

Resonant Silence: Love, Desire, and Intimacy in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*

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Pulitzer prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1990) presents versions of love that problematize its construct as a straightforward process of discovering a subject's stable, knowable interior. Drawing upon a range of theories to define romantic love as an engagement of physical desire and emotional intimacy, this essay reads Parks's staged silences, called "Spells," to explore the affective valence of these non-verbal exchanges between distinct bodies. Parks's definition of "Spells" as a "place of great (unspoken) emotion... a place for an emotional transition" highlights a series of bodies—the architecture of the text, the characters in the play, their historical analogs, the audience, the directors, the actors, the reader—all of whom participate, to varying degrees, in the affective experience evoked by unregulated public space. The Spells thus allow an interaction that highlights the complex dynamics of love—the ambiguities of indirect transmission, the freedom of individual interpretation, and the possibility of misunderstanding/misalliance or mistaken intimacy.

As a writer, my job is to write good plays; it's also to defend dramatic literature against becoming 'Theatre of Schmaltz.' For while there are several playwrights whose work I love love love, it also seems that in no other form of writing these days is the writing so awful. (The America Play 6)

Distinguishing high-quality, gripping drama from cloying, reductive sentimentality, Pulitzer prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks suggests that her theatrical agenda does not preclude provoking intense affect. After all, she includes her own intense affective relation to the work of several of her contemporaries. Instead, Parks emphasizes the man-

ner in which her own definitive romance with certain works (those that inspire “love love love”), paradoxically, stresses *mere* love as highly ambivalent, as very much an assessment of whether the inner worth of a text or loved object is “good” or “awful.” Not surprisingly, then, Parks’s 1990 play *Venus* presents versions of love that problematize its construct as a process of discovering a subject’s interior (as, for example, in the play’s staging of the anatomical dissection of Saartjie Baartmann, also known as The Venus Hottentot and Parks’s protagonist).

Language, *Venus* suggests, circumscribes but does not effectively capture the intimacy of this affective connection, in part because it attempts to fix that which cannot be fixed—an ongoing relationship between two people who are themselves constantly changing and whose interiority is therefore only imperfectly accessible. With her attention to language as an imperfect means for an inherently imperfect exchange, Parks reveals the complexity of not only the relationships foregrounded in her play, but also those formed between spectator and spectacle. Even in non-verbal communication, distinct corporeality precludes seamless transmission of experience; the physical body is no more coherent or readily understood than the emotional one. Like the play, love demands participation, physical and emotional engagement, and attachment at the same time as it inevitably fails to satisfy the desire for complete intimacy. Therein, perhaps, lies its eternal claim to our interest.

An Equation of Love: Desire + Intimacy

Whereas the Greeks used at least four different words for love—agape, or general affection; eros, or passionate sensual love; philia, or dispassionate virtuous love; and storge, or “natural” familial love—modern English has only one, umbrella term. However, although we apply a single term to it, our understanding of this affective engagement is, like the Greek definitions, highly dependent upon its context. Both Greek and English linguistic schemas equally rely on the configuration of the love relationship, or who is in love with whom (or, in some cases, what). Most conceptual frameworks differentiate the romantic love that combines the sexual passion of eros with the general affection of agape from other forms of love. These frameworks construct romantic love as an engagement that requires the mutual participation of two distinct entities and, through this dual participation, produces two separate though interdependent subjects. As anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli writes:

liberal discourses of love [...] are projected out of a set of relatively stable discourses and practices that measure the worth of a life, and a society, relative to its capacity to constitute and vest sovereignty in the individual. 'I' must be the citation and the site of enunciation and address. (183)

Povinelli's subject-in-love thus performs a "*foundational event*—also known as *explicit performative* and a *bootstrap performative*—in which the act of referring to the event or thing creates the event or thing" (183). For Povinelli, this foundational event occurs "through a relay with another subject, who is likewise oriented to sovereignty as a contractually driven foundational event" (188). Povinelli's interest in love is as the site of empire creation, and thus her event necessarily occurs between two subjects-in-love who expand into the "national mass subject (We the People)" and their government (188). I, however, am most interested in exploring the specific dynamics of the foundational event of romantic love for the purposes of reading a text in which varying subjects and objects participate in and perform love.

