

“Macerations’ French for ‘Lunch’”: Reading the Vampire in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*

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If the stage is woman . . . this stage-body will not hesitate to come up close . . . enough to be in danger—of life. A body in labour. The scene takes place where a woman’s life takes place, where her life is decided: inside her body, beginning with her blood.

—Hélène Cixous, “Aller à la Mer”

In her famous essay on the conception of a women’s theater, Hélène Cixous first claims that traditionally, the death of a woman underlies all theatrical productions: “it is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin.”¹ Cixous calls for a theater that allows for the “living, breathing, speaking” female body, a theater in which the stage *is* woman, devoid of theatricality. Such a move requires exploding the confines of the traditional stage in order to take woman back to her origination and allow her to signify through her very blood, the source of the life she loses in traditional phallogocentric theater. One way that contemporary female playwrights have allowed female blood to signify onstage is by employing the trope of the vampire in their work as a way of presenting the bodies of dead women, both historical and fictional, who, as Cixous claims, have been “condemned to be buried alive.”² Their undead presence via their written resurrection allows these characters the opportunity to condemn their killers before an audience traditionally implicated in their deaths.

The character of the vampire appears explicitly in numerous contemporary plays and performance pieces by female playwrights—for example, Caryl Churchill’s *Mad Forest*, Joan Schenkar’s *Signs of Life*, Adrienne Kennedy’s *Dramatic Circle*, Ntozake Shange’s *Spell #7*, and Karen Finley’s *Constant State of Desire*—and while the vampire signifies in different ways within each text, the explicit presence of the vampire marks each work as transgressive. In Churchill’s

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play, for example, the well-fed vampire who seduces a starving dog critiques the seduction of post-revolution Romanians by Western culture, while Finley's claim that she loves "to see nine-year-old boys who only communicate with their computers eat their daddies' balls"³ satirizes the patriarchal and cannibalistic capitalism of Wall Street.

Of her representation of the more implicitly vampirized Saartjie Baartman in her 1996 play *Venus*, Suzan Lori-Parks has claimed, "I could have written a two hour saga with Venus being the victim. But she's multi-faceted. She's vain, beautiful, intelligent, and, yes, complicit."⁴ Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Alice Rayner criticize such complicity for repeating the pattern of exploitation it critiques: "in spite of the best intentions, the public nature of the theatrical discourse . . . dismembers and dissects the corpse of the Hottentot Venus."⁵ Similarly, Jean Young claims that Parks's "stage representation of [Venus's] complicity diminishes the tragedy of her life as a nineteenth-century Black woman stripped of her humanity."⁶ Such theoretical reactions arise precisely because the signification of the implicit vampire in the text has been unrecognized by critics. It is my project in this essay to resurrect the vampire in Parks's text by reading the relationship between the Baron Docteur and the Venus through an analysis of the vampire trope as it functions as a more explicit metaphor for colonial domination in Joan Schenkar's *Signs of Life* and Adrienne Kennedy's *The Dramatic Circle*. In this context, the Venus's silences, as her only alternative voice, complicate her complicity. Her silences make manifest the colonial vampirization of her language and voice first by the patrons who support the simultaneous display of her body and dissection of her corpse, and ultimately by the Venus herself in an act of self-cannibalization that functions as the colonial subject's attempted mimicry of the colonizer. Furthermore, Parks implicates her own audience in the voyeurism; the Negro Resurrectionist's initial claim that "there wont b inny show tonite," because "thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead"⁷ forces the audience to participate in the vampiric voyeurism involved in witnessing the Venus's resurrected corpse.

The utilization of the vampire trope is so prevalent in contemporary female-authored theater that it functions as a floating signifier; in fact, as a term in contemporary usage, according to Luise White, "'vampire' conveys little of its original meaning. Popular versions of . . . modernized vampires reveal how powerfully a concept—and a word—can attract and hold events and ideas that were never a part of its initial construction."⁸ Whatever the specific meaning of the vampire in women's texts, two things remain consistent: first, the vampire functions as a metaphor for a colonizing force that allows the vampirized body of woman to signify as a third entity onstage, between living and dying or, in the colonial framework, according to Samira Kawash, "in-between and outside the Manichean opposition . . . a being neither living (as the colonizer) nor dead (as the landscape or the colonial bodies filling that landscape)."⁹ And second, the vampire

serves a transgressive resurrectory function; while destructively illustrating the ways that women's bodies and language are vampirized and hystericalized within the phallogocentric order, the vampire also productively reconstitutes women's bodies onstage. The vampirized female body in Parks's play marks the interregnum, in the Gramscian sense, between the murdered female body in patriarchal theater and the signification of the living female body of Cixous's theoretical paradigm. While the vampire trope provides productive ways for Parks and other female playwrights to disrupt traditional narratives by resurrecting the dead and creating a third space—neither living nor dead—from which to signify, the vampire is still a parasite, still a creator of colonial mimics, who inhabits a position that is never fully realized.

