

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*: An Intersectional Analysis

A Vênus de Suzan-Lori Parks: uma análise interseccional

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Venus

Suzan Lori-Parks

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Within intersecting oppressions, Black women's allegedly deviant sexuality becomes constructed around jezebel's sexual desires. [...] Because jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a "freak."
Patricia Hill Collins

When discussing racism and other dynamics of oppression, it is usual to correlate them as the mere result of Colonialism and its exploitation in exchange of gold to the traditional power (political) economies. This macro view of events leaves a couple of important aspects behind. Not saying they are unrelated, however, to some, it is almost as if they were not just intertwined, but as if racism was coupled with Colonialism in such a way that if Colonialism is supposedly over, racism as well might be. This perception has changed over the years, especially with the advent of black studies and black feminist theorists. This argument is not only untrue, it falsifies the essential core of the economy that succeeded slavery, profiting on the controlling imageries, ideologies and practices that remained—and that still persists.

One example of artistic work that has explored those imbrications of Capitalism and Colonialism is American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (produced in 1996)—the main theme of this review. Although her work focuses more on the transition between the 20th and 21st centuries, the debates and issues raised around racial hierarchies, particularly in American society (and the disruptive way in which the author addressed them), were not only artistically relevant, but also long-lasting and insightful in reflections that still need to be scrutinized today. *Venus* was the eighth in a range of many acclaimed works of the author, with a list that includes *The Sinner's Place* (produced in 1984 – her first), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (produced in 1989 and

winner of an Obi award along with *Venus*), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (produced in 1990); *The America Play* (produced in 1994), *In the Blood* (produced in 1999), *The Book of Grace* (produced in 2010), radio plays and *Topdog/Underdog* (produced in 2001), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, being Parks the first African-American woman to achieve it.

Among many aspects, Suzan-Lori Parks's critical reflection on racial hierarchies is as much political as intrinsic in her work, but at the same time it takes form through a non-obvious lens. There is a sort of acid humor and sarcasm regarding her plays and the constitution of the characters, something that afro-diasporic artists might name, recognize and acknowledge as sassiness or mockery, especially towards biased and racialized social patterns. The play *Venus*, in particular, has this addition of dealing with the absurd cruelty that the main character had been through, so the irony enters there in a sort of absurdity taken to the extreme—causing the audience to feel a kind of embarrassment through comic tragedy, such was the naturalness with which *freak shows* pushed the limits of humanity of others in order to dehumanize the people “on exhibit” (dehumanizing themselves *en route*). Also, the very way language is constituted throughout the plays, something that goes from Black English to neologisms, double meanings, rhymes, and wordplay used by the author herself constitute not just the symbolic personas of the characters, but also the ambivalences and contradictions permeating them—for instance, in *Venus*, the character called “The Negro Resurrectionist” carries the comic tragedy throughout the play and through his use of language, both as a kind of exterior narrator and as a pervasive host, presenting not just the main character, but all the events surrounding her. The analysis in this review will examine how her work presents racism as an intrinsic phenomenon. It will explore the dynamics surrounding the main character in *Venus*, employing the theoretical framework of Patricia Hill Collins as an analytical lens to interrogate the complexities of those relations. It is important to clarify that the objective here is not to reduce the play's multifaceted nature or its broader artistic merits, but rather to utilize this framework as a means of expanding the critical discourse surrounding its historical and thematic content.

Thus, the exotification of racialized bodies and 19th-century *freak shows* are faced as by-products of the Colonialism and Capitalism performed in reality and in the play, and as the reservoir of white supremacy projections of the Other. Nonetheless, here I try to analyze the above-mentioned events as crucial, not just to the pervasive racialized economy of exploitation—especially of female black

bodies, that endures to our present day, but to a whole set of Western cultural devices, through the critical analysis of the play, *Venus*, by Suzan-Lori Parks. It was inspired in Saartjie Baartman's story, a Khoikhoi South-African woman who had her body parts exhibited (alive and dead) first as a *freak show* attraction and then as a “scientific” one, an unfortunate and disturbing journey that took her from her continent of origin through all over Europe—her remains being repatriated to South Africa only in May 3rd, 2002. The following critical review of this play will be done alongside the crossed analysis of both the tragedy of her story and the play, with the intent to provide elements for further and permanent debate on the intersecting oppressions of race and gender.

