the Negro Resurrectionist, the Venus, and the Chorus of 8 Human Wonders are marked as being different from the Baron. They are minoritized individuals who express themselves in a minoritized, nonstandardized speech pattern. They are the embodiments of “uh.” Each expresses his or her “uh” formation differently. It is an article, a

declaration, and an adverb. Despite these differences, the “uh” sound comes together and repeats itself in a strange accumulation of “uhs” within the excerpt. Within this concatenation, the “uh” strives to project an experience of the minoritized body.

While the presence of “uh” certainly informs the audience’s expectations of the characters appearing within the play, the “uh” sound is not inherently physical, gestural, or visual. Certainly aural, the sound and the process by which that sound is generated may prompt the actor to become newly aware of her body, but it does not immediately conjure the image of the body. We may hear the sound of the actor but we cannot see her. This is the limit of language. The physicality of Parks’s language is aural and visceral but not visual. You can hear it. You can feel it. You cannot see it.²⁹ We can attribute this feature of the playwright’s writing style to her training as an actor who wanted to become a playwright. “I knew that the only way I could become a better writer,” Parks once told an interviewer, “was to study acting. But I never wanted to be an actor. Never. Ever. Ever.”³⁰ Her decision to study acting may root itself in the playwright’s desire to better understand how the body speaks. Parks listens to the body and then strives to record its voice. This is the basis of the “physicality” of her language. It is not anchored in her writing “uh” and then creating a performance based upon that utterance by an actor. The performance begins before the writing. She imagines herself or some other body with whom she converses saying “uh.” The focus here rests not on the utterance itself but the process by which that utterance manifests itself, the position of the body at the moment of enunciation, and the reverberations of the sound having been spoken. This is what she seeks to encapsulate in language. Language strives to become something that it can never be. It can gesture toward that prior physical enactment but it will never fully embody the moment that precedes the utterance.

Parks also reaches the limit of language in the form of “spells,” which she defines as an “elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look.”³¹ An example of a “spell” in *Venus* appears below:

THE VENUS.
THE BARON DOCTEUR.
THE VENUS.

Continuing her definition, Parks writes:

This is the place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While “no action” or “stage business” is necessary, directors should fill this moment the best they see fit. The feeling: looking at a daguerreotype; or the planets aligning and as they move we hear the music of their spheres. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It’s also a place for an emotional transition.³²

A spell, occupying the space between a beat and a moment, is the point at which something happens. It is a special, nonverbal happening that is filled with meaning. It exists beyond words. It is an experience. As an actor-playwright, Parks runs into the spell at the very moment that language begins to fail her. How do you represent that which refuses to be represented? How do you express the nonverbal in words? You cannot. Rather than attempting to write stage directions or dialogue that approximates the moment without embodying it, Parks stops short. She introduces the participants and then resorts to silence. We must imagine the moment. We must conjure our own spells. The spell operates as a moment where language absents itself in an effort to evoke a physical, visual presence. It marks the place where the word surrenders to the image. While the dialogue that precedes any given spell certainly creates the environment in which the spell gets enacted, the fact remains that the spell itself is both improvised and imagined. It is a scripted improvisation. It is where the playwright stops writing, the actor stops reading, and they momentarily move beyond the ends of language and into the realm of visuality.

The limit of language repeats as a replay within *Venus* in Parks’s representation of historical documents that pertain to Saartjie Baartman.³³ The presence of these various recorded and archived materials proves of interest to our study because they give the impression that they are honest representations of Baartman when, in reality, they only obscure her image. The lectures of Cuvier restage Baartman as an exhibit within a new space and, arguably, before a differing audience. The stage becomes the examining table. The carnival, the lecture hall. Baartman remains the object to be seen. The court transcripts drawn from the 1810 case to determine whether the young woman was being exhibited against her will similarly restage Baartman.

Within the actual transcripts, Baartman remains silent. The magistrate either speaks for her or summarizes what she supposedly said to him or others behind closed doors.³⁴ The eyewitness accounts of Baartman's mistreatment that prompted the court proceedings rehearse her position as a body on display for others in that we continually experience her exploitation through the vantage point of others who paid money for the privilege of seeing a black body on display. Their humanitarian concern emerges only after their curiosity has been satiated. In each case, we never encounter Baartman. We never see her. We do not hear her speak. She remains absent and silent within history.³⁵

What the presence of these historical documents reveals is the absence of the black body within recorded history. Specifically, it points to the absence of Saartjie Baartman within the volumes of recorded history. How can there be so many sources concerning Saartjie Baartman while her body remains invisible and silent? How can we know so much about the woman called the Hottentot Venus and at the same time know nothing? What the entrance of written history does in this moment is to reveal a known truth. Those who record and preserve history have often overlooked the black body. Ironically, the end result of these historical figures' overlooking of Baartman's body is that they fail to adequately represent her.

Reclaiming the Black Body

In her review Jean Young identifies Parks's representation of the black body as the play's tragic flaw. It is not difficult to side with Young. Imagine witnessing the performance of *Venus* at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Not only does Yale, as does every collegiate institution of a similar age and prestige, have a fraught relationship with the history of black captivity and the equal treatment of women, but there is also the fact that sitting alongside you are predominately white patrons who paid significant sums of money to witness the event.³⁶ This is the bite in Young's critique. She sees the replay of history in the very presence of white audiences paying to see a black female body appear on stage as an exhibit of otherness. Interestingly, a similar argument can be used against Robbie McCauley and Jennie Hutchin's *Sally's Rape*, a performance piece examined later in this chapter. Young's response begs the question: can a play like *Venus* create an opportunity to reclaim and refashion a more positive image of the black body? Young would say no. To her,

Parks reobjectifies and recommodifies Baartman. Parks, like Cuvier, packages Baartman and displays her to the masses for a price. Young's conclusion anchors itself in her reading of the historical inaccuracies of the Foreman production and Parks's display of Baartman. Both offend her. It is not difficult to understand her offense. I am offended whenever I work with Zealy's daguerreotypes or the photographs of lynched and burned black bodies. These images always remind me of the day when I, as a child, discovered a book on my parents' bookshelf turned to the image of a black body, Willie Brown's body, burning before a crowd of white men dressed up for the evening/event and posing before the camera and the body, and realized with horror that that body—that body there—could be my own.³⁷ Young's reaction is justified. It is not, however, the only reaction. Whereas Young finds the play offensive, Michele Wallace thinks of it as "fun." The fact that Wallace views *Venus* differently simply gestures toward the imbrication of black habitus, black memory, and the personal nature of visceral response, which itself emerges through differing learned experiences of blackness. Where does such a reaction belong in academic discourse? As I tell my students, you must begin with your "gut reaction" and then work outward. You must return to the body.

Worthen, despite his general disagreements with Young, briefly sides with her when he notes that history—or at least, the history represented within *Venus*—cannot be reclaimed. Although Worthen makes repeated reference to history, it is worth noting that his "history" is textual: written and recorded. Within *Venus*, it is the textual traces of Baartman's very existence and exhibition. It is the lectures conducted by Cuvier, the court transcripts, and other similar records. These traces specter the body. They mark its prior presence and its "It's right here before my eyes" status. In many ways, history (the text) becomes the body of Baartman. She is the text made flesh. Can we take back this history? Not according to Worthen. He believes that the very condition of theater prevents this from occurring. The theater, a place for seeing, ultimately re-creates the body of Baartman as a spectacle. Rather than reclaiming the body, it recapitulates it. He writes, "Performance can surrogate history, metaphorize it, cite it, but not reclaim it, at least not this history: it is too closely bound to the rhetoric of performance itself—'don't look'—a rhetoric that determined how Saartjie Baartman would enter history."³⁸

While the theater certainly makes the look apparent, the presence of the look does not rule out the possibility of reclaiming embodied experience.



Khoisan woman. Photograph by author.

The drawback with the proposal outlined by Worthen and Young is that the theater can only reobjectify the black body. Part of the confusion may rest in the word *reclaim*. Worthen uses it to connote historic erasure followed by a rewriting. There is the feeling that a successful reclamation consists of audiences being able to see the character Baartman onstage without being ghosted by the lived reality of Baartman. However, there is an alternate way to consider theatricalized efforts to engage with and, ultimately, to reclaim aspects of the past. The black body, the accumulated and repeated similarities of the embodied experiences of black bodies, is a body that is made to be given to be seen. It is a projection that is always on display, always on stage, and always in the process of its own exhibition. In light of this past, present, and *futured* condition of the black body, it is not sufficient to say that the framing of theater can only repeat what occurs in everyday life. Support for this contention threatens to ignore all of the future possibilities of black bodies onstage and seems to suggest that the body can only be a historical body replayed.