One side of *Venus's* love engagements remains the same, despite the changing second subjects who participate in the ongoing dynamic. Parks bases her narrative on the historical figure of Saartjie Baartman, an African woman whose supposedly enormous posterior made her a freak show star in nineteenth-century England. Beginning and ending the play with Baartman's death, Parks envisions the totality of her experience—from Baartman's early life as a servant in Cape Town to her transformation into the Venus Hottentot to her relationship with the white doctor who fell in love with her, kept her as his mistress, and ultimately dissected her in the interest of his medical reputation.

Thus, Parks's title points simultaneously in multiple directions: to the Roman goddess associated with love, beauty and fertility, to any artistically-rendered female nude, and to the historical antecedent of her play's protagonist. Thus conflating the body of the text, the body of the woman on stage, and the historic female bodies on artistic display, Parks gestures not just towards the layered nature of theatrical spectacle but also towards the difficulty of linguistically and artistically capturing an embodied affective experience. Venus, like the love she represents, is seemingly everywhere and nowhere in the play; her novel body almost always remains on stage, but its interior ever eludes the complete grasp of the Other. Within the text, The Baron Docteur and a series of other intermingling characters (The Mother-Showman, The Negro Resurrectionist, and the various Choruses)

perform the collapsing roles of spectator and lover, calling attention to the audience's own roles as desirous spectators who seek a troubling form of intimacy predicated on the possession of another's external form and the fantasy of knowing its interior.

In conceptualizing love and the specific experience of the individual subject-in-love in the context of the play, I engage the vocabulary introduced by several theories of romantic love. Contemporary anthropologist Helen Fisher's biological drive theory identifies three overlapping stages of romantic love based on physiology: lust, attraction, and attachment. Lust, "the craving for sexual gratification," motivates people to "seek sexual union with almost any partner"; romantic attraction encourages people to focus their energy on a single individual; attachment, "the feeling of calm, peace, and security," occurs between long-term partners (xii). Fisher's work, based on fMRI scans that captured the brain activity of people who "had just fallen madly in love" in both reciprocal and rejected romantic pairings, conceptualizes love as a "fundamental human drive" that she likens to "the craving for food and water and the maternal instinct" (xiii). For Fisher, romantic love is not a mutually-constitutive experience but, as it can be observed in non-reciprocal situations, an individual internal motivation system deriving from the production of dopamine, serotonin, and other stimulating brain chemicals. Clearly, these biological phenomena cannot be measured in *Venus*; however, the corporeality of Fisher's theory of lust and attraction lays the groundwork for my discussion of non-reciprocal physical desire.

In contrast to Fisher's primarily biological understanding of the individual subject-in-love, psychologists Silvan Tomkins and Richard Sternberg posit an affect-based engagement with the subject or object of affection. While Tomkins does not place love at either end of any of his eight affect continuums or identify any specific associated corporeal expressions of it, he asserts, "Love is primarily an affective phenomenon, a special case of what we term an addiction" (60). Further, Tomkins, who considers the related issue of sexuality more often than love, asserts that sexuality possesses "the immediate *instrumentality*, the defining orientation toward a specified aim and end different from itself" (Sedgwick 18-19). With a similar emphasis on the affective nature of the bond, Sternberg's Triangular Theory diagrams love in nine varying combinations of intimacy, passion, and commitment.¹ Sternberg's intimacy encompasses feelings of "close-

1. Sternberg's theory, developed in the early 1980s, stems from a series of questionnaires about subjects' "three most significant heterosexual love relationships" (11).

ness, bondedness, and connectedness” (38). Passion is “the expression of desires and needs [which] manifest themselves through psychological and physiological arousal, which are often inseparable from each other” (42).² Commitment involves, in the short-term, “the decision to love a certain other,” and, in the long-term, “the commitment to maintain that love” (47). His version of romantic love includes passion and intimacy; consummate love adds commitment to the former.