As I stated earlier, a narrative of colonization is played out through the metaphor of the vampire. According to Jules Zanger, "vampires . . . are cannibals feeding on the world around them, acting out in their own persons the bloody support system that sustains our lives—my shoes made by seated labor in Brazil, my meat from castrated and constrained animals."¹⁰

In the colonial paradigm, vampirism and cannibalism are two sides of the same proverbial coin created by a consumer system dependent on the exploitation of one group by another. The vampire is a cannibal whose visceral ingestion symbolizes capitalist consumption. Woman, who can be read as a colonial subject in a patriarchy, is constructed as sustenance for the colonizing man, who is always the bearer of patriarchy: the fangs of the vampire are synonymous with the phallus, and both are the implements of domination used by the colonizer. Furthermore, colonization has different levels of significance depending upon the race of the female playwright. In the theater of black playwrights like Parks, the colonial impetus within the text not only invokes a male/female dichotomy, but white/black, master/slave dichotomies as well.

Two current studies examine the long history of such dichotomies in terms of the othering impetus of the vampire figure, one that dominates by ingesting the body of another, in colonial history. In the mythology surrounding colonization, the vampire, as a being whose bite acts as a communicable infection, represents a justification to both colonizers and colonized. Colonizers have claimed that the people they seek to colonize are cannibals, while colonized individuals have sought to explain their subordinate position by claiming that their colonizers are vampires. In *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, edited by Francis Baker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, the authors claim that while cannibalism may exist historically, in the colonial ethos, cannibalism functions as a myth, a linguistic phenomenon signifying the ultimate power of capitalism, projected by colonizers onto colonized peoples in order to other and justify the colonial impulse to civilize the savages. According to Hulme, cannibalism "marked the world beyond European knowledge . . . ready to reappear when civilisational influence showed signs of

waning.”¹¹ In this sense, the figure of the cannibal is merely an excuse for colonial violence.

Conversely, in an attempt to take African vampire stories at face value, in *Speaking With Vampires*, Luise White examines the narrative of vampirism as both a literal and figurative telling of the colonial experience from the perspective of the colonized. White writes about the Mumiani or bloodsucker superstition of East and Central Africa that emerged simultaneously and with consistent details in Kenya, Tangayika, and Northern Rhodesia during the 1930s. According to White, in the Mumiani story, Africans, taken by white settlers are “hung upside down, their throats . . . cut, and their blood drained into huge buckets.”¹² The bodies were then removed by the killers and taken to some mysterious location where colonizers supposedly drank the blood. Such a story is clearly based on witnessed incidents of colonial violence and on the imagined consequences for a body after its enigmatic disappearance.

While Hulme acknowledges the fact that both sides of the colonial equation believed tales of human consumption—“in the nineteenth-century . . . the fear of cannibalism ran both ways, with Africans often convinced that whites were buying them in order to eat them”¹³—his focus is on disproving such stories. And while the argumentative perspectives in these two studies may seem to contradict each other—one tries to disprove the vampire/cannibal narrative, while the other tries to lend credence to it—both strategies credit the imbalance of power within the colonial context for the existence of such stories. The colonizer projects cannibalism to justify control, and the colonized person imagines vampirism as an explanation of that control. Similarly, the female playwright like Parks who employs the trope of the vampire, effectively demonizes colonial power while simultaneously subverting it: while she condemns the vampires that drain women’s blood, she is also able to resurrect the bodies of the women onstage through the very act of vampirism.

In order to discuss the extant tradition of the vampire trope in contemporary drama, I will contextualize Parks’s play by situating *Venus* in the company of two other plays that contain more explicit vampires and that share some of Parks’s vampiric imagery, Joan Schenkar’s *Signs of Life* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Dramatic Circle*. In her 1980 play, *Signs of Life*, Schenkar resurrects the historical characters of Alice and Henry James, along with James’s fictional creation, Dr. Sloper, a character based on Dr. J. Marion Sims, the American gynecologist responsible for the invention of the “uterine Guillotine.” Also appearing in the play is the Elephant Woman, Jane Merritt, a female version of the historical Elephant man, John Merrick. Set in nineteenth-century America, the play is framed by a discussion between Henry James and Dr. Sloper over tea filled with blood and biscuits made of bone, both of which signify for the absent bodies of Alice and

Jane. Dr. Sloper invokes the language of colonization when he says that Jane “was a world, I tell you Mr. James she was an entire universe”¹⁴ in need of his exploration and discovery. He says, “I have often wondered what it was in Jane Merritt’s expression that moved me to explore the secrets of her bones.” Henry James replies, “well, I’ve often wondered what it was in Alice’s eyes that drove me to pursue the secrets of her journal.”¹⁵ Explicit in this conversation and in the content of their cups is the vampirization of these women, the consumption of their bodies and language. Henry James has colonized his sister’s writing just as Sloper has colonized his patient’s body. In these acts of thievery, James’s pen and Sloper’s knife signify the vampire’s fangs, which in turn signify the phallus.