Re-claiming does not require that we erase the past and script a new one. The prefix tells us this. To reclaim is to take something back. It is to possess something in the present while knowing that it has only recently been back in your possession. It is to remain aware of its previous “claims” even as you articulate your own. It is to know the past in the present as you work toward creating a future. Read from this perspective, Parks’s play allows us to reclaim, to take back, and to know the passed/past in the present for the future. On a variety of levels, it enables us to claim the experience of Baartman and the other, lesser-known women who were subjected to the title “Hottentot Venus.” First and foremost, Parks’s play, to echo Wallace, encourages us to focus on an often-overlooked body part and to understand its historical significance. The centrality of exposed flesh, including but not limited to the buttocks, reveals that there is an originating point—the body—in the experience of the black body. It is the presence and recognizability of the black body within the medical theater, in the boxing ring, before the camera, and on city streets that spark an experience of phenomenal blackness.

Second, we need to consider the physical movement of the remains of Baartman from the Musée de L’Homme. After nearly a decade of negotiations, the skeleton and plaster cast of Baartman were finally returned to the Khoisan people of South Africa. Back “home” and given a long overdue burial, the remains are no longer on display, and the almost two-hundred-year

show has ended. As Parks, employing her characteristic spelling, declares, “There wont b inny show tuhnite.” Despite the fact that the remains were returned several years after Parks’s play was first produced, the process of reclaiming them had begun before the play had even gone into production. It seems logical to say that Parks—in light of the abundant research required to write the play—had to have been aware of the efforts of the Khoisan people and the South African government to reclaim Baartman’s remains. Whether the final lines of the character Baartman were written merely to give an update on the location of Baartman’s body or to spur those in attendance to support the Khoisan–South African cause, the fact remains that the playwright reminds us that even as the character Baartman’s exhibition is ending before the theatrical audience, the real Baartman—even in death—continues to be on display. The character Baartman, referring to herself at the end of the play, declares, “Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit.”

An *American Theatre* article by Shawn-Marie Garrett hints at yet another way of understanding the process by which Parks reclaims embodied histories. Referring to Parks, she notes, “Her theatre of history, then, unlike August Wilson’s, is a space of simultaneity. History for Parks is not necessarily a progressive experience, or even a set of finished events that can be divided and dramatized by decade. The pain of the past that has never passed is precisely what sharpens the bite of her wicked satire.”³⁹ Reviewing the final words of the character Baartman, we can see that her exhibition continues. There is no absolution in death. “Loves corpse stands on show in museum.” In these words, we can see that history has been paused but has not passed. The result is that Baartman, a historical figure of the past, has not passed but remains paused in the moment of her exhibition. What Parks succeeds in doing throughout the play is animating the still body of Baartman. This is why the play begins and ends with the character’s still stand and the pronouncement that “Thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead.”

Finally, the reclaimed status of the embodied experience of Saartjie Baartman anchors itself in her request that we “Please visit.” Why does she want us to visit? After all, one might think that more spectators would only heighten the feeling of objectification and commodification. Even the play, according to Young, does this as a replay. It reobjectifies and recommodifies her. Is this her aim? The answer may rest somewhere between Parks’s need to converse with the dead to tell their stories and our need to rewrite history by digging it up in order to encounter our paused passed/past. To converse

with history is to both see it—as imagined, remembered, and/or reenacted—and to be touched by it. Literary critic Hershini Bhana Young offers an eloquent description of this process, in relation to Saartjie Baartman:

The black body is thus always a collective as it remembers both its ghosts and that which has traumatically marked it as Other. The artificiality of the appendage that conjures up Baartman's ghost speak to the weight of violence that has inorganically fragmented and reconstituted the black body, creating a racialized creature with phantom limbs. This body, overburdened by the discourse of race and representation that created its blackness in the first place, can only survive by acts of (aesthetic) identification that create community.⁴⁰

In *Haunting Capital*, Young champions a similar conception of the black body but develops it through a literary analysis structured upon trauma theory and accounts of ghosting. Although the author privileges a reading of the experience of the black body as being phantasmic, she similarly acknowledges that an engagement with embodied black experience offers access to the “weight of violence” that frequently accompanies the black body. The act of conversing with history—of passing on stories—invites a consideration of that violence. It enables that weight to be encountered, recognized, and, eventually, shared. An example of this appears in Robbie McCauley and Jennie Hutchins's *Sally's Rape*, in which McCauley shoulders the “weight of violence” that was directed toward her great-great-grandmother.

Touching History

Sally's Rape, Robbie McCauley's 1992 Obie Award-winning performance project, roots itself in the presentation of two women, one black (McCauley) and one white (Hutchins), who, initially over tea, civilly discuss various aspects of their lives and upbringing. Interspersed throughout these vocalized nostalgic retreats are several moments where McCauley recounts, and to a certain extent relives, the experience of her great-great-grandmother, Sally, who was sexually assaulted on the ground(s) of a Georgia plantation. Although the recounted and represented act appears in only two of the ten scenes, it remains central to (and centered in) the play. The title of the performance project draws itself from the assault, remembered; and the various

nostalgic conversations that revolve around childhood, etiquette, and distant memories exist as a counterpoint to the experience of Sally. In this section, I investigate how the body touches history and how history touches the body. How does, for example, the black body experience the embodied histories of prior bodies? I question: how does the passed become *futured* across present bodies?

On a certain level, the body is the *futured* history—the future made past—of a prior body. My body is the *futured* body of my great-great-grandmother, my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. It is the future manifestation of my ancestors' bodies viewed from a past perspective in which the future past, the *futured*, is the then-present that is now. To look at my skin, my own body, and my image reflected in a mirror is to see not only me—standing there looking at myself—but also to view the various parts of these other bodies that ghost my own. I am the embodiment of their experience of the body. I am the causal result of their bodily activities. Of course, my body will never be the same as their bodies. They are many and I am but one. Differences will exist. However, it is my body, as the site of similarity, where we come together.

Robbie McCauley's body is her ancestral body. It represents, and indeed re-presents, the bodies and the embodied experience of her ancestors whose previous actions invoked her current presence. McCauley, herself, confirms this connection early within *Sally's Rape* when she asserts, "I become others inside me."⁴¹ Among the many "others" inside her stands Sally, McCauley's great-great-grandmother. Within the performance project, McCauley reveals to her audience that the experience of Sally haunts her in the present. In dreams, she not only remembers Sally and remembers Sally's experience of the body, but also believes that she has become Sally and shares Sally's experiences of the body in the moment of the sexual assault. She declares, "In the dream, I am Sally down on the ground being done it to."⁴² McCauley can access and replay the experience of her great-great-grandmother, in part, because the embodied experiences of Sally were always already in the performance artist's body. Standing before an audience, four generations after the assault, McCauley exists as evidence (the stain) of the rape act. She is its *futured* remains. She carries it with her because it is her. It is an experience of the body that she may not have personally experienced, but it is an experience of the body (of Sally's body) that constructs her person. If the assault had never occurred, then McCauley would not be here to talk about it. Without

the rape act, there would not be a Robbie McCauley. Her experience of the body began the moment that the plantation “master” assaulted Sally. Her future was located in this past enactment. This is why she can “be” Sally.

When McCauley does re-present the “rape” of her great-great-grandmother within the context of a dreamt remembrance, it is important to note that Hutchins does not play a role. Interestingly, the sexual assault is recast and remembered as a solitary act. McCauley, alone, replays it. Rather than perform the moment of the assault, the performer presents the assault as an aftereffect, a happening that happened and now is being reviewed within the context of a remembrance. Within the performance of the remembered encounter in which McCauley is “bein’” Sally “being done it to,” there is not an aggressor. There are not any movements or physical gestures to give the impression of the rape act occurring onstage. Neither is there an attempt at introducing a real (visible, onstage) or imagined “master.” Instead, McCauley sits naked, wrapped in a blanket, and remembers the “rape.” This remembrance combined with her posture establishes the action as an aftereffect. It happened but its reverberations can still be felt. The echo of the rape act appears in the language that the performance artist employs to describe her dream of the assault. She declares:

In the dream I. I am being Sally. Bein’ bein’ I . . . I being bound down I didn’t didn’t wanna be in the dream, bound down in the dream I am I am Sally being done it to I am down on the ground being done it to bound down didn’t wanna be bound down on the ground. In the dream I am Sally down on the ground being done it to. In the dream I am Sally being done it to bound down on the ground.⁴³

The echo of the remembered assault can be heard not only through the repetition and fragmentation of the central phrase “I am Sally bound down on the ground being done it to” but also through the similar sounds of the often repeated words *bound*, *down*, and *ground*. Together these recurring elements create a loop in which the experience of the sexual assault continually returns to be experienced again and again. We can think of each sentence in the preceding excerpt as the point where the cycle repeats. In the dream I am Sally down on the ground being done it to. What does it mean for the experience of Sally to repeat? To repeat across generations? To repeat within the frame of theater as a representation of an actual, prior moment?

