

Embodied Absence and Theatrical Dismemberment

Johanna Frank

Both Adrienne Kennedy's *A Lesson in Dead Language* (c1962)¹ and Susan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (c1990)² situate the figure of the girl and her bodily representation squarely within the realm of performance that engages its own theatricality. These spaces of performance—the primary school classroom and the freak sideshow that later becomes the courtroom and medical laboratory—are of bodily excess: Kennedy's Pupils wear dresses that become more and more saturated with blood and Parks's The Venus, whom we repeatedly are told in the Overture “iz dead” and “there wont b inny show tonite,” remains at the center of a spectacle that gazes upon and ultimately consumes her. Both plays also posit a character that controls and gives information intermittently (and here I am referencing The Great White Dog a/k/a the school teacher in *A Lesson* and The Negro Resurrectionist in *Venus*). In the most simplified reading, these plays suggest that Western society positions black girls within the space of bodily excess; a space to which they must either submit or challenge. In the most simplified reading, girls are subject to the consequences of what it means to be black and female and will become either victims or survivors as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Yet Kennedy and Parks's plays demand a much more nuanced reading that moves beyond the notion of “girl” as a space to be traversed.

Such a reading might ask how does dismemberment position the figure of the girl as a site of embodied absence? Such a reading might also acknowledge that bodily excess presented within a performance that represents its own theatricality is always already about bodily vacancy, about bodily estrangement, or about bodily deterioration. This notion of embodiment is less concerned with a unified identity and more with a gap or a disturbance, a *relationship* between disparate parts. Moreover, this notion of embodiment is one marked by temporal estrangement or temporal rupture illuminated by the failure of voice/language to signify corporeality. If we think about Kennedy and Parks's plays in these terms, we can read the figure of the girl as a performance that haunts the body or a performance that echoes the body; a performance I call embodied absence—simultaneously there and not there, simultaneously present and absent—that embraces the very paradox it suggests.³

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Of course, the severing of Baartman's body from the narratives circulated about that body in *Venus* is clearly different from that of the severing of a wooden body and the live voice in *A Lesson in Dead Language*. Or is it? To a certain extent, the wooden busts that appear onstage yet speak from offstage in Kennedy's play and the real-ness of body parts preserved in formaldehyde that never appear in *Venus* yet signify the continual exploitation of Baartman's body as a spectacle for consumption both remain at the realm of representation. While dismemberment references literal violence to the body that has, no doubt, social and political implications, it is important *not* to ignore the figural violence imposed by the "regimes," "technologies," and "machineries" of dominant culture that control meaning and signification. The central difference between these two plays lies with who or what shifts from a passive to active role. Any movement from a passive to active spectator occurs within the *frame* of Kennedy's play, but *breaks* the frame of Parks's. This is a crucial difference in terms of the political implications regarding the function of drama.

A Lesson opens in a schoolroom with seven Pupils who sit with their backs to the audience and face three chalkboards and a "teacher" at a desk. In this schoolroom lesson on Latin and history, The Great White Dog, the teacher who is half-human and half-canine, towers over her students as she dictates the story of Caesar's assassination and his wife's premonition of his death (in her dream Calpurnia visualizes Caesar at the base of Pompey's statue that is outside of the Roman senate). For the young Pupils of Kennedy's classroom, notions of blood, conspiracy, life, death, pasts and futures are framed by a formal school lesson in which the teacher offers the knowledge that they, in turn, receive. The Pupils most often speak in unison—every once in a while an individual Pupil will speak separate from the group—and repeat back the words of the teacher or else engage in what seems to be a call-and-response. In addition, they write in unison on imaginary tablets as they speak aloud. The teacher is the authority and the Pupils seemingly aim to follow her lead, which involves a lesson that associates images of menstruation, guilt, murder, power, and family with notions of knowledge.