In a later scene that conflates pen and vampiric fangs, Alice describes her internalization of her brother’s theft by cutting herself with his razor: “I began to develop complicated rituals that kept my arms below the level of the school desk . . . so that I would not have to see what my brother’s razor had done to me.”¹⁶ By drawing blood with her brother’s razor, Alice is forced to keep her arms beneath the desk and is incapable of writing, debilitated by her internalized desire for proper appearances. Henry’s psychic vampirism of Alice’s writing is physically manifested by Alice’s hysterical practice of cutting her arms, an act that silences her writing by placing her arms below the level of the desk, the surface upon which she writes. Similarly, Sloper operates on Jane’s congenitally misshapen body even while she appears in P. T. Barnum’s American Museum as a freak. Sloper cuts Jane’s mouth in order to correct her speech. Like Cixous’s Dora who cries out, “I’m not the one who’s dumb. I am silenced by your inability to hear,”¹⁷ Dr. Sloper refuses to hear Jane’s utterances as a legitimate form of speech. Sloper and Henry James’s actions allow them to ventriloquize the women: by wounding Alice and Jane and inscribing their means of communication—Alice’s arms and Jane’s mouth—with blood, James and Sloper render the women speechless and turn their bodies into texts for male interpretation.

In turn, Schenkar overdetermines the forced speechlessness of her silenced female characters. Jane is continually silenced, even after her mouth is “fixed.” Barnum, for example, responds to Jane’s complaints when she says, “I think . . . I’m dead,”¹⁸ by telling her that she has a show in ten minutes. For Barnum’s purposes, the body, dead or alive, is what is important, not the speech of its owner. Furthermore, despite the fact that the audience learns that Alice speaks a particular sentence whenever she has a hysterical attack, Schenkar never discloses the content of that sentence. What is spoken, it seems, is less important than the physical secrets Alice is forced to hide, the text written on her body: her mutilated arms and her lesbianism. Alice’s hysteria is a response to her silencing by her brother who, as a representative of the nineteenth-century ideology regarding proper behavior for women, steals her writing and closets her lesbian relationship with Kathryn Loring. As Ann Wilson claims, the hysteric is never truly silenced: “she commands

the attention of her audience with the spectacle of her body.”¹⁹ Historically, however, and despite this potential disruption, the hysteric, like the homosexual, has been silenced, medicalized and removed from public view. Schenkar’s resurrection of Alice and Jane, via the writing and production of her play, and her mirroring of Alice’s hysterical outbursts with Jane’s physical deformity reinscribes the body of the hysteric with new meaning, as Schenkar forces the audience to read the vampirized female body in the absence of its speech and writing.

Alice James as exhibitionist and Jane Merritt as exhibit signify through binary oppositions of mind and corporeality the ways that men silence female intellectualism by medicalizing or seeking to fix the female body. The punishment that both women suffer for their threat to the phallogocentric order is immobility and muteness: Jane “can’t speak without bleeding” and Alice “can’t move without fainting,”²⁰ constraints that keep the women from ever meeting and becoming whole, an act that would ultimately disrupt the mind/body dichotomy that is represented by Alice/Jane. Furthermore, Sloper will not operate on Alice’s cancerous breast, but unnecessarily operates on Jane’s mouth. As a result, both women, vampirized by the doctor, bleed from stigmata that mark their means of communication and reproduction. Alice comments that her breast “begins to bleed whenever [Sloper] comes near,”²¹ and Jane’s mouth “won’t stop bleeding”²² after Sloper operates on it.

The literal and symbolic mutilation that begins while the women are alive continues after their death. In a move that foreshadows the actions of the Baron Docteur in Parks’s later play, Sloper dissects Jane’s body only to discover that her blood is human just like his own, a realization that ostensibly grants Jane her humanity, but only at the expense of her life. Just as Jane’s body continues to signify through her blood, Alice’s body is only questionably absent and still poses as posthumous threat to the men who have vampirized it. Henry says that Alice’s fingernails grow after death to become her “last set of pointed instruments. You might say . . . that she was buried . . . armed to the teeth.”²³ Ultimately, it is Schenkar who is enabled by this ammunition when she resurrects Alice’s body and returns the narrative to its rightful owner.