Although the experience of Sally that gets replayed in the preceding excerpt is certainly singular—it pertains strictly to Sally—the experience created by the replay, the performance of McCauley’s dream, is multiple and variable. Several factors contribute toward the widening of this experience of a single body into an inclusive arena for multiple bodies. On one level, McCauley can imagine and approximate her great-great-grandmother’s reactions in the moment of and following her sexual assault. Her ability to access this experience in a tangible manner begins with her realization that she must work backward, commencing with herself as the remains of the performance, the rape, until she can reach the original act itself. This movement toward reclaiming the past from a past perspective located within the future, a future that is passed, gets complicated when we realize that the remains from which she began were created not only by the experience of Sally’s body but also of the unnamed, within the performance project, “master.” When McCauley replays the moment of the assault, as an imagined reenactment, a dreamed remembrance *and* an aftereffect of having been done it to, what she accesses is not only the first-person thoughts of Sally but also the first-person thoughts of the “master,” her great-great-grandfather. Although McCauley’s approximation of Sally’s experience of the body gets voiced within the project, the experience of the “master’s” body remains unspoken despite the fact that it provides the actions to which McCauley’s Sally reacts. We can imagine the voice and remembered experience of the “master,” who also resides within McCauley, as providing the antiphony to McCauley’s dream remembered:

In the dream I. I am being Master. Bindin’ Bindin’ I . . . I binding down I didn’t didn’t wanna be in the dream, binding down in the dream I am I am Master doing it to I am down on the ground doing it to binding down didn’t wanna be binding down on the ground. In the dream I am Master down on the ground doing it to. In the dream I am Master doing it to binding down on the ground.

This inversion clarifies an aspect of McCauley’s performance. It suggests that McCauley, caught between the experiences of both of her ancestors, does not comfortably inhabit either one. Within *Sally’s Rape*, she imagines the experience of her great-great-grandmother and expresses her desire to escape both the dream and the re-created moment of the rape act. She states, “I

didn't didn't wanna be in the dream," and later, "I didn't wanna be bound down." While the experience of rape, as remembered and imagined, provides a likely explanation for her discomfort, it could also be asserted that McCauley has difficulty imagining and re-creating an assault between two bodies who dwell within her own. In the inversion of the remembrance in which McCauley becomes "master," we can make a similar argument concerning the discomfort generated over assuming the role of, in the dual sense, ancestral rapist: a rapist as an ancestor and a rapist who assaults an ancestor. Although the ambivalence of the "master"—didn't wanna be binding down—in this imagined scenario does not accord with popular representations of such "masters," the fact remains that within McCauley's performance project the actions from which it draws its title occur between her great-great-grandmother and her great-great-grandfather. When remembered through her body as both the screen across which the dream gets played and the remains of the act that the screen seeks to capture, the rape of Sally invokes the presence and experience of both Sally and the unnamed "master."⁴⁴

The absented presence of the "master" within the performance project encourages the widening of the experience of Sally to include more than just Sally, McCauley's great-great-grandmother. The performance artist herself initiates our move toward such a reading in both *Sally's Rape* and within its preface when she introduces another Sally, Sally Hemings, the captive and mistress of Thomas Jefferson. Sally Hemings, like Sally, was also "raped" by her "master." McCauley, in the preface to her play, writes: "I'm going against the myth of the romance of the slave master and the overseers with the slave women, even Thomas Jefferson. I'm going against the myth because it was a power thing, so we call it rape. Sometimes it was actual, brutal rape; sometimes it might have been romantic. It doesn't matter. It was a rape that happens in those power situations."⁴⁵ To McCauley, rape includes not only an act of forcible aggression against one's will but also seemingly consensual relationships in which the two participants widely vary in terms of symbolic capital. Despite the fact that the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings is considered to be loving and romantic within the popular imagination, McCauley reminds us that Hemings was Jefferson's captive and begs us to ask whether a loving, romantic relationship could exist under such conditions.⁴⁶ Although Hemings lived in the eighteenth century and may have consented to her relationship, and McCauley's ancestor lived a century later

and may not have consented—as evidenced by her imagined protestations—there are several obvious similarities between the two women. They were named Sally. They were sexually involved with their “masters.” They bore children by their “master.” Clearly, the experience of Robbie’s Sally is not unique.

The similar, repeating experiences of both Sallys reveal how history operates as a replay across the black body. *In the dream, I am being Sally*. Sally’s experience repeats that of Sally Hemings’s that of her mother, Elizabeth Hemings, and her grandmother (whose name escapes recorded history). Sally Hemings’s grandmother was an African captive who was sexually involved with the English captain, Captain Hemings, who oversaw her transport from Africa to the Americas. Once she was in the United States, John Wayles purchased the now pregnant African captive. Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth (Betty) Hemings was born and her parentage was discovered.⁴⁷ Many years later and after the death of Wayles’s third wife, the plantation “master” took Betty Hemings as his lover and fathered six children, including Sally, by her. These children, always considered to be servants, were raised alongside his other (white) children from his previous marriages. When Wayles’s (white) daughter Martha married Thomas Jefferson in 1772, Betty and her children, Martha’s illegitimate stepmother and half-siblings, moved to Monticello, Jefferson’s estate, to live with them. Following Martha’s death a decade later, Jefferson took Sally as his lover and fathered at least one of her six children. Reviewing Hemings’s genealogy, it is difficult to ignore the repeated similarity of the liaisons of plantation masters—Captain Hemings, John Wayles, and Thomas Jefferson—with black women. It happens again and again and again over at least three consecutive generations.

While there are few narratives by black women that document the earliest instances of such liaisons, the fact that they did occur can be seen in many of the surviving, recorded court proceedings and legislative acts of colonial America. In 1630, eleven years after the first black captives were brought to Jamestown, Hugh Davis, a white settler in the Jamestown colony, was charged and punished for being sexually involved with a black captive. It was ordered that Davis “be soundly whipped before an assemblage of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of the Christians by defiling his body in lying with a Negro.”⁴⁸ With public punishment not curbing racial intermixture and the increasing number of mixed-

race childbirths, the Virginia Assembly needed, in 1632, to officially determine the status of these offspring. The result was the following decree: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether a child got by an Englishman upon a Negro should be free or slave, be it therefore enacted by this present grand assembly, that all children born in this country shall be bound or free according to the condition of the mother.”⁴⁹ With the decree, sexual relationships no longer appeared to carry the immoral signature evident in the earlier ruling. It also deemed such relationships and the products of such liaisons to be potentially profitable. The black female body became the site for both pleasure and profit for the “master.” Literally, he could profit from his pleasure.

Although the legislature, relying upon popular (conservative) notions of white femininity to prevent the liaisons of white women with black men, unknowingly opened the possibility that white female abolitionists could have a series of relationships with black men and populate the colony with free mulattos, it closed the door in 1691 when it created a new law declaring that a white woman who had a mixed-race child had to pay a fine to the church and that the child would be taken into slavery until the age of thirty. The goal of the legislature was clear. Racial intermixture was permissible, moral, and profitable when it involved a white male and a black female. In light of the fact that these encounters were protected both by law and by the privacy of the plantation setting, the question arises: How many women had an experience similar to Sally’s? The fact that the Virginia State Legislature, in an effort not to disenfranchise its leading and oldest families, passed a law, in 1785, that a person with less than an eighth black blood was white reveals the widespread nature of racial intermixture within the period. This law contrasts with the ones enacted a century later in which “one drop” of black blood or the presence of one black ancestor was all it took to be considered legally “black.” What the earlier law reveals—something that legislators later disavowed—is an awareness that racial intermixture occurred often and that very few people, if anyone, were racially pure.⁵⁰ Clearly, the experiences of Sally, Sally Hemings, Betty Hemings, and Betty Hemings’s mother were not unique to them. How many Sallys were there? How many of us, both black and white, have a Sally in our past? It is difficult to conceive of the experience of the black body or phenomenal blackness without these histories of assault. It is an experience that was not limited solely to women. While black men had access to the abuses of their female ancestors, they too were the tar-

gets of sexual assault. In addition to the more frequent accounts of the sodomizing of the black male body as part of a lynching campaign, black males were the targets of sexual abuse within the era of black captivity. The protagonist (Simon) in Tanya Barfield's play *Blue Door* is a black slave who was repeatedly abused by his "master."

The touch of history on the black body appears not only in the realization that McCauley's body is her ancestral body, but also in the performance artist's figuring of her body in a historically significant manner. Specifically, she replays the moment of the auction block within *Sally's Rape*. Occurring as a prologue of sorts to her dreamed remembrance of Sally's experience, the auction block scene begins with McCauley quickly and unnoticeably standing on a block and dropping her sack dress. Her ascension, as does her nudity, catches the audience unaware and by surprise.⁵¹ At the moment that the audience begins to understand what has happened, Hutchins goads them into chanting, "Bid 'em in." As the group, repeating the phrase, speaks, their collective voice gains strength. Bid 'em in. Bid 'em in. Bid 'em in. The words of McCauley in this moment prove less significant than her physical position. Her body speaks. In re-creating the moment of the auction block before a theatrical audience, the performance artist collapses the temporal distance between herself and those who were forced to stand on the auction block. Her body becomes representative of their bodies. Her body becomes an example of the black captive body on display. Beyond the external association of nudity, the similarity between the two temporally distinct performances appears through the foregrounding of the auction block itself. The auction block, from an African American cultural perspective, is an American icon. It represents the black body being stripped of its individuality and displayed, as a commodity, for the highest bidder. Captives on blocks do not have names; they have (lot) numbers. When McCauley ascends her block and drops her dress, she catalyzes our memories of the auction block as a site of black oppression. On the block, she is no longer Robbie McCauley, a performance artist whom an audience has paid to see. She absents herself to reveal an experience of the black body, which rejects the specificity of a name because of the commonality of its history.