What starts as a simple question and answer educational model shifts to critical engagement in terms of what the teacher states and how the Pupils respond. For example, at the beginning the White Dog states, "Lesson I bleed" and the Pupils respond, "I bleed."⁴ As the lesson progresses, the teacher poses such questions as, "Now, will the one who killed the white dog please come forward from the senate?" and repeats this question with slight variations. The Pupils are silent until one offers the following insight: "I bleed, Teacher. I bleed. I am bleeding, Mother."⁵ This answer is developed further with each prompting by the teacher as she restates her question. If we read this interaction between the teacher and the Pupils as pedagogical—the teacher encourages the Pupils to assert themselves as individual thinkers—then her questions aim to generate a critical response from

the Pupils rather than a mere repetition of facts. This form of education—asking questions that demand more and more developed answers—proceeds throughout the short one-act play.

Central to staging of *A Lesson in Dead Language* are the life-size, larger-than-the-Pupils, wooden statues of Jesus, Joseph, Mary, two Wise Men, and a Shepard that hover on a ledge above the one-room school. The six religious statues—only visible to the Pupils—are acknowledged only when the Pupils can no longer answer the teacher's questions. When they reach an impasse with their lesson, they gaze upon these statues in a gesture that seems to suggest they implore knowledge that resides beyond the classroom. One Pupil raises her hand and declares, "He ran beside me and the sky was blue and so was Mary's robe." This mention of Mary is the first of its kind in the play—for which the statues *seem to be* the referent. Clearly the Pupils are either aware of the physical presence of statues surrounding the perimeter of the room or else of their epistemological hovering they seem to represent. Immediately the other Pupils take the individual Pupil's lead and declare in unison, "This bleeding started when Jesus and Joseph and Mary, and two Wise Men, and my shepherd died, and now Caesar." In a moment of heightened gesture at the conclusion of this line, the Pupils shift their gaze and attention from the teacher to the now brightly lit statues surrounding the room.⁶

The looming wooden statues inform the Pupils' notions of information, knowledge, and personal experience. By including Caesar in their litany of martyrs, the Pupils demonstrate how the information on Caesar—the content of the school lesson—joins their cognitive awareness and perception of themselves in relation to their larger historical and religious narratives. In doing so, the Pupils merge their own physical experiences with those of their school lesson. This is emphasized by the Pupils' accompanying gestures and the lighting shift that actively acknowledge those statues. In other words, this combination of speech and bodily gesture links the Pupils' cognitive awareness and perception of themselves, their bodies, voices, and identity in relation to their larger religious and historical knowledge. The Pupils join their knowledge of Caesar with that of their knowledge or experience of religious narratives *and* their corporeal presence.

It is not surprising, then, that this moment of joining narrative and corporeal presence also conjures the Statues, characters Kennedy identifies, to life. While the bodies of the statues and the Pupils remain on the stage, we hear the Statues' voices from offstage. The first time the voices speak, they exclaim, "It started when Jesus and Joseph, Mary, the two Wise Men and the shepherd died. I found their bodies in the yard of my house. One day they disappeared and I found their bodies in the yard of my house tumbled down." These lines build upon the Pupils' lines by embedding the Pupils' words, "I found their bodies in the yard of my house," with Statues' lines.⁷ In response, there is a shift in the Pupils' rhetoric from lines of

inquiry to declarative statements. Consider the following exchange that concludes the interaction between the Pupils and the offstage voices of the Statues:

PUPIL. (Raises her hand.) I played a game with lemons in the green grass. I bleed too, Caesar. Dear Caesar.

PUPILS. My mother says it is because I am a woman.

STATUES. (Offstage voices again.) That I found the bodies on the grass at the Capitol at the foot of Pompey's statue.

PUPIL. They were the friends of my childhood. I bleed too, Caesar.⁸

In this second time, the offstage voices speak, they *finish* the sentences of the Pupils. For example, the Pupils exclaim, "My mother says it is because I am a woman," and the statues continue the thought by asserting, "That I found the bodies on the grass at the Capitol at the foot of Pompey's statue."⁹ The offstage voices merge with the Pupils' voices and together speak in first person of the experiences of the Pupil and the dream of Calpurnia, as well as what seems to be a story of Christianity: evoking the birth and figure of Christ.