The image of various pointed instruments appears frequently in the play; Sloper brags about his collection of surgical knives, Alice has an obsession with scalpels, and Schenkar reclaims the pen, another pointed instrument that is stolen from Alice by her brother. James’s and Sloper’s loss of their pointed instruments—their fangs and their phalluses—is apparent in their claims of their own impotence after the women die. Sloper says, “I haven’t really performed a successful operation since Jane Merritt’s autopsy,” and Henry James responds, “my books have sunk like stones in still water since Alice died.”²⁴ A scuffle ensues between the two men over the biscuits and the loss of the butter knife, the pointed instrument necessary to butter the bread and facilitate the consumption of the women’s bodies. James

says, "I can tolerate *bone* in my biscuits. I can put up with *blood* in my cup. But, doctor, I warn you, I will not do without my butter knife."²⁵ Through this dialogue, Schenkar playfully alludes to the way that she as female playwright has claimed the pen/knife/phallus. By stealing Henry James's pen, Schenkar resurrects his dead sister and positions her body in an incubatory position, that of woman "armed to the teeth." As Schenkar's creation, Alice James is a formidable foe for her brother, the parasitic vampire who must go hungry after she dies.

Adrienne Kennedy, the African American playwright whose work has largely influenced Parks, rewrites Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in her play *The Dramatic Circle* and incorporates vampirized characters that function as colonial mimics—a device implicit in Parks's *Venus*. While Kennedy's plays are intensely subjective, employing her own set of personal archetypes, she also weaves a metanarrative tapestry of personal experience, extant fiction, and historical nonfiction in order to invoke nightmares of her own. Like the floating signifier of the vampire in women's drama, Kennedy's plays are in themselves originally evocative. According to Claudia Barnett, "they do not represent memories . . . instead they evoke them and create them;"²⁶ like Artaud's theater of cruelty, Kennedy's plays create representations without originals. In this context, the use of the vampire trope is fitting because the vampire is a simulacrum as well, a being without a reflection.

In her 1992 play *The Dramatic Circle*, Kennedy incorporates her own autobiographical experience in London in the early 1960s, Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, and Algerian psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon's theoretical examination of colonial violence in a text that creates vampires with multiple identifications. Such a move seems to invert Cixous's "woman beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be"²⁷ by presenting instead the totality of those she may seek to mimic but never become. In Kennedy's play, characters change identity, appear disguised and unrecognizable as they present various faces to both Suzanne—Kennedy's persona in the play—and the audience. According to Samira Kawash, the vampire functions "as a figure of contagion and multiplicity,"²⁸ a kind of virus that spreads as it replicates, and Kennedy's characters, via a series of multiple identities, illustrate the ways that vampirism is a contagion that infiltrates the lives of everyone within the colonial paradigm depicted on stage.

In *The Dramatic Circle*, Alice Alexander narrates the story of how she and her pregnant sister-in-law Suzanne wait in London for her brother David to return from Africa where he is "trying to find the source of Frantz Fanon's illness."²⁹ Suzanne experiences breathlessness, a symptom her newfound friend, Dr. Freudenger, attributes to the stress of not hearing word of David's whereabouts. Alice further describes Suzanne's hysteria by claiming that she sleepwalks and recites lines from the letters of Napoleon and Josephine. In order to calm Suzanne, Dr. Freudenger invites the women to come to his house for a dramatic reading

of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* during which Suzanne reads the part of Lucy while Alice reads the part of Mina. Dr. Freudenberger reads the part of Dracula thereby conflating the connection between Freudian psychoanalysis, vampirism, and the colonial domination of Africans in general, and of women in particular. Furthermore, because both are psychoanalysts, Freudenberger mirrors Fanon—or, and perhaps more accurately, as a colonized Algerian, Fanon mimics Freudenberger. Alice admits that despite the fact that David has worked closely with the Algerian psychoanalyst, “he said there was danger surrounding Fanon.”³⁰ Furthermore, if Freud via Freudenberger is Dracula, then Fanon must be a vampire as well. Kennedy's mimicking identifications of the vampire illustrate the ways that the rhetoric of the psychoanalyst, like the rhetoric of the colonizer, is analogous to the seduction of the vampire. As a kind of infliction by force, it both implicates and harms those that it seduces through the promise that the colonized can become like the colonizers via assimilation.

John Paul Sartre, in his introduction to *Wretched of the Earth*, presents colonial seduction through a conflation of food and language when he claims that the colonizers force fed the language of the settlers to the assimilating Algerians and “stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth.”³¹ Just as Alice and Jane are ventriloquized by the men who drink their blood, Sartre claims that the colonizers can ventriloquize the colonized by manufacturing a native elite who mimic the ideology of the colonizing force. It is also possible to read Sartre's commentary as a recipe for the vampiric feast of the colonizers: assimilation allows the colonized ostensible access to the fruits of the colonial regime, but because the colonial elite never gain true equality, all their physical efforts merely serve to feed the colonial machine. Because of the violence inflicted on the natives, according to Fanon, decolonization must involve the violent terrorist reactions of the colonized. In her essay “Terrorists and Vampires: Fanon's Spectral Violence of Decolonization,” Samira Kawash illustrates the vampiric nature of Fanon's decolonization when she deconstructs his rhetoric of violence in order to examine the ways that, in the 1980s and 1990s, “‘terrorism’ stands as [Fanon's] violence of decolonization gone global.”³² As a spectral presence always about to appear, the terrorist is like the vampire that threatens to destabilize the status quo of the phallogocentric order.