Together these theories emphasize that love is a complicated interplay between two (or perhaps four) interrelated concepts that *Venus* traces: desire and intimacy (physical and emotional). Operating on the corporeal level are Fisher’s lust and attraction, Sternberg’s passion, and Tomkins’s addiction. For all of their overlap in this regard, Fisher, Sternberg, and Tomkins diverge significantly when it comes to the imagined recipient of desire. Tomkins proposes the most extensive freedom in this regard; he writes, “any affect may have any ‘object’” (qtd. in Sedgwick 19). In contrast, both Fisher and Sternberg envision engagement with another human, and Sternberg’s version of romantic love further requires two interacting subjects. In addition to their physical component, these theories of romantic love also rely on an ambiguous nexus of emotional connection, proximity, and accessed interiority. With traces of Greek *agape* (affection), Fisher’s attachment and Sternberg’s intimacy incorporate familiarity and closeness, and Sternberg adds knowledge and acceptance of the loved one. Sternberg writes, “Intimacy probably starts in self-disclosure,” and “self-disclosure begets self-disclosure,” though of course this intimate dialogue requires the equal participation of two subjects in order to establish and maintain its affective bond (40-41). Particularly relevant to a reading of a theatrical dynamic, Tomkins underscores the importance of interocular connection, which translates to the shared experience of intimacy.³

Povinelli writes, “A good sign that the intimate event has occurred is the collapse of the sex object and intimate subject. Where this collapse has not occurred, love is qualified” (188). This transition of the Other from corporeal sex object to affective subject highlights the relationship between physical desire and intimacy and emotional desire and intimacy—the phys-

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2. In his definition of passion, Sternberg first emphasizes the work of Elaine Hatfield and William Walster, who define the concept as “a state of intense longing *for union* with the other” (qtd. in Sternberg 42).
 3. Tomkins writes that shame, “the negative affect linked with love,” creates an “impediment to intimacy and communion, within the self and between the self and others” as it results in both physical and emotional withdrawal (139).

ical connection suggests the emotional one, and physical access, emotional access. In body as in theory, love inhabits an ambiguous space between a tangible, even visceral corporeal experience and a more nebulous affective phenomenon. For all of the discourse written on the topic, love resists linguistic transmission. Ironically, then, overlaps, ambiguities, and breakdowns of communication may be the most effective yet inherently incomplete means of approaching a subject that is both central to the human experience and ever beyond our articulation.

Prior to reading many of the literal ambiguities and communicative breakdowns within the text, I would like to introduce one further concept as it pertains to Venus's love engagements: Tomkins's ideo-affective resonance. If, as Sternberg suggests, romantic love is a mutually-constitutive relay between two agencied subjects, one must consider to what extent Venus operates as an (un)equal subject as opposed to an object. Certainly, in all of her interrelated identities, Venus exists as an unstable object representing, performing, enabling, and projecting love for an ever-shifting subject. But does she ever do more than enable "the affective relay between subject and object" that defines a literary work's tone, according to Sianne Ngai (46)? In order to do that, she would have to do more than portray love; she would have to *feel* it. How, given the theatrical context, would that differ from performing it? And how would the spectator identify such an affect? As my subsequent readings of the play's "love scenes" will show, *Venus* and its protagonist demonstrate the fantasies at play in such intimate identification. As in Ngai's reading of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, in which Ngai concludes that "the world of the novel's story *runs on a feeling that no one actually feels*" and that no one "can verify or publicly prove he possesses, *even* with the aid of tokens [which] are essentially abstractions of that unfelt" experience, Venus and the multiple analogies that emanate from and trace back to her ever-present, thoroughly mapped yet never-fully-entered body of love effectively become the play's "ideo-affective resonator" (69). As Tomkins defines his term:

a love affair of a loosely organized set of feelings and ideas about feelings with a highly organized and articulate set of ideas about anything. As in the case of a love affair the fit need not at the outset be perfect, so long as there is sufficient similarity [...] to set the vibrations between the two entities into sympathetic coordination with each other.... It is possible, and indeed common for different individuals to resonate in different manners to the same ideology. (qtd. in Ngai 75)

As the close readings below indicate, Venus becomes the ideo-affective resonator, both for the characters in the play and for the audience. What resonates and amplifies through her physical body is not love but its unsettling lack. While Venus articulates a desire for emotional intimacy that, adopting the language of her colonizers, she calls love, Parks's play ultimately communicates the empty, performative nature of this heavily-scripted, affectively-charged word and the incomplete reality of the intimate connection it suggests.