Whether or not we understand the offstage voices, as Kennedy dictates, as the voices of the Statues, the dialogue collapses their experiences with the Pupils' experiences. This collapsing of bodily experience with those of historical and religious figures positions the Pupils as speakers and listeners simultaneously in the present and the past: they are at once aware of their presence as Pupils in a classroom space as a space of knowledge construction, aware of their corporeality evident in the blood on their dresses, and aware of becoming linked with the bodies—of suffering, of martyrdom, of celebration—that exist in narrative. As the one individual pupil reminds us, "They were the friends of my childhood. I bleed too, Caesar."¹⁰ The girls encounter their own bodily excess in relation to religious and historical narratives, merging their individual bodily experience with narratives of embodiment. Moreover, they express empathy—for a character of an historical narrative—as a *physical sensation*. And their role as Pupils in relation to their teacher shifts: they become more and more in allegiance with The Great White Dog, who at the conclusion of the play reveals her human face. As such, the relationship between the statues and their offstage voices function as a device to link corporeality with voice and prompt, if not signify, a shift in the ways in which the figure of the girl participates in the school lesson as an active participant of knowledge. Kennedy positions the figure of the girl to be both speaker and listener, both spectacle and spectator. This suggests that there is power not only in voice but also in the relationship between narrating and enacting.

If *A Lesson in Dead Language* dramatizes the figure of the girl as that which moves from a passive to an active position as a consequence of inculcating the voices

of dismembered Statues, then how do we read the figure of the girl in *Venus*, whose inevitable “presence” remains linked to the narration of her dismembering? Like *A Lesson in Dead Language*, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* opens with the figure of the girl and her bodily representation within a space of performance aware of its own theatricality. It, too, plays with expectations of visibility by manipulating notions of the material body as the referent for lived experience, signification, and a stable identity. In *A Lesson* the girls encounter narratives as passive spectators and, then, through the moment of dismemberment, become those narratives, become active participants, by linking embodiment and voice with the narratives that surround them. *Venus* positions The Girl as always already the spectacle—dismemberment has already occurred, as announced in the Overture, The Venus “iz dead” and “there wont b inny show tonite”—whose development in the play is that of increasing awareness of both her status as spectacle and the layers of representation that bury her within that position. Character development for The Venus, then, is more of a regression than a progression, the perverse movement towards awareness of objectivity, suppression of possibility of action, and inevitable suffocation.

The larger frame of *Venus* tells a story of the exploitation of Saartjie Baartman from her alleged kidnapping to her last days of life in captivity and pending death. This progression of plot mirrors the stripping or reduction of scenes (they are numbered in reverse order from 31 to 1) in which The Venus moves toward her death and ultimate dismemberment and maceration. Along the way, she becomes an indentured servant to The Mother-Showman who runs a sideshow of The Chorus of 8 Human Wonders where The Venus is the headliner. She also becomes the focus of a court trial. The court questions if The Venus is exhibited “against her will,”¹¹ but collapses that concern with an inquiry of decency vs. indecency. Finally, she becomes the object of fixation of The Baron Docteur, who first meets The Venus at one of her “shows” and then makes her the object of study in his medical lab. In addition to detailing The Venus’s exploitation while she is alive, the play references Western society’s continual obsession with her post-death dismembered body. It also references Western society’s continual obsession with her post-death dismembered body. The Negro Resurrectionist, who functions as a narrator-of-sorts, reminds the audience of this history, which includes the holdings of Baartman’s skeleton, brain, and genitals at the Musée de l’Homme until they were returned to South Africa in 2002. This larger frame locates The Girl as spectacle from which she can never escape as evident in her ultimate demise and continual exploitation post-death.