According to Kawash, the terrorist is “structurally similar to the ghosts and vampires of the Victorian imagination, exemplary figures of the Freudian uncanny.”³³ In much of his writing, including his essay “Algeria Unveiled,” Fanon advocates terrorism as a last resort to the ongoing domination of the Algerians by the colonizing French, but Kawash argues that “Fanon makes it impossible to choose, for violence or against.”³⁴ Violence, in the decolonizing process, is inevitable and complete. Fanon himself claims that “decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men,”³⁵ implying

that something new is created in the destructive process of decolonization. The entity that results from the clash is neither the colonizer nor the colonized, just as the woman who carries the bite of the vampire is neither living nor dead. According to Kawash's rather utopian reading, in the wake of decolonial violence, "something altogether different and unknown, a 'new humanity' will rise up."³⁶ In the interregnum, just as Alice waits to be reborn, so does this new entity of decolonization, and the process that occurs to create this new humanity is one that is negatively dialectical—neither thesis nor antithesis—a simulacrum instead of a vampiric copy, and a direct assault on the hegemonic and assimilative colonial project of the native elite.

By conflating the identities of Freudenberger, Fanon, and Dracula, Kennedy refuses to construct Fanon and the colonized Algerians as victims in the decolonization process, but as both victim and victimizer in a situation in which violence begets violence. As Fanon claims, "colonization is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence."³⁷ The bite of the vampire infects the one who is bitten, awakening bloodlust via a process of seduction, and as Elin Diamond claims of Kennedy's play, "the vampire is . . . mimesis 'personified,' identification corporealized: his bite transforms the other into a double,"³⁸ a body equally capable of enacting the very violence inflicted upon it.

As Schenkar marks her vampirized characters with reproductive and linguistic stigmata, Kennedy marks her bitten characters with physical difference, explicitly with white hair, a sign of the "whitening" effect of colonial mimicry. When Suzanne sees Dr. Freudenberger in her garden, he is barely recognizable to her. She says, "I think it's him," but "his hair is white."³⁹ Similarly, at the end of the play, David returns and is hardly recognizable to Alice because "he had changed so. He limped like an old man and his black hair had turned white."⁴⁰ The promise of power, of exchanging the role of colonized for colonizer, is the way that the vampire seduces his victims. David returns in the guise of Freudenberger, who has donned white hair to prepare Suzanne's mind for an ironic "darkness:" the "whitened" body of her husband seduced by Fanon's rhetoric of decolonial violence.

Through the production of colonial mimesis, Kennedy creates multiple vampires that illustrate the extent of the infection of colonial violence on the black woman. According to Savas Patsalidis, Kennedy's struggle as a black woman against the multiple fronts of white racism and black sexism produces "limitless interplay of confusing narratives, a non-stop passing into mirrors."⁴¹ In the play, Suzanne mirrors both Kennedy and Lucy, representing the colonized person whose symptoms of hysteria, according to Alice, mimic some of those suffered by Fanon's patients. By conflating Suzanne's breathlessness with the post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by the colonial Algerians, Kennedy represents the locus for

colonial control as patriarchy and Western psychiatry. In a very paternalistic manner, Dr. Freudenberger who, as his name suggests, espouses Freudian psychoanalytical theory, forbids Suzanne from leaving London lest she harm her unborn child.

This prohibition is autobiographical, a fictionalization of Kennedy's own experience of pregnancy in Ghana in 1960. In her autobiography, *People Who Led to my Plays*, Kennedy says,

the doctor advised that I travel little during the fifth month of pregnancy. All of this produced growing tensions and unhappiness in me. It was now that I felt increasingly that I was just accompanying another person as he lived out his dreams.⁴²

Pregnancy, as constituted by the expectations and needs of the fetus, father, and doctor, in both *The Dramatic Circle* and in Kennedy's autobiography, becomes a burden that drains life from the mother. As Claudia Barnett claims, "throughout her dramas, Kennedy presents motherhood and pregnancy not as traditional symbols of life and growth, but as signs of madness and death."⁴³ The child in Kennedy's play, as read through Suzanne/Lucy is both vampire and vampirized, a deliberate parasite and a source of food; the mother devours the child and remains in a state of limbo.

This "Ouroboros effect," as I will call it, after the mythical creature that devours its own tail and guards the boundary between life and death in Egyptian mythology,⁴⁴ is more explicitly illustrated by Ntozake Shange in *Spell #7*. In Shange's play, Sue-Jean gives birth to a child named "Myself" who "wanted to crawl / & discover a world of his own," so Sue-Jean, in an attempt at recolonization, "slit his wrists" and "sucked the blood back into [herself]."⁴⁵ Sue-Jean's body, therefore, is eternally pregnant, a body in the interregnum between silence and identification, forever on the verge of creative experience but incapable of producing anything.