Staging the Ambiguity of Affect

Among its various unique textual elements, *Venus* features a series of staged silences that Parks terms "Spells." In her "Author's Notes" at the beginning of *Venus*, she defines the form as: "An elongated and heightened (*Rest*) ... Has sort of an architectural look ... This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit" (3). In a longer version of her "Elements of Style," the definition continues: "The feeling: look at a daguerreotype; or: the planets are aligning and as they move we hear the music of their spheres. A Spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It's also a place for an emotional transition" (*The America Play* 16-17). Parks's definition highlights a series of bodies—the architecture of the text, the characters in the play, their historical analogs, the audience, the directors, the actors, the reader—all of whom participate, to varying degrees, in the affective experience evoked by unregulated non-verbal public space. The Spells thus allow an interaction that highlights the complex dynamics of love—the ambiguities of indirect transmission, the freedom of individual interpretation, and the possibility of misunderstanding/misalliance or mistaken intimacy. At the same time as they introduce such ambiguity, the Spells are fundamental units in the composition of the play and the relationships it constructs.

Although categorization is inherently reductive, I would like to consider four different types of Spells, distinguishing them by their context and the dynamics of the interaction they stage: traveling, gazing, thinking/negotiating, and loving. The traveling Spells, which occur just before and during the scene titled "The Whirlwind Tour," emphasize the parallel movement of the physical bodies on stage without any affective relation. Featuring *The Venus* and *The Mother-Showman* and, indirectly in the last two, *The Negro Resurrectionist*, the traveling Spells are either preceded by or occur during

a list of distinct but seemingly interchangeable towns, identified by random letters and numbers. This listing has a number of textual counterparts that perform similar visual and auditory functions: the “counting down,” also identified as “counting the take,” one instance of which immediately precedes the first traveling Spell, and the scientific itemizing of Venus’s body that occurs during the “Dis(-re-)memberment” of the Intermission and several subsequent scenes (40; 50; 91).⁴ The Spells of perpetual movement, like the on-going numeric and corporeal listings, depict a passage across and through a continent, a female body, and a staged performance that attempts to mitigate desire and prohibits intimacy.⁵ In *The Mother-Showman’s* capitalist agenda, as in *The Docteur’s* medical examination and any other colonial project, exteriors can be counted, itemized, defined, and distinguished, but the subject’s superficial interest in its object as a means to an end necessarily obscures any interiority. A conquest other than a human connection, the non-loving subject-object relationship depicted in the traveling Spells occurs at a distance that enables the trafficking in corporeality, reducing the human to a commodity.

Whereas the traveling Spells depict a non-loving subject-object contact, the gazing Spells elucidate the potential unilateral desire of subject-object contact. Serving as the visual stimuli for multiple lustful subjects, Venus’s exotic corporeality becomes the object of attention, obscuring her interior and its potential subjectivity. The gazing Spells begin when Venus undergoes her transition from “The Girl” into “The Venus Hottentot,” an identity reconfiguration manipulated by *The Mother-Showman* to emphasize Venus’s physique and its racial identity. As *The Girl* finishes her bath, the stage directions indicate, “The Negro Resurrectionist watches her” (35). “What you lookin at?,” Venus asks, already engaged in a layered sexual spectacle for a desiring (male) subject before she takes the stage (35).

4. In addition to the Intermission, Venus’s body is itemized in scenes beginning on pages 109, 115, 124, and 148.

5. Although *The Docteur’s* scientific cataloguing may preclude his own affective relationship to Venus’s body, the on-going performance during the Intermission calls attention to the affective experience of the viewer, as a sustained interest in the ever-changing (hence ever-stimulating) performance, the desire to “see it all,” and the discomfort provoked by the impossibility of doing so parallels the difficult reality of ever-incomplete intimacy. Anticipating the gazing Spells between a desirous subject and object, the content of the Intermission itself further underscores the voyeurism of this interest in the body on display, the body of the text as well as the itemized body of *The Venus*.