Throughout *Venus*, The Negro Resurrectionist reminds us of this history via anecdotes presented as “footnotes”—historical, medical, literary, popular cultural, archival, or legal information—throughout the text. The footnotes provide the “back story” to the play, but in fragmented pieces. As the play progresses, so too do the frequency and length in which these “footnotes” appear. These footnotes become curious moments in Parks’s play. To a certain degree, they function in a similar

manner as the dictations of The Great White Dog in Adrienne Kennedy's *A Lesson in Dead Language*, which provide information and define the relationship between the teacher and the Pupils. On one hand, they are merely informational sound bites. On the other, they position the audience as passive receivers of information who have the opportunity to become active participants in and through their relationship to that information. The footnotes are directed towards the audience, but often The Negro Resurrectionist holds onto The Venus when he offers the footnote and makes her, along with the audience, listen to the information. For example, the stage directions dictate that in Scene 28: Footnote #2, The Negro Resurrectionist "holds fast to The Venus's arm" as he "reads through The Baron Docteur's notebook":

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST. Footnote #2:

(*Rest*)

Historical Extract. Category: Medical. Autopsy report:

(*Rest*)

"Her brain, immediately after removal, deprived of the greater part of its membranes, weighed 38 ounces."

(*Rest*)

"Her spinal cord was not examined, as it was considered more desirable to preserve the vertebral column intact. The dissection of her nerves, although carefully made, revealed no important deviations from the ordinary arrangement."

(*Rest*)

"Her liver weighed 54 and $\frac{3}{4}$ ounces and was of a ruinous color and slightly fatty."

(*Rest*)

"Her gallbladder was small and a little dilated at the *fundus*, being almost cylindrical when distended with air. Length 4 inches."

(*Rest*)

"Her stomach was the usual form. Small intestines measured 15 feet. Spleen was pale in color and weighed 2 and $\frac{1}{4}$ ounces. Her pancreas weighed 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ ounces. Her kidneys were large."

(*Rest*)¹²

At other moments, the footnotes are offered as information even though they may not necessarily be explicitly directed at an audience (The Venus or the theatre-going audience). They punctuate the play, and to an unsuspecting audience they seem to reference the "real" world beyond the play. Yet, by making The Venus listen to those words and, in turn, also making the theatregoing audience listen, The Negro Resurrectionist becomes complicit in that history, even if it is history rooted in source material whose authorship is unknown.

We can perceive this best in Scene 16, which is actually the intermission of the three-hour play. The Negro Resurrectionist remains silent and listens to one “source” or “author” of the material for which he has previously served as the reader. Entitled “Several Years from Now: In the Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen: The Dis(-re)memberment of the Venus Hottentot, Part I”, the theatre’s houselights are up, and The Baron Docteur stands at a podium before the theatre-audience and reads from what is supposedly his own notebook that details the dismemberment of The Venus. The following is but one brief excerpt in which The Baron Docteur describes the results and interpretation of The Venus’s dismemberment:

THE BARON DOCTEUR. The *mammae*, situated exactly
 Over the fourth and fifth ribs,
 Were a full 6 inches apart at the inner edge of their bases.
 They were soft
 Soft, flaccid and subpendulous:
 4 inches in diameter at the base
 And about the same from base to apex.
 Nipple very prominent of blackish-brownish hue
 And 1 inch in diameter. An areola
 Darker than the neighbour skin
 Extended around for 1 and a ½ inches
 From the nipple’s center.¹³

What I quote here is a small section of Scene 16, which involves the methodical listing of measurements that lasts the entire length/duration of an intermission. Moreover, the Baron Docteur’s long passages are marked by short exclamations by the Bride-to-Be, a character from the play-within-the-play, who sits off to the side of The Baron Docteur’s podium and reads from her love letters. The anatomical descriptions—or rather, categorization of The Venus’s body—are set in contrast to the repeated whimsical clichés exclaimed over and over by the Bride-to-Be: “my love for you, My Love, is artificial/Fabricated much like this epistle.”¹⁴ The contrast between the content of these performances calls attention to the validity we grant to certain performances over others; or rather, the desire to accept some performances as representation and others as “real.” Moreover, the acts of reading both “scientific evidence” and “love letters” assume, if not require, an audience, and Parks aligns The Negro Resurrectionist and her theatregoing audience as the receivers of both performances.