Similarly, Dr. Freudenberger reads another Ouroboros effect that takes place in Stoker's novel. Lucy's body is more radiantly beautiful after she drinks the blood of a child. And just as Freudenberger appears disguised in Suzanne's garden in order to prepare her for the ironic darkness of her husband's whitening, Dracula disguises himself as a human, dressed in the clothes of Mina's betrothed, to procure "a child for the three vampire women."⁴⁶ For both Lucy and the vampire women, the blood of the child provides sustenance and therefore subverts the mother/child dichotomy to create the female body on the verge of creation but never fully creative. Just as Sue-Jean expects herself in Shange's play, Kennedy/Suzanne/Lucy comes to expect, but does not fully realize, the self as well.

Suzan-Lori Parks, a playwright whose work is influenced by Kennedy, also portrays the slippery nature of colonial vampiric seduction in *Venus*, a work

that shares the trope of the freak show explored by Schenkar in *Signs of Life*. Critics compare and contrast Parks to Kennedy, noting the more historical and political nature of Parks's project. For example, Alisa Solomon notes that "while Parks's writing . . . shares the constantly shifting ground of Kennedy's beautifully nightmarish plays, it is . . . more ostensibly political."⁴⁷ Similarly, Jeanette R. Malkin writes that "unlike Adrienne Kennedy, whose intimate spectral plays so strongly inspired her, Suzan-Lori Parks's dreamscape is situated in history."⁴⁸ Like Schenkar's dramatization of historical characters, Parks dramatizes the life of the historical Saartjie Baartman, a member of the Knoi-San people of South Africa, who was displayed as the "Hottentot Venus" in London and Paris during the early nineteenth-century. Her large posterior—the source of her popularity as a freak—was preserved as a plaster cast and displayed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris after her death and subsequent dissection by George Cuvier.

Parks has claimed that the fictionalized Saartjie Baartman in *Venus*, as presented through the narrative voice of the Negro Resurrectionist, is a woman complicit in her own exploitation. I would argue that the Venus's complicity in her seduction by the Baron Docteur, Parks's fictionalization of Cuvier, is a result of a vampiric infection, a situation that places the Venus in the interregnum space where true choice becomes impossible. Such a reading allows for further exploration of Fanon's negative dialectic of decolonization, a representation of a point at which the colonized individual turns against the self and embraces his or her desire to *become* the colonizer.

In describing the Venus, the Baron Docteur, like Sloper in Schenkar's play, invokes the language of colonization when he "others" the Venus and sets out to explore her. He says, "in you, Sweetheart, I've met my opposite exact," to which she replies, "you could be whatshisname: Columbus."⁴⁹ Parks's treatment of the Baron Docteur as a vampire is much more implicit than Schenkar and Kennedy's treatment of their vampiric characters. But by equating the Venus with the chocolates the Docteur feeds her and by mirroring the glossary of medical terms that describe her body with a glossary of chocolates, Parks implies the Venus's body parts constitute the "food of the Gods,"⁵⁰ in this case, the white audiences of freak show patrons and medical anatomists that devour her with their gazes. Furthermore, the Venus speaks more than at any other point in the play in her soliloquy on "A Brief History of Chocolate," which she concludes by positing that chocolate "is primarily today a great source of fat, and, of course, pleasure."⁵¹ The body of the Venus, for the Baron Docteur and her various audiences, also constitutes these same qualities. And the fact that the Venus eats chocolate throughout the play signifies another Ouroboros effect: when she eats the chocolate the Docteur gives her she exclaims, "the nipples of Venus. Mmmmm. My

favorite.”⁵² By equating the body of the Venus with the chocolates she eats, the Venus’s so-called complicity can be read as an act of self-silencing cannibalism.

Therefore, arguments in favor of the Venus’s complicity or victimization seem reductive. Jean Young’s claim that Parks depicts the Venus “as a sovereign, consenting individual with the freedom and agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of material gain”⁵³ is based on a misreading of the Venus’s silences within the play and a misunderstanding of the psychology of decolonization. While Young is aware that the Venus’s silence in the courtroom is “interpreted as acquiescence in this . . . ‘discourse of domination,’”⁵⁴ she fails to look at Parks’s own theatrical structuring of silence, through her use of “rests” and “spells”—a convention noted by the repetition of the characters’ names with no dialogue. During these spells, characters, by virtue of their silences, signify through their bodies because, as Malkin notes, “Parks is aware that the consciousness she ‘chronicles’ is one that was drained of its original language.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, because the Venus is given very little spoken dialogue in the play, it is necessary to read what is glaringly omitted from her testimony.