“You. / Yr lovely,” he responds (35). His adjective indicates an exclusive interest in her love-ly exterior, not her love-able interior, and the subsequent brief Spell between the two serves to maintain this dynamic. After engaging in this Spell and then a much longer one with The Chorus of Spectators, Venus articulates her affective experience of the voyeuristic interfaces: “Oh, God:/ Unloved” (36). Presumably, she discloses this dissociation to the live audience, not the on-stage Spectators, whose only reaction is an equally dissociated long squeal (37). The next extended gazing Spell, in which The Chorus of Spectators and The Mother-Showman watch Venus, prompts yet another dissociated response: a long peal of “wild laughter” from the Chorus (47). Again the ensuing text retrospectively suggests the affective tenor of this Spell, as Venus is silent for a short Spell and then mirrors their laughter in a quieter, briefer manner. As in the previous scene, when she begins interjecting numerically-ordered single digits into The Mother-Showman’s counting of the take, Venus vocalizes an altered form of the Spectators’ objectifying utterance. Venus’s responses reject an attempt to silence an entirely commodified female body and, through a shared vocalization with the subjects in her midst, introduce a version of her own subjectivity into the gazing Spells. Alongside her limited voice, she possesses a limited gaze to be turned upon herself and/or her audience. However, if these limits impinge somewhat upon her ability to communicate affectively, the true barrier to intimacy arises from the inherent one-way nature of the subject-object gaze.⁶

In a move towards potential subject-subject contact, the thinking and negotiating Spells are moments of implicit negotiation, theoretical interiority, and greater emotional intimacy than either the traveling or gazing Spells. The thinking Spells, which involve only one character, and the negotiating Spells, which involve two or more characters, perform a similar function: whether there are multiple characters in the Spell itself or not, the text around them occurs between bodies who recognize at least some level of subjectivity in one another and therefore engage verbally as well as visu-

6. The affective exchanges of these gazing Spells, with Venus’s racially marked female body as their object on display, contrast to those that occur when the roles are reversed and The Young Man—and, more specifically, his desire to “love something Wild”—is the focus of visual attention (48). Unlike the gazing Spells with Venus as the object, in this moment of layered gazing, as Venus watches The Baron Docteur watch The Father and The Uncle take in the Young Man, he remains a full agent. His unambivalently asserted desire for physical but not emotionally intimate “love,” a euphemism both introducing and obscuring any affective connection, is actualized in a series of gazing Spells in Act 2 (132, 134, 145).

ally both before and after the Spell. This version of mutual subjectivity allows the potential for individual thought and the necessity of negotiating respective desires—a movement closer to the dynamic of romantic love. Problematically, however, Venus has little or no access to the linguistic or cultural power needed to make the decisions she is at least superficially permitted within these spaces—a permission granted only because her physical body *is* the point of negotiation. With her racially marked, lower class female body, she negotiates from a perpetually disempowered position in relation to the characters on stage as well as to the audience, thus undermining the potential intimacy of these interactions. In the play's first negotiating Spell, for example, Venus, who is still *The Girl in Southern Africa*, asks a series of questions that betray her subordinate position, including the question, "Do I have a choice?" (17). The Spell, which occurs just after *The Man* tells her, "Think it over, Girl. Go on. / Think it all over," involves Venus and two men, *The Brother* and *The Man* (later *The Mother-Showman* and *The Baron Docteur* respectively), colonizers with whom Venus continues to negotiate her body and its interior. The arguments the men posit in favor of her coming with them to England paint a fantasy not just of financial wealth, but evoke Fisher's female desire for "romantic words, images, and themes in stories" of romance as well. "Like Cinderella," *The Brother* tells her, then asks, "Shes heard of Cinderella, right?" (16). Citing a fairy tale in which the romance plot obscures the underlying exchange of the female body and its specific right-sized body part, *The Brother* similarly obscures Venus's participation in the European capitalist market for her body. This issue of transmitting desire across language and cultural barriers resonates throughout the thinking and negotiating Spells. Similarly, these Spells reveal the power disparity between the agents who have the potential to satisfy their desires and the linguistic, cultural subaltern who can never realize her subjectivity or its desires.⁷