In *Conjure Women*, a documentary film featuring McCauley reflecting upon *Sally's Rape*, the performance artist asserts, "I am interested in breaking silences about things that are hard to talk about." The experience of black captivity and the memories of the abuse of black bodies comprise the

difficult subject matter of her play. In making this statement, McCauley aligns herself with cultural theorist Houston Baker. She underscores the importance of critically mining black memory. She agrees that everyone needs to engage with and reflect upon the embodied black experiences that continue to structure social relationships. Risking not being “liked,” the performance artist dares to shift the nature of her civil conversation with Hutchins. She activates the memory and experience of the decidedly uncivil treatment of her ancestors and shares them with Hutchins and her audience. McCauley demonstrates Hershini Bhana Young’s assertion that to “pass on a story, to enter the portal of re-memory where the past, present, and future come together, often means the inheritance of injury.”⁵²

The power of *Sally’s Rape* is rooted in the reenactment of the abuses of black bodies on stage. It emerges through McCauley, standing naked on a block, as audiences gape and stare and chant and gasp and respond in a host of other ways. It is within these moments that the reverberations of history—the echoes of phenomenal blackness—can be felt. Standing still before the audience, McCauley becomes not only her great-great-grandmother but also Saartjie Baartman and all of the other women who were called “Hottentot Venus.” Despite the fact that her performance mirrors the exhibition of Baartman and the thousands of black bodies who were forced to stand as “lots” in auctions, McCauley controls the larger frame within which she appears and, in so doing, encourages those who witness her performance to read the black body from her perspective. In the course of the performance, she addresses her audience and declares, “I wanted to do this—stand naked in public on the auction block. I thought somehow it could help free us from this.” The stage directions reveal the “this” to be “her naked body.” McCauley volunteered to stand on the auction block and, in so doing, to open the floodgates of black memory associated with this bodily positioning. Her performance invites comparison with Muhammad Ali, who similarly subjected his body to inspection and, later, stood still in order to fashion a new understanding of the black body. However, McCauley’s stand does not “free us” from the black body. To the contrary, her presence onstage reminds us of the ways in which the black body structures the everyday experience of black folk. It only takes her nude body on stage to jog memories of black captivity. Her presence and the meaning that it creates within *Sally’s Rape* reveal the persistence of the idea of the black body as a projection frequently applied to individuated black bodies.

In her play *Yellowman*, Dael Orlandersmith similarly mines the influence of the past on the present. Although her protagonist, like McCauley, strives to break free from the experience of the black body, the play stages the passing of the “inheritance of injury” from one generation to the next.

Shouldering History

In *Yellowman*, playwright and actress Dael Orlandersmith, following in the footsteps of Suzan-Lori Parks and Robbie McCauley, remembers and stages the bodies “being done it to.” The play’s core characters, the “lithe bodied” and “extremely light-skinned” Eugene and “large-sized . . . medium brown” Alma, encounter, react against, and, ultimately, embody societal prejudice that manifests itself in the form of internalized race-based self-hatred and intrablack racism. The drama of the play anchors itself in how the characters, who were childhood friends who later became lovers, were indoctrinated by the racist rants and tirades of their relatives. It is harrowing to watch as the young, innocent, race-blind Eugene and Alma are subjected to their parents’ stereotypical conceptions of blackness. Emphasizing the influence that adults have on their children, the same actor often plays parent and child.⁵³ Alma’s mother, Odelia, spews gin-fueled critiques of her daughter’s blackness that emerge from and target the same body. At regular intervals throughout the play, Odelia tells her daughter that she is an “ugly black thing.” Apparently, the bodies *being done it to* are doing it to themselves.

Commissioned by the McCarter Theatre and developed over two consecutive summers at the Sundance Theatre Lab beginning in 2001 under the supervision of Emily Mann, *Yellowman* fuses Mann’s theater-of-testimony style with Orlandersmith’s tendency to meditate on societal racism within her performance projects. The result is an engaging play built upon long, descriptive, and, at times, repetitive monologues that give the piece not only a documentary feel but also a revealing insight into the psychological interiority of the play’s characters. Similar to Orlandersmith’s solo works *Beauty’s Baby* and *My Red Hand, My Black Hand*, the play prompts its audience to ask: What does it mean to be *raced*, to be visibly marked as a racial other, within contemporary society? In contrast to her other works, Orlandersmith’s *Yellowman* features a second performer who shares the stage with the play’s protagonist, Alma. According to the playwright, the performance piece

was expanded to include two actors with the explicit aim of making the play more palatable to regional theaters that were reluctant to program one-person performance pieces and, perhaps, were less likely to include a one-woman show featuring a darker-skinned, full-figured black woman.⁵⁴ From the beginning, the play proved to be a critical success. Of the plays discussed in this chapter, *Yellowman* garnered the most positive reviews and had the greatest commercial appeal. It was named a finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in Drama (losing to Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*) and won Orlandersmith the 2002–3 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an “award given annually to a woman who deserves recognition for having written a work of outstanding quality for the English-speaking theatre.” Why was the play so well liked, and apparently so widely? If the story of a white French doctor's thinly veiled lust for a black African woman whom he eventually would dismember and the portrayal of the experiences of a black captive being bid on and later sexually assaulted by a plantation “master” did not invite widespread critical acclaim, then what was so inviting about the problematic love affair between the light-skinned Eugene and darker-complexioned Alma that results in murder and a willful miscarriage? Is it that same-race liaisons are less threatening to theatrical audiences than miscegenation?

One explanation often cited for the play's critical success is its ability to honestly depict the damage created by self-hatred. Consistently, reviewers asserted that *Yellowman* audiences, regardless of their race, skin color, nationality, sex, gender, or bodily shape, could identify with the issues at the heart of the play. *Curtain Up* reviewer Karen Osenlund, having attended the 2002 premiere productions at the McCarter and the Wilma theaters, observed that the character Alma “fights the negative self image that most of us experience, whatever sex or color we are.”⁵⁵ Referring to the reactions of fellow spectators at the performances, Osenlund wrote, “You can feel the recognition in the audience.” Claire Hamilton, reviewing a 2004 production that did not feature either Orlandersmith or her costar, Howard Overshown, at the Everyman Playhouse in Liverpool, England, contended that “the story may not directly reflect your own experience, but I defy you to leave the theatre unmoved or unashamed at the prejudice that corrupts the human spirit in all walks of life.”⁵⁶ That same year, in a different production that also did not feature Orlandersmith or Overshown at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., theater critic Peter Marks observed:

The play harbors intimations of “Romeo and Juliet”: Does anyone in Verona remember the root cause of that “ancient grudge” between the Capulets and Montagues? Indeed, you could substitute Alma and Eugene for any couple anywhere, from Belfast to Belgrade, that has had to run the gantlet of inter-family opposition.⁵⁷

Although a few theater critics cautioned prospective audiences about the severity of the language, the plentiful racial epithets strewn throughout the play, and, in one instance, advised against bringing young children to the show, the majority praised both Orlandersmith and her play for offering a truthful, recognizable, and relatable drama about the anxieties related to self-image or familial tensions.

I am intrigued by these repeated suggestions that anyone who has had an anxious moment related to her own self-image or familial dysfunction can identify with Alma, because they consistently downplay the specific, racialized experience addressed within the play. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, in her investigation into “anxiety provoking” moments in performance projects involving color consciousness, offers an insightful study of the varied negative reactions that specific audience members had to *Yellowman*. Rather than privileging newspaper columnists, Carpenter interviewed theater historians who witnessed multiple productions of the play and were attuned to the reactions of fellow audience members. Among the recounted experiences privileged within her study, the author incorporates her own memories of watching the 2004 production of *Yellowman* at Arena Stage, the same production witnessed by Marks.