The language that is present on stage is the historical record of courtroom transcripts and newspaper articles of the events surrounding the display of the Hottentot Venus, interspersed with the dialogue of the Baron Docteur and other “patrons” of the Venus. By employing various texts within her play, Parks makes it necessary to read between the lines in order to understand the story of victimization inscribed on the body of Saartjie Baartman. Parks has claimed that “because so much African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to . . . locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.”⁵⁶ In *Venus*, Parks symbolically lets Baartman’s bones tell the story that “Venus” was denied, both linguistically and socially.

In *Venus*, the Baron Docteur is yet another manifestation of the violent colonial apparatus that Fanon describes in *Wretched of the Earth*. Just as Sartre conflates food and language, the Docteur teaches the Venus French, filling her mouth with the “high sounding phrases”⁵⁷ that Sartre describes as a mechanism for silencing the colonized elite in Algeria; and he feeds her chocolate as a way of rewarding and placating her need for autonomy. When the mouth is full, it is also silent, and the Venus’s mouth is stuffed with the language and food of the colonizer. All of this overfeeding, according to Fanon, leads to a moment in the period of decolonization when “the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up.”⁵⁸ This experience of throwing up, the metaphorical purge prior to embracing the violence of decolonization, also implies illness and disease, the infection—like the clap that kills the Venus—of the vampire’s bite and its subsequent awakening of violence in his victim.

Reading the cause of the Venus's death as a venereal disease, as Parks does, instead of incorporating Richard Altick's claim that Baartman died of smallpox,⁵⁹ strengthens the case for an implicit vampire, the parasitic contagion, in the text. The Docteur admits that he is "perhaps"⁶⁰ the cause of the Venus's infection, and such an admission undermines Young's claim that Parks ignores the racism and misogyny inherent in Baartman's death when she treats it as an "uncaused misfortune."⁶¹ The Grade School Chum says, "we'll clap her into jail. / And if her clap runs its course, well, / thats fate, Friend."⁶² Even as the Docteur attempts to think of another solution to the problem that the living Venus presents to his ability to dissect her, he begins to speak of her in the past tense: "she would have made uh splendid wife." The Chum answers, "oh, please. / She'll make uh splendid corpse."⁶³ The Docteur's act of murder literalizes the symbolism of vampirism as a sexually transmitted disease implicit in Stoker's *Dracula* when the male characters attempt to protect Mina and Lucy from the insatiable and infectious sexuality evoked by the vampire's bite. Just as Dracula fixates on the neck of his victim, the Docteur fixates on the buttocks and genitals of his. While Dracula penetrates the jugular with his fangs, infecting his victim with the bloodlust of his bite, the Docteur penetrates with his penis and infects the Venus with the clap.

Because the Venus is well-fed, not the starving peasant that Fanon claims is the first to realize the power of violence, her reaction is instead one that Fanon claims is a precursor to the violence of decolonization. During this period, the colonized person "will manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people." Such a reaction occurs because, as Fanon claims, "we have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler."⁶⁴ Similarly, the Venus imagines herself as mistress of the Docteur's household and catalogues the things she would do in such a position of power: "I'll rule the house with an iron first and have the most fabulous parties."⁶⁵ In this fantasy of domination, the Venus wears a wig, which, like the "white" hair of the vampire and vampirized characters in Kennedy's play, functions as an indicator of her mimicry, her disguise of whiteness.

The Venus cannot act out her colonial fantasy upon others who are like her because in the context of London and Paris, she is one of a kind, a microcosm of the larger-scale domination of the Africans by the Europeans. Therefore, in order to enact the power fantasy against her own people, she must literally enact it against herself. By eating Capezzoli di Venere ("nipples of Venus"), Petits Coeurs ("little hearts") and Enfants de Bruxelles, dark chocolate lozenges "with an image of a little African child" on them,⁶⁶ the Venus, like the snake that eats its own tail, symbolically cannibalizes her body and the bodies of the two fetuses she aborts in order to save her relationship with the Baron Docteur.

This relationship between the Docteur and the Venus, between colonizer and colonized, is first represented in "A Scene of Love (?)" as a series of "spells" during which the characters signify by their physical presence onstage, as mirror reflections of one another; the gaze of the Docteur weighted with the desire to discover the Venus (as he examines and ultimately dissects her body) and her gaze weighted with the desire to be like the Docteur (as she mimics his language and pretends to be the lady of the house). Theirs is a relationship between the vampire and the victim he seduces with the false promise of power; in this case, she is wooed by unseen riches and the assimilative promise of the Docteur's elusive love.