Having said that, it is of most importance to display Patricia Hill Collins' concept of Controlling Images before I analyze the play, because she discusses something that pretty much connects both to Saartjie Baartman's tragic life, and to the play about her, especially on the way it was constructed. To understand what a controlling image is, first we need to strike that racial, sexual, class and gender oppression are as complex as intersected. And this intersection is what grounds the notion of a universal white male gaze in spite of everyone else. Quoting the author,

The foundations of intersecting oppressions become grounded in interdependent concepts of binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectification, and social hierarchy. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression. African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination¹.

Venus, through its plot and performance, highlights the ultimate objectification, violence and abuse a racialized woman could ever get in the beginning of the 19th century. She was probably one out of many, exploited in different ways: domestic service, prostitution, breeders of workforce... Her exhibition as Venus Hottentot fetishized what Europeans already had in mind when it came to peoples that were not their own, as savages, incapable of learning, uncivilized. She was used as reinforcement to the controlling image of a sexualized, sinful body that would apply to “the people” she belonged to²—in the play, this same body, animalized, was used as a totem of aphrodisiac fertility and

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2000, p. 71.

² In scene 16 of “*Venus*”, the character The Baron Docteur mixes medical vocabulary that fragmented and analyzed Baartman as a mere body. In scene 13, when amazed by the fact she was more than able to speak French, this same character states: “The Baron Docteur: Not entirely, Gentlemen. We study a people as a group and don't throw away our years of labor because of one most glorious exception” (Parks, 2019, p. 145).

good luck, with the feathers she carried in her costume being “gifts” to the audience.

The text of the play *Venus* counts both with a “map” suggested by the author—as it is usual when reading a play now with the addition of a Glossary of medical terms, and a Glossary of Chocolates—both as representatives of colonial exploitative dimensions of the body (biopolitical and erotic), and with the following characters: Miss Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot; The Man, later The Baron Docteur, the deceiver, first oppressor and supposed “lover” of the Venus; The Mans Brother, later The Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum; The Negro Resurrectionist, who narrates the story to the audience; The Chorus—The Chorus of the Human Wonders, The Chorus of the Spectators, The Chorus of the Court, The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists; The Father; The Uncle; The Mother; The Bride-to-Be (later, guised as “The Hottentot Venus”). The play is especially centered in the objectification of Saartjie Baartman and in Baron Docteur's infatuation with her, highlighting her desire to be loved, no matter how—given the social and emotional aversion she faces as a stated fact. Ranging from the moment she was captured as a girl, to the moments she's converted and fixed in the sexualized figure of the Venus Hottentot, then imprisoned for getting involved with a to-be-married white man (“the Baron Docteur”) and then of her death (being afterwards used as a scientific experiment), there's no breath to the suffering. In this story, as it usually happens in reality with black bodies, pain becomes a spectacle, a fetish—it is no coincidence that the character “The Bride-to-Be” dresses up as Venus to attract “The Baron Docteur's” attention.

The play is structured in ancient Greek terms (it has Choruses the same way *Oedipus Rex* and other Greek plays had) and backwards—after the Overture, it starts with scene 31 and it goes back to scene 2 and 1 where there are both the Final Chorus and where Venus tells the story of her life. By the form those acts and scenes are divided, there is an idea of the plot being chopped into pieces, as if it were a performance of an anatomic procedure. As if it were, in its own composition, revolving to the main character's disintegration—even though most of the 31 scenes are co-referenced and intertwined. The performance of disintegration is intentional, I believe; it is part of a broader episteme that seizes up the object (the Other) and breaks it into several pieces in the “benefit” of science. This is particularly clear in the scene 7, *She'll Make a Splendid Corpse*, where Venus is seized because she's captured as having an “affair” with Baron Docteur, a white man. It follows,

The Baron Docteur
 There must be some other solution.
The Grade-School Chum
 We'll clap her into jail.
 And if her clap runs its course, well,
 thats fate, Friend.
The Baron Docteur
 Oh God.
The Grade-School Chum
 A simple yes or no will do, Doctor.
 Come on.
The Baron Docteur
 Such a lovely creature in her way,
 She has a grace-
The Grade-School Chum
 Come on.
 Say yes.
 Before she wakes.
The Baron Docteur
 Her charming hands-
The Grade-School Chum
 Shes just a 2-bit sideshow freak.
The Baron Docteur
 She would have made uh splendid wife.
The Grade-School Chum
 Oh, please.
 She'll make uh splendid corpse³.