Moreover, these engagements resemble the moments in which The Negro Resurrectionist makes The Venus (and hence, the theatre audience) the receiver of his information. These acts in Scene 16 directly address that audience in a way that has not occurred up to this point in the play. The Baron Docteur repeatedly declares

to the theatregoing audience (and The Negro Resurrectionist who stands silently on the stage) that this is the intermission to Parks's play, and that they have the option to stay in their seats, to wander in the lobby of the theatre, and/or to engage in a bit of both. In other words, this intermission performs simultaneously an act of the play and a break from the play. The Baron Docteur offers the audience the opportunity to divorce themselves from the action on stage or to take part in the act of telling and listening. If audience members choose to remain in their seats, then The Baron Docteur and Bride-to-Be's respective performances demand the audience's engagement even as the convention of "intermission" is a time and space in which the audience may take leave from a play.

As representations, these moments of the footnotes and intermission seem to haunt the stage as devices that both interrupt and drive the plot. In order to complete the narrative that the footnotes present, the drama must move forward, even as that movement will insure the incompleteness, the dismemberment of The Venus. In these terms, the quest for complete knowledge is linked to the undoing of the subject. As such, the construction of knowledge, the assertion of the self as subject, requires one to tread on dangerous ground. Any desire for knowledge, complete notion of knowledge, requires one to compile and connect parts and pieces into a seemingly unified whole, to construct the self as a subject, regardless of the potential outcome on others of that process. And because, up to this point, Parks has her characters allude to the eventual death and dismemberment of The Venus, one might expect the intermission to operate as a fulfillment, of sorts, by completing that information. Yet, the listing of body parts and their measurements provide not only a detailed narration of her dismemberment—which could be fascinating, repugnant, or both—but also a further distancing from any understanding of that body and/or its lived experiences. The intermission scene merely presents one of many pieces of information of that history.

It is not surprising, then, that The Negro Resurrectionist takes a passive role in this intermission scene: he stands and listens to the performances of both The Baron Docteur and the Bride-to-Be. Despite his active role of reading the footnotes to The Venus and/or the audience—a role that seems to position him as an authority on The Venus, if not outside of any complicity in her spectacle—we come to learn that he too is a spectator who has no more or less authority than any one person in the onstage or theatre-going audiences. In the intermission we come to learn that The Negro Resurrectionist functions simultaneously as part of the dramatic structure and removed from it: as a character on stage that interacts with the other onstage characters, but also as a listener alongside with the ticket-paying audience. As The Baron Docteur and the Bride-to-Be recite to the audience what has been occurring all along within the frame of the play, Parks emphasizes how The Negro Resurrectionist has been as much of a voyeur of The Venus as any of the onstage characters or the ticket-paying audience. As such, The Negro Resurrectionist is

a model that reveals how the story of The Venus's dismemberment necessitates a listener, and it is through the relationship between speaker and listener that the audience joins to The Venus's historical narrative.

While the intermission highlights quite clearly The Negro Resurrectionist as a spectator to The Baron Docteur and The Bride-to-Be, Parks engages the onstage "audiences" to model and focus the gaze for the theatregoing audience. The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders who become The Chorus of the Spectators, The Chorus of the Court, and The Chorus of the 9 Anatomists provide for the audience the viewfinder through which to watch and understand The Venus as a spectacle. In each environment (the sideshow, courtroom, and medical laboratory) they observe, look, poke, prod, and *record* The Venus. Just as The Mother-Showman barks at the sideshow, "Turn to the side, Girl./Let me see! Let em see!" and the 8 Human Wonders gawk at The Venus, in the court scene, The Chorus of the Court seems mostly interested in "habeas corpus" as an opportunity to view The Venus.¹⁵ When The Venus is before the law, The Chorus of the Court seems more intrigued by her indecency than the question of whether or not she is working for The Mother Showman under her own free will.¹⁶ Similarly, in the medical laboratory, The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists measures The Venus: The Baron Docteur calls out the body part and The Chorus answer with the measurement. For example, The Baron Docteur states, "To the middle fingers tip/the arm being extended from the side:" and The Chorus responds, "32.1."¹⁷ At each scene, the Chorus either integrates the spectacle with its own knowledge base (in the case of the courtroom scene The Chorus incorporates The Venus's statements with its own sense of morality) or else records that spectacle as the basis for new knowledge (i.e., The Anatomists).