This disparity—and its preclusion of love—plays out even in the nego-

7. Two other notable thinking/negotiating Spells occur during the courtroom scene and, in a role reversal, with *The Young Man*. In the former, *The Chorus of the Court* asks a series of questions that, though Venus certainly understands, she cannot possibly answer in any truthful capacity, including "Who are you?" and "Were you ever beaten? / Did you like it was it good?" (74). After a brief thinking Spell, Venus responds, "The Venus Hottentot / is unavailable for comment" (74). Thus invoking the name she has been given by the society in whose court she sits, Venus provides the only acceptable response to their interrogation. Their superficial interest in her "subjective" experience not only reinforces her position as a colonized body; it immediate-

tiating Spells that hold the greatest theoretical potential for intimacy, between Venus and the Baron Docteur. In their first negotiation, which mirrors the above discussion, The Docteur asks her to come with him to Paris. He tells her, “Im a doctor / ‘Doctor.’ / Understand?” (86). Under the cloak of scientific (dis)interest in her physical form, his assertion of power is veiled as protective of her affective capacity through its lack of interest in both her sexuality and her interiority. His next persuasive technique, however, relies heavily on affect: in the stage directions, “he gives her a red heart box of chocolates” (86). Like The Brother and his use of Cinderella, The Docteur obviates language by exploiting a universal signifier of love with problematic underpinnings. Chocolates, of course, are a colonial product; in effect, he hands Venus her own body.⁸ Although she asks “Do I have a choice?” and he gives her a Spell to “Think it over,” Venus again possesses no more agency in her transaction than the producers of her colonized commodities had in theirs (87-88).

The disparity in agency plays out most intensely in the thinking and lengthy negotiating Spells surrounding Venus’s pregnancy. Temporarily in these Spells, Venus gains subjectivity through the reproductive power of her female body: for a change, she directs the moments that lead up to the Spell. Responding in kind to The Docteur’s directive to drink his proffered beverage, she tells him, “Put yr hand here, Sweetheart [...] Feel me” (127). Presumably, she guides his hand to her stomach, indicating that this direction and the Spell that follows are not sexually charged. This intimate moment of subject-subject interaction forces The Docteur’s recognition of Venus’s interiority and, for all his medical examination and itemization of its parts, his own imperfect knowledge of its totality. “What am I feeling?,” he asks and she instructs “Guess” (128). Although the Spell that follows no doubt con-

ly reduces her to a sexual object. Adding yet another complicating layer to the performance of love and Venus’s subjectivity, there are a series of negotiating Spells that occur between the Uncle, the Young Man, and his Bride-to-Be “disguised as The Hottentot Venus” (132). In this performance of Venus’s mediated subalternity, the Bride-to-Be/Venus is again directed to speak by her (white, male) superiors. In the ensuing Spell that occurs, Venus and The Uncle “click and cluck at each other” before he “interpret[s]” her utterances: “She sez shes pure bred Hottentot./ She sez if Wilds your desire/she comes from The Wilds and she carries them behind her” (133). Transmitted through the play-within-a-play and a character-within-a-character, Venus is reduced yet again to a sexual object whose potential interiority is scripted and usurped.

8. Furthering this connection/conflation, the text provides both a glossary of medical terms and a glossary of chocolate.

tains a subject-subject contact of potential love and intimacy, The Docteur's next lines point toward a more problematic affective tenor: "Is there anything / we can do about it we together in / the privacy of my office" (128). His statement of non-question indicates that abortion is a foregone conclusion, as is his upper hand in their negotiations as interrelated subjects. Although he uses the intimate pronoun "we," Venus will inevitably only participate by yielding her physical body and silencing her affective one. Following yet another thinking Spell in which Venus is only permitted the "agency" of capitulation, her response solidifies her own affective reaction. "Where I come from / its cause for celebration," she says, referencing a physical and emotional landscape that validates her subjectivity and its interiority (128).