Suzan-Lori Parks, throughout the text, uses allegories triggered by the goddess Venus, regarding eroticism, love, desire, and idealization. However, in the encounter of this Venus with the colonial paradigms, the Hottentot Venus becomes an object observed through the path, not of beauty, but of exoticism; not of the one who can and deserves to be loved, but of the one who, under hidden desire, serves as a sexual object and repository of subaltern imageries. The plot is permeated by the intersections of the colonial and the erotic—especially in the interspersed acts *For the love of Venus*: the "fascination" the man who kidnaps Saartjie has, in this play, the Baron Docteur, makes him, in addition to exploiting her as a *freak* and a corpse later on, "get involved" with her sexually, behind closed doors. He makes promises of love and deceives her continually—actually, since their first encounter where he promises her a career as a dancer⁴, and she naively believes him—probably because there is no other option for her at that point. She is caged, chained, exhibited, exploited, in several ways, and yet she believes in her role of beloved, also believing in this so-called love she receives from the Baron Docteur. It is one of the conflicts and contradictions that drive the play's plot. Her confinement as a sexual object and totem even makes Baron Docteur's future fiancée dress up as Venus to attract his desire, to integrate, within her, the image of lover and wife—since those two are segregated by Western patriarchy. The role Venus Hottentot incorporates, indeed, not just the

³ Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*, 1997, p. 144.

⁴ The role is performed by the same character, blurring the image that it might have been him, as well as it might have been any European in the African continent, motivated by profit.

realm of sexual objectivity, but various stereotypes regarding social perceptions of Black women within this exclusionary episteme—"I am what the Other is not," a result of years of colonial exploitation and its successive ideology.

That is one of the spheres drawn by this play, how Western imageries implicate doubled patterns, when it comes to being considered human (or not): Masculine vs. Feminine, White vs. Non-White, Civilized vs. Uncivilized, Universal vs. Specific, Healthy/Normal vs. Pathological, Lover vs. Beloved... Anyway, the ultimate category: Subject vs. Object. Those hierarchies based on oppositional difference are more than tripled in Saartje Baartman's case: she was a deceived foreigner, a woman whose figure was forcefully perceived to be different from her "audience", that she again was used to remind them the reason why slavery and colonialism, according to this same idea, was a "good business"—one needed to civilize what Baartman represented. A mixture of perverse fascination, fear, objectification and abuse is what marked Baartman's journey, and being called girl, freak, because of the proportions of her body and buttocks, as well as her genitalia were somehow reinforcements to, later on, her own corpse become an "object of study." It demonstrates how Western scientific history is based on racism—the idea of a *knowing self* that fragments and separates from the *known object*⁵.

A second aspect is the doubled consequence of this process of dehumanization through becoming a deviant body: the justification of this oppression expands to a level that the whole group of racialized women become—according to Collins, whether asexual bodies that only fit for work, whether emotional, passionate, sexual beings incapable of reasoning and thinking. Referring to the author,

The allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women's sexual exploitation. Similarly, restricting Black women's literacy, then claiming that we lack the facts for sound judgment, relegates African-American women to the inferior side of the fact/opinion binary. Denying Black women status as fully human subjects by treating us as the objectified. Other within multiple binaries

⁵ As quoted by Patricia Hill Collins: "Social theorist Dona Richards (1980) suggests that Western thought requires objectification, a process she describes as the "separation of the 'knowing self' from the 'known object'" (Richards apud Collins, 2000, p. 70). In Brazil, a very known figure and representative of Scientific Racism is Nina Rodrigues, who, in the face of his own research that listed and cataloged the African Peoples that constituted Brazilian's population and were sequestered to forced labor here, he asserts, in the 9th chapter of the book *Os Africanos no Brasil*, that there must be a psychic remain in criminality when it comes to Brazilian Black Peoples. He reinforced the thesis that the referred country should whiten its population, further backing the on-going governmental acts of European Immigration in the 19th century, with the intent of replacing and erasing the prior Black and enslaved work-force.

demonstrates the power that binary thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification wield within intersecting oppressions⁶.

Lastly, that is precisely what Venus Hottentot's figure construction, more than an alias, is Saartje Baartman as a non-human being according to this logic, represented: a result of fetishism, exploitation, objectification and binary thinking. There are scientific, sociopolitical, economic developments, not to mention the emotional and psychic internalization of oppression, in a way that many bodies of black women around the world are still seen and exploited, in this same colonialist motto—as it is demonstrated, quoting from the play:

The Venus: No! Please. Good, good honest people. If I bear thuh bad mark what better way to cleanse it off? Showing my sinful person as a caution to you all could, in the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance and I could wash off my dark mark. I came here black. Give me the chance to leave here white⁷.

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2000, p. 71.

⁷ Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*, 1997, p. 76.

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