The Docteur takes the Venus out of one exploitative situation, the freak show, and places her in another when he displays her before a group of anatomists. Parks parallels the other freakish spectacles, the "Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders," with the "Chorus of the 8 Anatomists," thereby placing the anatomists in the simultaneous position of both freak and spectator. When they turn away from the Venus, "steal looks at her over their shoulders and jerk off,"⁶⁷ the audience views the spectacle of the anatomists while the anatomists in turn view the doubly objectified spectacle of the Venus. Parks further implicates her audience in its deliberate gaze by having the Docteur read his catalogue of the Venus's body parts during the play's intermission. Parks's stage directions explicitly state that the audience should be encouraged to leave, thus overdetermining the voyeurism of the audience who is again enticed to gaze upon a corpse. During the intermission, the Venus, whose body and voice are absent, is twice removed as a presence on stage. By representing her as merely a list of parts enumerated by the Docteur, Parks determines not the complicity of the Venus, but the complicit gaze of both the audience and the critics.

A position of genuine complicity for the Venus, or a situation in which she has a choice, seems unlikely when one considers the linguistic status and lack of physical autonomy available to the Venus as a black African woman in Europe in the early nineteenth-century. Her gendered and racialized alienation is apparent when she asks the Baron Docteur what the anatomists mean when they say that her measurements will be corrected after maceration. The Docteur answers, "'macerations' French for 'lunch.'"⁶⁸ Again, the Docteur conflates the silencing power of both language and food in the colonial context, and despite the fact that he provides a false definition, "maceration" takes up new meaning in the context of the vampiric relationship in which the Docteur feeds on the Venus. Parks includes a more standard definition of maceration that invokes a cannibalistic ingestion of flesh: maceration is "a process performed . . . after the subjects death. The subjects body parts are soaked in a chemical solution to separate the flesh from the bones so that the bones may be measured with greater accuracy."⁶⁹ The Docteur, via the

process of maceration, will eat away the flesh of the Venus; in this sense, for the Docteur's purposes, "maceration" really does mean "lunch." He dissects and interprets her body as a way of digesting her meaning, or of narrating the meaning that he ascribes to her after he kills her with his vampiric "kiss" in the form of a sexually transmitted disease.

And while the Venus's dialogue may seem to imply her complicity in her exploitation, her question, "do I have a choice," uttered at various intervals throughout the play illustrates the very lack of power available to a South African woman in Europe in the early nineteenth-century. Furthermore, her decision to leave South Africa to "make a mint"⁷⁰ in Europe underlies her subservient position in South Africa as well; before going to Europe, Parks's stage directions place Baartman "on her hands and knees with scrub brush and bucket"⁷¹ scrubbing the floors in the employment of white men. Issues of power, control, and submission are constantly visible on the body of the Venus, if they are not apparent in her speech, as she consumes herself and is consumed by the various voyeurs at the freak show, the anatomy theater, and in Parks's theater.

In *Signs of Life*, Henry James claims that when he viewed Jane in Barnum's museum, there were "tears on her . . . terrible cheeks;"⁷² conversely, the crowd that viewed the Venus noticed many things, "but no one ever noticed that her face was streamed with tears."⁷³ Critics like Young, who claim that "Parks's stage representation of [Saartjie Baartman's] complicity diminishes the tragedy of her life as a nineteenth-century Black woman stripped of her humanity,"⁷⁴ do not notice the tears of the woman who carries the bite of the vampire. Parks's play provides a replica of what nineteenth-century audiences wanted to believe about the so-called Hottentot Venus, and thereby renders her spoken dialogue unreliable, a linguistic phenomenon that merely mimics the voice of her oppressors in the well-fed moment prior to the eruption of decolonial violence.

The trope of the vampire enables female playwrights like Parks to reconstitute the bodies of women onstage through a medium that allows for the multifaceted expression of seduction and victimization. Such a trope complicates the lives of women who have been reduced to the narcissistic fantasy of phallogocentric theater. Through the bite of the vampire, women are drained of their language and creativity so that the vampire may reinscribe their meaning in terms of the binary language of colonization; through his seductive promises of power and love, the vampire creates mimics of himself, women who devour their children and ultimately themselves in a vain attempt to be their oppressors. Hélène Cixous writes of a time when women's theater will move beyond a stage of woman anticipating herself, the Ouroboros that devours and forever expects its own birth: "it is coming to pass, this arrival of Woman into the world; I hear it from so far away."⁷⁵ Through the trope of the vampire, women playwrights help to bridge the gap between expectation

and realization. Perhaps before the body of living woman can signify on stage and disrupt the phallogocentric order, the dead body, the "sacrificial object" that Cixous describes, must be resurrected, placed in an undead limbo in order to narrate the historical tradition that buried her in the first place.

Notes

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28. Kawash 247.
29. Adrienne Kennedy, *The Dramatic Circle, Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women*, ed. Sydné Malone (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1984) 195.
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32. Kawash 238.
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41. Savas Patsalidis, "Adrienne Kennedy's Heterotopias and the (Im)possibilities of the Black Female Self," *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*, ed. Marc Maufort (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) 304.
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45. Ntozake Shange, *Spell #7, Three Pieces* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981) 31.
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