Upon arriving in the theatre I was immediately struck by the sight of several white patrons trying to sell their tickets in the theatre lobby. I had never witnessed this in a regional theatre before. . . . From that point on I became very aware of audience reaction. Not only did I notice the blank expressions, but there were many seats that emptied at intermission, never to be filled again . . . what I found most disturbing in terms of audience reaction was not the early departure of some white audience members, but rather the multiple moments of inappropriate laughter that erupted from black audience members.⁵⁸

Carpenter’s experience suggests that some critics (perhaps Marks?), in an effort to highlight *Yellowman*’s broad audience appeal, might have overlooked

the specific, visceral reactions that spectators were having to the play and were staging within the space of the theater. Select patrons traveled to the theater in order to create a public show of their unwillingness to witness the performance. Others, having weathered the first half of the play, opted to leave. In the two favorably reviewed productions of *Yellowman* that I attended in 2004 in Chicago and in 2007 in upstate New York, I did not observe anyone attempting to sell their tickets. However, a significant percentage, possibly as many as 25 percent, of audience members did not return for the second act of the Chicago production. Although the motivations for the Arena Stage's spectators' decision to sell their tickets or leave early are unknown, the limited number of explanations range from having extra tickets to the show (which still implies an unwillingness to see the production), to the late hour of the show, to a desire not to witness a production with racial/racist overtones. The patrons at Arena Stage who either deliberately or inadvertently created a public spectacle of their resistance could have assumed that the play, involving issues of embodied black experience, would cast them, as Robbie McCauley did in one memorable moment in *Sally's Rape*, as the race villain, the slave auctioneer or, worse, the plantation master. This does not happen within *Yellowman*. What greets the spectator, regardless of race, who enters the theater is the history of bodily abuse and the historical weight of racist stereotypes and caricatures condensed into language and then deployed, like weapons, by Orlandersmith's characters. The result is a theatrical experience that can overwhelm, offend, and prompt a desire for escape—whether physical departure or laughter. While Carpenter does suggest that the “inappropriate” laughter likely resulted from the women's own discomfort with the material presented within the play, the profound impact of their laughter on Carpenter and, perhaps, other audience members rests in the fact that bodies that share a similar history of oppression and are substitutable for the abused body on display *appear* to derive pleasure from the enactment of abuse. Imagine a black spectator laughing at—or, in the face—of Drana, Bootjack McDaniels, or Saartjie Baartman. The laughter heightens the feeling of vicarious victimization potentially felt by other spectators.

Orlandersmith scripts these heightened moments within *Yellowman*. Every time the actress playing Alma becomes Odelia and equates blackness with bigness and ugliness, she *appears* to derive pleasure from an insult. The characters seem to be laughing at themselves. This, according to Nicole Fleetwood in her *Theatre Journal* review of the 2002 production of *Yellow-*

man at the Manhattan Theatre Club, is the insurmountable problem of the play. Orlandersmith creates “a closed world of black on black discrimination” without addressing the larger, societal factors that led to the internalization of dominating stereotypes and prejudices.⁵⁹ Although the playwright does not explicitly center the structures of violence that undergird societal biases, she utilizes her “closed world” to reveal a palpable fear or anxiety of blackness that is symptomatic of a larger, social problem. The majority of her characters share a desire to protect their children (or grandchildren) from having to live the black experience within the United States. It is this goal that fuels a longing for “lightness” and prompts their actions. A pregnant Alma willfully aborts the child she carries because her child could share her skin tone. Eugene’s light-skinned grandfather disinherits his darker-skinned son-in-law and names his grandson his heir—but only after he learns that Eugene and he are the same complexion. Odelia encourages Alma’s relationship with Eugene but not with Alma’s darker-complexioned friend Alton. Despite their varying skin tones, Orlandersmith’s characters understand the complexities and complicatedness of embodied black experience. They have all been racially profiled by one another.

Orlandersmith introduces this theme and enables a reading of the commonality or, at least, the similarity of embodied black experience within Alma’s opening monologue. Sitting “in a chair upper stage right on a raised platform talking directly to audience,” Alma declares:

My mother women like my mother and her mother before her toiled/ tugged
the soil beside the men. They were dark and therefore not considered pretty/
. . . the men beat them/ leave them/ they ride them/ they don’t make love to
them/ they ride them/ the men/ always on top/ like my father/ they rode/ on
top/ they rode/ they entered/ they shot their seed/ then left them. My
mother/ women like my mother and her mother too/ ate it/ accepted it.⁶⁰

With these words, Orlandersmith as Alma describes the experience not only of Odelia and Odelia’s mother but also of “women like my mother and her mother before her.” This reference to others who exist outside of the frame of the play and beyond the present moment serves as a reminder that those bodies being ridden and then abandoned—the ones *being done it to*—are not products of the playwright’s imagination. Orlandersmith grounds these embodied experiences within real bodies who toiled, tugged, and tilled the

soil. While we might presume that the playwright locates these bodies within South Carolina, the setting of *Yellowman*, she does not definitively place them. Her silence invites us to be more inclusive and consider the hundreds of thousands of black bodies—captive, indentured, leased, and free—who worked the cotton, tobacco, and other agricultural fields across the United States.

Alma's monologue, linking black bodies, sexual assault, and the ground, invites a return to Robbie McCauley's frequently repeated phrase in *Sally's Rape*: "I am Sally down on the ground being done it to." The attention given to the ground, the soil, in the repeated victimization of the body in each, suggests that place structures the abuse and exploitation of the black body. Ongoing academic investigations of the treatment of black bodies within African slave "castles," onboard ships within cargo holds, and within the current prison industrial complex privilege this perspective. As background, backdrop, or setting, the plantation conditions the abuses of the black body, in part, because the productivity of the land was tied to the labor, in the dual sense, of those who cultivated it. Deborah Gray White in *Ar'n't I a Woman?* asserts that "some women of childbearing age plowed and ditched when they were pregnant," but the majority, owing to their "masters'" desire for "natural increase," were spared the arduous work assignments until they reached middle age.⁶¹ Angela Davis offers a more colloquial account of the abuses of those who were forced to work: pregnant captives subjected to physical punishments were instructed to lie on the ground, with their enlarged bellies positioned in a previously dug hole, before being whipped.⁶² The positioning of the "body down on the ground being done it" was meant to protect the captive's child and the master's investment. Does the transmission of embodied black experience, the socialization of blackness across generations, begin in this grounded, prenatal moment? Is the child also being whipped? Does the unborn child of a black captive sense her own captive status *before* she has been birthed?

In addition to prompting questions related to the socialization of blackness and revealing the entanglement of race, sexuality, and geography within a specific sociohistorical moment, Alma's opening monologue invites consideration of the play's situation of black women as unseemly, unloved sexual objects. Suggestive of the manner in which animals are mated for breeding purposes, her words establish black women in a past moment as depersonalized figures who are mounted, impregnated, and, subsequently, left. There

are historical precedents for Orlandersmith's depictions: the sexual assaults of black women on slave ships and on plantations by white sailors and plantation masters. In his 1789 autobiography, Olaudah Equiano, speaking of the treatment of "cargoes of new Negroes" by sailors and clerks in route to the Americas, recalls that

it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; . . . I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old.⁶³

A century and a half later, in 1937, W. L. Bost, a former captive who was interviewed as part of the Federal Writers Project, alluded to ongoing sexual assaults of black women committed by white plantation "masters" in South Carolina and North Carolina during the waning years of legalized black captivity. Bost observed, "Plenty of the colored women have children by the white men. She know better than to not do what he say. . . . If the missus ["master's" wife] find out she raise revolution. But she hardly find out. The white men not going to tell and the nigger women were always afraid to. So they just go on hoping that things won't be that way always."⁶⁴ The opening monologue in *Yellowman* gestures toward these experiences. It refers to the uncounted and uncountable numbers of assaults that occurred throughout three centuries of legalized captivity. The objectification and commodification of the black body lasted for so long and occurred within so many places that the black body's experience seems almost atemporal and ahistorical. It is against this backdrop that the decision to "accept"—but not to allow or to understand—the treatment can be viewed as a survival mechanism.

Unlike *Sally's Rape, Venus*, or the scenarios outlined in the preceding pages, *Yellowman* centers the relationships of black men and black women. There are not any white characters within this play. The sexual encounter described by Alma, in the opening monologue, occurs between black folk. What is the effect of casting black men, instead of white men, as the historical victimizers of black women? Influenced by Jean Young's disagreement with Richard Foreman's decision to cast a black actor to play the Baron Docteur in *Venus*, we can say that this decision scripts a new past, a new historical record, that absolves the white (male) body of its complicity in the abuse

of the black body. Indeed, when the play finds itself subject to negative criticism, this is the point that is raised most often. Its presentation of a “closed world,” to invoke Nicole Fleetwood’s phrase, cloaks the dominating structure that positions the black body, both male and female, as object and victim.

Although Fleetwood makes a compelling point that the presence of black bodies combined with the absence of white characters can be understood as de-emphasizing the role that dominating society played in the structuring of embodied black experience, there is a way of reading and thinking about the play that does not lessen the complicity of the plantation masters, overseers, and professional slave breeders among others in the abuse of the black body. It is not accidental that the two characters are the results of differently complexioned parents. Alma’s mother Odelia is dark-skinned and her father light-skinned. The opposite is true for Eugene. In addition, Eugene engages in a sexual relationship with Alma, who, according to Odelia, is “ugly, black.” Although all of the pairings involve black bodies, they also gesture toward a series of past sexual assaults, presumably (but not necessarily exclusively) by white men upon black women. The lightness of Eugene, his mother, and his grandfather, for example, exists as the by-product of the type of encounter described by both Equiano and McCauley. Each character, like McCauley, exists as a by-product (or stain) of that prior act and, as a result, carries both the experiences of the light (and, at some historical point, white) and the darker complexioned within themselves. While Eugene’s grandfather’s genealogical proximity to whiteness could explain his intense hatred of blackness, there may be another way of looking at this response. What led his daughter and his grandson to covet that which he despised?