By the second to the last scene of the play "The Venus Hottentot Tells the Story of Her Life," The Negro Resurrectionist is The Venus's sole viewer and seemingly aims to protect her, at her request, from the gaze of the other spectators. Although The Negro Resurrectionist is paid to serve as the official Watchman over The Venus until she dies—and then to unearth her body for her future dismemberment because he is, as the Grade School Chum belittles him, a former "*digger*," he also serves a key role in The Venus's rememberment.¹⁸ While his motivation is suspect, he takes on the role of listener at The Venus's request. In his willingness to hear her account, The Negro Resurrectionist's relationship with The Venus, as does the theatregoing audience's, changes: he is no longer in the role of narrator who participates in sustaining The Venus's spectacle through his persistent observation of her (he had never left the stage throughout the play) and is no longer in the role of investigator, who presents the clippings—the footnotes—of her history. He becomes, instead, her Watchman and witness.

By listening, rather than merely telling, The Negro Resurrectionist provides comfort to The Venus in the moments of her death and necessitates that he—and by extension we—consider her as a subject. The Negro Resurrectionist helps to redeem

The Venus's identity because his act of listening is an act of responsibility: he functions as viewer and listener. While Saartjie Baartman's historical dismemberment may continue to exist in representation—as The Negro Resurrectionist recounts, “A plaster cast of her body was once displayed, along with her skeleton, in the Musée de l'Homme”—Parks's play offers an alternative representation that redistributes power to the possibility of the relationship between spectator, spectacle, and narrative.¹⁹ Even as the play structurally dismembers The Venus as it recounts the events that lead up to her physical dismemberment, it also functions to re-member her. If there is any link between embodiment and voice with the narratives that construct identity, then it occurs beyond the realm of the play: between the stage space storytelling and the theatregoing audience. The play enacts dismemberment as a means to re-member this history.

If we were to take Kennedy's play *A Lesson in Dead Language* as a model for considering Parks's play, then one reading could be that Parks's use of dismemberment positions the figure of the girl as the site of embodied absence, whose presence emerges in the performance of stories of corporeality *rather* than by corporeality itself. This movement towards knowledge, towards constructing a complete narrative about The Venus and/or the history surrounding her exploitation, parallels Kennedy's Pupils who become simultaneously themselves and their perceptions of Caesar, Jesus, etc. Yet, The Venus's dismemberment is never an event or an object, *per se*, but rather a device of plot that Parks controls—she gives and withholds the stories of the body in disparate parts by presenting those parts as a performance, linking corporeality with knowledge construction. She reinscribes dismemberment as narrative that bears meaning only in performance, which is never complete without a listener. By offering the theatregoing audience an opportunity to move from passive spectator to active participant in this process of dismemberment, Parks's play engages in a political act of re-memberment. As such, Parks positions performance *as* dismemberment and re-memberment; she locates *performance* as embodied absence and demands the spectators to become active participants in the performance of re-membering.

Notes

1. Adrienne Kennedy, “A Lesson in Dead Language,” *Adrienne Kennedy in One Act* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 47-53.

2. Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997).

3. Rebecca Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997) engages a similar notion of “gap” but with a different valence. Schneider uses the term “explicit body” to address the ways in which such performances explicate bodies in social relations and examines how the markings of “woman” precede feminist performance artists and are inevitably components of their performances. By reading performance artists as consciously stripping and reworking the layers of signification that surround their bodies, Schneider presents the idea of feminist performance artists and the “bodies beside themselves” or “the woman standing beside herself,” two concept phrases she uses repeatedly throughout her book, as a way to understand the relationship between the female

body as a sign and its corporeal existence. Ultimately, she reads contemporary feminist body artists as deploying or re-playing primitivization back across the performer's body as a double take—hence the phrase bodies beside their selves.

4. Kennedy 48.

5. 48.

6. All quotations in paragraph are from page 50.

7. All quotations in paragraph are from page 50.

8. 50.

9. All quotations in paragraph are from page 50.

10. 50.

11. Parks 76.

12. 28.

13. 94.

14. 94.

15. 42.

16. 76.

17. 116.

18. 159.

19. 159.