Providing counterpoint to Alma’s spoken anxieties relating to her self-image and Odelia’s critiques of blackness, the desire for brown skin is announced by Eugene, as he recounts his first, teenage experience “making out” with a girl, a “fair girl” who was introduced to him by his childhood friend Wyce. He recalls thinking, “The girl is sweet and fine but Alma is sweet and fine to me—I want this girl to be Alma.”⁶⁵ Later, when he announces his desire for Alma and kisses her, he states, “Kissing Alma, I was home—I knew I was finally home.”⁶⁶ When they “make love,” he takes care “not to ride her” but to “make love to her.”⁶⁷ He finds her “beautiful.” Although the play’s centering on Alma and Eugene prevents any sustained understanding of the nature of the relationships involving the other characters, there is a brief moment when Thelma, Eugene’s mother, explains her attrac-

tion to Eugene's father. His father, according to Thelma, "is one of the gentlest human beings there is."⁶⁸ Black gentleness stands in contrast to the white (sexual) violence in each character's ancestral past. These statements in support of the beauty and desirability of blackness are significant because they reveal that Eugene and Thelma covet the type of blackness that Alma seeks to escape. What is the source of their longing? It could be steeped in an effort to recover some lost part of themselves (i.e., their blackness). It could be to create darker and darker progeny whose appearance at some point in the future effectively would disavow the appearance and, perhaps, the actions of the "master," overseer, or breeder. Or it could be the embodied lust of the "master," overseer, or breeder (re)asserting itself.

Black Like Me?

Dael Orlandersmith, in a series of interviews, has asserted that *Yellowman* is not autobiographical. "Everyone assumes that [it is autobiographical] because I'm in it," she noted in a 2002 interview.⁶⁹ According to Joyce Paran, the McCarter dramaturg who worked on the play, Orlandersmith "is pretty adamant about thinking of herself as an artist telling a story."⁷⁰ Although the playwright admits that the play is "very, very loosely based upon a family" whom she encountered in South Carolina, the rest is pure fiction. Any suggestion that the play reflects her own experiences or, more generally, engages the experiences of the black body, in Orlandersmith's eyes, is a complete misreading. In several interviews, the playwright makes a concerted effort to identify herself as apolitical within her plays and to promptly end any assertion that she speaks for or seeks to document the history of black people. In the same 2002 interview, she declares, "My background may not be similar to another black person's background. . . . Certainly, there is a given history, but we are also individuals. And when people expect us to write about the same thing, I have a major problem with that." Despite the playwright's desire to be seen as an artist capable of inventing a fully realized scenario, it is difficult to ignore the resonances and resemblances between elements of the play and her own life.

Even as Orlandersmith cites her experiential differences from other, unnamed black bodies, her similarity to her character Alma is unmistakable. The playwright has revealed that the first play that she saw, as a child, was *The Great White Hope*, premised on black heavyweight boxing champion

Jack Johnson, whose color renders him an outcast in society and whose romances with white women led to criminal prosecution and eventual imprisonment.⁷¹ How impactful was this play's staging of black vice and white desirability on her young mind? More recently, the playwright has said that her entrance into the theater was prompted by her difficulty being cast in commercial television and film. The industry, according to Orlandersmith, desires lighter complexioned actresses: "A Halle Berry, a Jada Pinkett—lighter-skinned actresses are working more so than darker-skinned black actresses. . . . And darker-skinned people are made to feel ugly because they are dark."⁷² It is difficult to imagine Orlandersmith not identifying with her own protagonist's racial anxieties.

Her anxieties (if any) could have been heightened by the critical reception of her performance as Alma. Despite the fact that the playwright has noted that she only added a second performer to *Yellowman* to increase the odds of it being produced in regional theaters, her lighter-complexioned costar (Overshown) consistently received higher praise by theater critics. While the majority of reviewers lavished praise on both actors, several intimated that Orlandersmith, despite being an experienced solo performer, appeared tense, anxious, and never entirely at ease on stage. David P. Stearns, reviewing the 2002 opening night production at the Wilma Theatre, suggested that the playwright's seeming discomfort could be located in the autobiographical nature of the play.

The playwright is also the star, and knowing that there have to be some autobiographical elements (both character and creator attended Hunter College, for example), you wonder how she can stand to relive this pain-steeped narrative on a nightly basis. During bows, as costar Overshown was smilingly receiving applause, Orlandersmith remained visibly shaken. The run of this play has only just begun. Pray for her.⁷³

In the critical reviews of Orlandersmith's prior performances, including *The Gimmick* (1996) and *Monster* (1999), there is not any indication that the actress does not control the stage. It is conceivable that the subject matter of *Yellowman*, possibly a reflection of the playwright's experience, could have affected the manner in which she approached the role. Having to carry and endure the "weight of violence" and an "inheritance of injury" throughout an evening's performance, the performer could have been exhausted by the

emotional and physical toll of playing Alma. It is also possible that the presence of Overshown may have compelled the solo-performance artist to adapt her style to accommodate another presence onstage. This could explain her apparent discomfort.

What is fascinating about the critical reviews of Orlandersmith's early performance projects, especially those written by Peter Marks, is the attention that they direct toward her body. Marks, in his review of *Monster*, writes, of Orlandersmith, "It is impossible not to empathize with the character as she stands on a darkened stage, her ample figure filling every inch of her black leotard."⁷⁴ It is not clear what elicits Marks's empathy: Orlandersmith's autobiographical tale, in which she was called "white girl" because of her "aspirations that defied boundaries" of blackness, or Orlandersmith's physical size—a big, black body squeezed, within Marks's imagination, into a piece of clothing that reveals her body-shape. In his review of *The Gimmick*, Marks makes frequent reference to the actress' physical size. He describes her as "imposing in size," and notes that "Ms. Orlandersmith fills the New York Theater Workshop with the outsize proportions of her formidable fury . . . [S]he fills the space." He calls her "unapologetically large," and makes reference to her "intimidating body."⁷⁵ Although Marks does not refer to her skin color, I suspect that it is implied—as *bigness* and *blackness* are corollaries in many, popular descriptions of black bodies. Indeed, the critic in his 2004 review of *Yellowman* recalls that Orlandersmith is "big and black" and seems to long for her "big" and "awkward" presence in the Arena Stage production. Alma's opening monologue echoes Marks's review:

My mother women like my mother and her mother before her toiled/ tugged
the soil right beside the men/ They were dark and therefore not considered
pretty/ they were dark and large—therefore sexless. They were sometime
bigger than the men/ their bodies filling space.

There is a similar attention to *bigness* amplified by *blackness*. Both are undesirable. Although they can elicit empathy, they, with their heightened presence, also threaten and intimidate. Despite the fact that Orlandersmith promptly dismisses any attempt to draw parallels between herself and Alma, the resonance of Marks's words opens up the possibility that *Yellowman* might have been influenced by or written in reaction to critical receptions of her earlier performance work. In channeling the spirit of the fictional Odelia

and presenting her voice before an audience, the playwright appears to cite and embellish the critical readings of her own body. She stands before members of the audience and, perhaps, tells them what they might be thinking about her or, perhaps, what they suspect that the person next to them might be thinking about her and themselves.

Orlandersmith, similar to McCauley in *Sally's Rape*, asserts that she wants to move beyond the black body or, at least, blackness. In the majority of interviews, the playwright rebuffs efforts to identify her aesthetic as bearing black traces, roots, or style. Unlike Suzan-Lori Parks, who, while citing the unique nature of her own life experiences as an "army brat," draws influence from jazz style and rhythms, Orlandersmith keeps identifiably black arts at a distance and downplays their influence on her dramaturgy. Her repeated dismissals, combined with her frequent citation of her partial Puerto Rican identity, being half black and half *puertorriqueña*, within nearly a dozen newspaper reviews proffer the impression that Orlandersmith does not want to be read as *black* and, as a playwright, does not want her work to be understood as being representative or, perhaps, emblematic of black style. The lady dost protest too much. And like Gertrude (in *Hamlet*), who watches the play within and comments upon the characterization of herself, the public Orlandersmith seems to make proclamations that do not jibe with the more accurate portrayals on stage. Although Orlandersmith emphasizes her Puerto Rican identity with the aim of suggesting that the black experience does not solely define her, it is important to remember that a similar experience of blackness, anchored in negative reactions and responses to darker skin complexion as manifested through theatrical and televisual performances of blackface, is a part of Puerto Rican cultural identity. Indeed, the privileges associated with lightness compared with darkness (Taino or Afro-Caribbean) in Puerto Rican history are analogous to the situation within *Yellowman*. Although Orlandersmith wants to move beyond the body, like McCauley, her appearance onstage and her replaying of select, racialized experiences only reify it. This return to the body proves particularly powerful and impactful. The problem is that Orlandersmith believes that she is breaking the cycle of repetition and return. She thinks that she is moving away from *the black body* by placing her black body onstage. Even as the story of *Yellowman* proves increasingly self-referential, the playwright-performer contends that the story is not about her and that she exists outside these embodied black experiences.

In spotlighting Orlandersmith, I seek not to flatten the differences that separate her from Suzan-Lori Parks and Robbie McCauley but to emphasize her staging of repeated, similar experiences that have affected, and, indeed, effected black bodies over the past two centuries. *Yellowman* is ghosted by the history and legacy of sexual assaults in slave castles, ships, and plantations. The voice of Odelia echoes the spoken barbs of countless individuals whose prejudices justified the institution of black captivity within the Americas and supported discriminatory policies in the century following emancipation. Eugene's final condition, alone and in prison, resembles Saartjie Baartman's status at the close of *Venus* and similarly reminds the audience that captivity continues to haunt the black community. The three plays discussed in this chapter—*Venus*, *Sally's Rape*, and *Yellowman*—are difficult plays to watch. Referring to Orlandersmith's play, Chuck Smith, resident director at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and the director of a 2004 production of the play, told me that he would never direct the play again. He cited the "hatred" that gets spoken and pointed out that the sheer repetition of Odelia's and Eugene's grandfather's words within rehearsals and performances "wears you down." The same can be said about the other two plays. *Venus* centers a black body put on display both in life and in death. It stages the power dynamic between white seer/master/aggressor and black seen/slave/victim that Robbie McCauley identifies as "rape." Within the play, the black body exists as a freak, an oddity, and ultimately, a scientific specimen. In *Sally's Rape*, McCauley wants to interrogate the past histories of bodily abuse, specifically sexual assault, that ghost black bodies in the present. After all, she (McCauley) is the result of a past rape act. The "master's" aggression is part of her being. At the same time, she wants to move beyond this history and to move beyond the black body by, ironically, restaging past abuses across her own body. While she reenacts the auction block moment by recasting audience members, who paid to see her perform, as potential masters who now must bid on her naked body, she represents the rape act as a dream remembered. The assault does not occur onstage—only her imagined memories of it. Much like Parks, McCauley's replay can be read as an interventionist act. She uses reenactment to assert the black body's agency in scenarios within which it historically has been rendered powerless. Although the performance artist explicitly expresses a desire to move beyond bodily based experiences, her production only emphasizes its importance. Similar to *Venus* and *Sally's Rape*, *Yellowman* stages the weight of past sexual as-

saults and the ongoing socialization of skin color prejudice that must be shouldered in the present. The character Alma exists as a modern-day Baartman; Eugene as one of Sally's children. Despite the twenty-first-century setting, the characters have not reached the point in which their blackness no longer defines them nor structures their experience of the body. Taken together, the three plays, which present stories based upon or inspired by the lives of real people, suggest that the past bears an impression on the ongoing present.

In the preceding sections, we engaged with the black body on display or, to put it another way, the black body as spectacle. Saartjie Baartman's body transformed her into a sideshow attraction that, in turn, caught the attention of George Cuvier. Robbie McCauley's body echoed the abuse of other bodies whose sufferings and labor on the grounds of southern plantations engendered future generations of black bodies. Dael Orlandersmith's body, on the twenty-first-century stage, reminded us not only of the way in which stereotypes of blackness are maintained through the cross-generational socialization of children but also the race-conscious perceptions (and, indeed, projections) of members within dominating society. In *Venus*, *Sally's Rape*, and *Yellowman*, Parks, McCauley, and Orlandersmith use the theater to gain access to these historical experiences of the black body and present them before an assembled audience. Although they frequently contend that their pieces seek to move beyond and, in short, to transcend the black body, I have maintained that the power of their respective performance projects anchors itself in the authors' ability to replay in the present the past experiences of bodies that have passed.

In this final section, I look at the character/caricature of the "black welfare mother" in Suzan-Lori Parks's *In the Blood* and contend that the playwright's staging of a black body coupled with her presentation of it as silent or rarely verbal, encourages audiences to imagine the experience of the body and, eventually, to speak on her behalf (and in her support). Loosely based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Parks's *In the Blood* centers Hester LaNegrita, a homeless, illiterate, black woman who independently raises her five children. Throughout the dramatic narrative, Hester encounters a series of individuals: Chilli and Reverend D., the fathers of two of her children (Jabber and Baby, respectively); The Welfare Lady, the federal program personified; Doctor, the embodiment of the federal Medicare system; and Amiga Gringa, her homeless "white" friend. Although each individual

can provide some form of assistance to Hester, they do not. Instead, they use her—often sexually—before discarding her. Simultaneously abused and neglected by these five characters, Hester struggles to survive each day and to provide for her children. Eventually, poor nutrition, poverty, and the weight of societal ridicule prompt her to kill her eldest child, Jabber. The play ends with Hester, standing at center, covered in blood as bars are lowered around her body.

In the Blood begins with a chorus, comprised of all five individuals, talking to one another about Hester. Their voices overlap and they speak together as one, not necessarily in unison, but from a single mind-set. It is clear that they view Hester as being socially beneath themselves. More to the point, they blame her for her various predicaments—single motherhood, poverty, and homelessness. At various intervals, they announce, “SHE’S A NO COUNT / SHIFTLESS / HOPELESS / BAD NEWS / BURDEN TO SOCIETY / SLUT!”⁷⁶ These words, which are declared before Hester appears onstage, frame the expectations of the audience. The play will be about a woman who is at fault for her social status and standing. With the entrance of Hester, who appears in tatters compared to the more refined clothing of the chorus, the chorus parts and the play begins. It takes several minutes for the audience to realize—with the entrance of Hester’s five children—that the choral members will play dual roles. It takes several more, with the entrance of the Doctor, for spectators to understand that the chorus has been triple cast. The actor who plays Doctor also plays Trouble, Hester’s son, and the role of chorus member. Reverend D. is Baby and also a part of the chorus. The Welfare Lady (hereafter Welfare) is Bully and chorus. Amiga Gringa is Beauty and chorus. Chilli is Jabber and chorus. Despite the multiple casting, it is immediately clear that the adult roles can be equated with the chorus and should be read as distinct from the children. In short, the chorus consists of Chilli, Reverend D., Amiga Gringa, Welfare, and Doctor.

Throughout the dramatic narrative, the individuated choral members interact with Hester. The nature of their respective encounters reflects an extended familiarity with the protagonist, despite her lower social standing, and reveals their responsibility for her homelessness, poverty, and single-parent status. Chilli and Reverend D. are absent fathers who refuse to pay child support. Welfare underemploys Hester by paying her to make dresses. Doctor loans her a dollar and threatens to perform a hysterectomy on Hester but does little to elevate her social position. Amiga Gringa steals money

from Hester. Each encounter ends with the choral member leaving Hester and, before exiting the stage, speaking in direct address to the audience. Parks labels these moments “confessions.” They are the moments when the individuated choral characters, who have already demonstrated their role in Hester’s “low” status, reveal to the audience that their involvement is more complex than initially presented. What makes these confessions dramatically interesting, beyond offering more examples of how Hester was used, is that they end without the characters accepting their roles in her mistreatment. Toward the end of his visit with Hester, Doctor announces that she will have to have a hysterectomy, referred to as a “removal of your womanly parts,” because of the number of children she has had—each by a different father. His state-sponsored intervention suggests that Hester actively disregards safe-sex practices and that her actions and the consequences of her actions, her children, have created problems for the locality. As a result, she, like an animal, must be corrected—“fixed.” Following his announcement, the Doctor confesses the following to the audience:

When I see a woman begging on the streets I guess I could bring her in my house / sit her at my table / make her a member of my family, sure. / But there are hundreds and thousands of them / and my house cant hold them all. / Maybe we should all take in just one. / Except they wouldnt really fit. / They wouldnt really fit in with us. / Theres such a gulf between us. What can we do? / . . . / Shes been one of my neediest cases for several years now. / What can I do? Each time she comes to me / looking more and more forlorn / and more and more in need of affection. / At first I wouldn’t touch her without gloves on, but then—/ (Rest) / we did it once in that alley there, / she was / phenomenal. / (Rest) / . . . / Sucked me off for what seemed like hours / But I was very insistent. And held back / and she understood that I wanted her in the traditional way. / And she was very giving very motherly very obliging very understanding / very phenomenal. Let me cumm inside her. Like I needed to. / What could I do? / I couldn’t help it.⁷⁷

Robbie McCauley would identify Doctor as a rapist. Indeed, all of the other adult characters within the play use their elevated social status to abuse Hester. Welfare, despite maintaining that she “walk[s] the line between us and them / between our kind and their kind,” reveals that she participated in a ménage à trois involving herself, her husband, and Hester.⁷⁸ Ending her con-

fession, Welfare declares, “It was my first threesome and it wont happen again. And I should emphasize that she is a low-class person. What I mean is that we have absolutely nothing in common.”⁷⁹ Reverend D., after having Hester perform oral sex on him and then compensating her with a “crumpled bill,” states, within his confession, “Suffering is an enormous turn-on.”⁸⁰ Despite his involvement with her, the Reverend, who has fathered her youngest child, refuses to allow her “to drag me down / and sit me at the table / at the head of the table of her fatherless house.”⁸¹ Chilli, Hester’s first love, father of Hester’s first child, and, possibly Hester’s first sexual/romantic partner, revokes his marriage proposal to Hester after encountering her children. His rejection, simply stated within his confession, appears as follows: “She was my first. / We was young, / Times change.”⁸² Amiga Gringa convinces Hester to appear in sex shows for money.

Similar to Doctor, each character explains their actions to the theatrical audience. Collectively, their words chronicle a series of assaults against the black body and offer a glimpse at how historical reflections can simultaneously center the black body and overlook the experiences of the black body. It is easy to picture George Cuvier, especially as imagined by Parks, or Louis Agassiz or Sally’s “master” using similar wording to describe and, indeed, justify their actions. It is not difficult to envision how racial privilege and social capital informed the manner with which Jim Corbett, Captain Hemings, and, perhaps, Walker Evans interacted with black folk. Hester’s silence invites a closer examination of the black body. Although she exists at the center of each confession, Hester remains silent. Parks, as playwright, does not give her protagonist an opportunity to directly address the audience. She is prevented from being able to tell her story—to relay the facts from her perspective. This is not to say that the character is mute within the narrative. She interacts with the five chorus members but does not offer any insight into her perspective. Admittedly, the playwright does script a sixth and final “confession” that she awards to Hester. However, this “confession,” in style and content, differs from the ones that precede it. Whereas the other monologues are relatively long and develop both logically and realistically, Hester’s final words are comparatively shorter and more expressionistic. Her repetitive, wandering statements appear to be more a vocalization of her fragile mental condition—after having killed her son—than a persuasive, direct appeal to connect with the audience. Hester’s silence is intriguing. Why is she the only

character who does not confess? Why does Parks deny her the opportunity to testify about her experiences?

I am making the following assumption: that *confession* and *testimony* are related terms. Despite the fact the former tends to carry an association of guilt over actions performed, whereas the latter centers itself on witnessed events and often allows the speaker to choose silence rather than to incriminate herself, they share the fact that they gain their legitimacy through an association with governmental or religious institutions and that they are spoken narratives performed by participant-observers before a disinterested third party. While Parks, a talented and dutiful linguist, may have elected to use the word *confession* to associate a sense of guilt or, at least, immorality with each of her characters, the content of their monologues appears equally to confess and to testify to their actions. This is a both/and scenario, not an either/or. Within their confessions, the characters testify. “To testify,” writes Shoshana Felman, “is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community.”⁸³ Felman’s definition reminds us that testimony, like confession, begins at the point of reception and not at the moment of enunciation. With its increasing specificity of the role of the audience in testimony—from merely “another” to “listener” to “community”—Felman’s description suggests that the receptor of the delivered testimony represents the locality, the society in which the testifier lives. To testify is to speak to your neighbor in the form of a direct appeal. Within our present-day, mediated society, testimony is everywhere. It is both unavoidable and inescapable. It is impossible to turn on the television and not be confronted with a spoken personal narrative in the form of court proceedings, therapy sessions, talk shows, and infomercials. While one might have contended in the past that testimony differed from confession in that the former was a public act and the latter private, our contemporary media environment erases this difference. At any time and, virtually, in any place, we can encounter the personal narratives (whether testimonies or confessions) of others.

Noting the overabundance of people willing to talk about themselves before an audience and recalling that each chorus member in *In the Blood* delivers a confession, we are even more surprised that Hester, the protagonist and the center of both Parks’s narrative and the narratives of the chorus

(which are also Parks's narratives), does not confess. At no point in the play does she do what Doctor, Amiga Gringa, Welfare, Reverend D., and Chilli do. She does not stand at the center of the stage, look directly at us, the audience, and tell us about her past and past encounters. Instead, she remains silent. When she does elect to speak, she rambles incoherently. Unlike the others who confess, Hester jabbbers. In light of Parks's careful use of language in her dramaturgy, it seems intentional that Hester, after killing Jabber, loses the capacity to speak on her own behalf and before an audience. While this certainly offers one possible explanation of why Hester remains silent or, more accurately, lacks the ability to confess, there are other, equally plausible options. First, the chorus members represent the spectators in the audience. With the exception of Amiga Gringa, each chorus member is a respected figure within the imagined community of the play. Even Gringa, thanks to her seeming whiteness, has access to societal privilege. These connections allow the chorus members to appeal to the various privileges that they share with the play's spectators. In their confessions, they are speaking with peers and, perhaps, colleagues, people who understand their point of view and likely share their biases and prejudices. Hester, a member of the underclass, cannot interact with her audience on the same level as these others. Her only recourse is to not talk, or to talk to herself.

Second, we can borrow Giorgio Agamben's reading of the limits to the authority of the witness and apply it to *In the Blood*. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben suggests that there is a fundamental deception in the testimony of witnesses. According to him, the ideal witnesses are those who did not survive to testify. He writes, "The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who 'touched bottom.'"⁸⁴ The inability of these idealized nonwitnesses to testify necessitates the emergence of others who must attempt to speak from the unknowable position of the absent witness. In the case of the Holocaust, the present witness must pretend to speak from the position of the dead. Although Hester lives and, therefore, seems capable of speaking on her own behalf, she too needs a surrogate because she has "touched bottom." Agamben's reading of the true or complete witness suggests that successful witnessing and testimony require distance from the actions, events, or persons that they detail. Hester is too close to the experience to be able to witness it, and therefore, to be able to speak about it. Indeed, she is the experience, or at least the sexualized body that creates the experiences for the

chorus members. She continues to live that embodied experience in the present, whereas the chorus members recount their interactions with her from a past perspective.

Third and, perhaps, most interestingly, Hester's silence compels us spectators to imaginatively situate ourselves in her place in order to understand her behavior as announced in the confessions of the chorus members or witnessed onstage. It encourages us to attempt to understand her perspective and experience of the body. Her silence elicits our empathy. This may have been Parks's intention. In a January 2004 interview with a student journalist at Eastern Michigan University, Suzan-Lori Parks was asked, "What is the one quality that you think that every person should work on improving?" The playwright replied, "Compassion." When pressed to explain why she chose that word, Parks responded:

Because if you can see someone's side of it regardless of who they are, what they're going through, if you can see, you know, Saddam Hussein getting his mouth opened and feel something other than, like, the thing you're programmed to feel . . . that's a great, powerful thing, and it's a force for positive change. You know, if you can see the Unabomber and feel compassion for him, if you can see the sniper and feel compassion for him. You know? If you can see the serial killer and feel compassion for him, that's a great thing. That's what Jesus and Gandhi and Buddha and Martin Luther King did.⁸⁵

What does it mean for Parks to equate silence with compassion? Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq who was deposed and imprisoned by the United States in April 2003 and executed in 2006, appeared silent in the publicly circulated images of his health inspection (by U.S. doctors) following his arrest, and yet Parks suggests that his silence should encourage compassion for him. Silence elicits empathy. Why? In a world in which people rush to tell others about themselves, the disempowered often lack a voice. Silenced and marginalized by the dominating society within which they live, these individuals enter into the national dialogue when they are the subject matter of the conversations of the more empowered. They rarely are the ones speaking. What Parks succeeds in doing is showcasing the vocal marginalization of the disempowered within her play. She gives their silence a presence and a voice. Their silence encourages us, audience members and readers of her play text, to listen more attentively for the voice that never will

arise and then to give voice, through our collective imagination, to the body whose activities we witness.

Each of the playwrights featured within this chapter sought to break silences involving the black body. Parks takes two black bodies, places them onstage, and invites us to imagine their experiences. McCauley channels the memory of an ancestor alongside dreams about her encounters on the plantation grounds and performs them across her body. *Yellowman* stages epithets and descriptions of blackness that have been employed for centuries to fix an idea of the black body into a stereotype. Orlandersmith reveals how the internalization of these words has structured experiences of the body. What is striking about these plays is that they challenge the muting effect of historical erasure or historical misrepresentation by centering not the voice but the body. It is the body that speaks. In the next chapter, I continue to address the historical touch and the embodied voice by looking at the role that the black body has played within lynching campaigns in the twentieth century within the United States. I suggest that the events rarely were generative of remains of the performance, and that the body, either living or dead, became the chief artifact of those social enactments. I also offer an account of how a single lynching survivor has used his body and his memories of his near-death to create a memorial to racial violence within the United States.