The negotiating Spells that concern Venus's second pregnancy and second abortion highlight her evolving subjectivity and its increasing desire for intimacy in relation to The Docteur. Indeed, the second abortion negotiation occurs just after she delivers the first of her two monologues and the only one in which her self-disclosure contains the interiority necessary to establish intimacy.⁹ "I love him," she tells herself and the audience, though, as noted earlier, her framework for defining this affective experience relies problematically on the language of her colonizers (138). Limited though it may be, the linguistic capture enables the verbal negotiation of an affective experience that would otherwise be impossible. In order for the negotiation to occur, however, there must be two subjects willing to participate in the dialogue. Moments later, upon learning of her pregnancy, The Docteur avoids answering her question about the return of his affection, though he insists she respond to his non-question "Can we do anything?" (138). Although she again submits to his will in relation to aborting the child, she rejects his immediate imperative for her body to "get some sleep" (139). Moreover, after the negotiating Spell that follows this demand, she asks a rare question, "Whats 'maceration'" (139). His answer, of course, obscures the truth, but the shifting dynamic and Venus's increasing self-disclosures indicate her development as an affective subject available for a certain form of intimacy with a receptive audience on either side of the theater's fourth wall.

With this change in Venus's subjectivity and hence her ability to negotiate, the pregnancy and abortion scenes also contain loving Spells, which depict the greater physical intimacy of touch and the possible affective corollary of emotional intimacy between subjects. These Spells, typically pre-

9. The other monologue is a delivery of the encyclopedic "A Brief History of Chocolate" (155).

ceded or followed by the use of the term “love,” often with a question mark appended, begin with the play’s longest and most ambiguous Spell, which lasts for the duration of the scene titled, “A Scene of Love (?)” (80). As the script indicates no speech or stage direction for The Venus and The Baron Docteur in this initial interaction, Parks forces the reader and the director to consider the nature of their interaction up to this point. Although it is hard to imagine how, a particularly skillful director might even stage some of this ambiguity for the audience. When The Venus and The Docteur are formally introduced two scenes later, she apparently does not recognize him, suggesting that this first love Spell does not involve intimate physical contact. Is this a scene of one-way sexual desire, as in the previous gazing Spells, or of mutual gazing? Is there something akin to negotiation between a subject and an object, or between two subjects? What is its affective valence? Ultimately, the dynamic captured in this scene determines much of the play’s commentary on love, desire, and intimacy. In reading the text, it is easier then to interpret the affect retrospectively, after examining the love scenes and Spells that follow.

Just before the first of the love Spells, in Scene 14, Venus asks a question that she repeats throughout Act 2: “Love me?” (104). Initially, The Docteur responds, “I do,” in a pseudo-marriage vow exchange, but as the scene progresses and a number of love Spells occur, his responses move away from this significant performative statement, ranging from “Do I ever” to “Yes” (103-07). By the end of their interactions in the play, his answers devolve further, from “Im here arent I?” to ignoring her question altogether in the second pregnancy negotiation noted above. This linguistic repetition with subtle reconfiguration indicates the shifting dynamic between the two characters, with Venus’s growing desire for emotional intimacy and The Docteur’s initial desire for physical intimacy dissipating into a scientific interest in her body. In both of his desires, The Docteur’s interest focuses on her exterior, whereas she displays a developing interest in his interior/affect, if exclusively as it relates to her. In addition to the “Love me?” question-and-answer that occurs on either side of many of the love Spells, the verbal exchange and the scripted physical actions further highlight the growing discrepancy between what the two characters want. After the final, lengthy love Spell of Scene 14, The Docteur tells Venus, “I love you, Girl,” a potentially intimate utterance further complicated by the tension of her line that precedes the Spell, “You could discover *me*” (108). Her line, a response to his expressed desire for fame via scientific discovery, serves as a flirtatious, sexual comment, indicating her desire to yield her *self* physically but perhaps also emotionally. As this exchange bears out, definitions of “me”

and “you” are as ambiguous and individual as those of “love.” Does his expressed love refer to her exterior, with its potential for medical fame and the satisfaction of his own sexual desire, or, as she seems to intend, to her interior? Moreover, are there limits to the extent to which the colonist can “discover” the interior of the colonized body? Povinelli theorizes that the true intimate event obscures and even erases identity politics:

Intimate recognition, according to Habermas, uniquely transformed socially thick people into purely human subjects. Socially deracinated, inter-subjective dependence would slowly become opposed to and conceived as absolutely other than displacements of the self through social being. (189)

In keeping with Povinelli’s theory, Venus’s desire to become a non-marked body in their relationship suggests that the hierarchy does upset emotional intimacy. In response to his declarative statement of love, she says, “Lights out,” indicating her desire for increased subjectivity in their interaction, as he has previously asked to turn the light on, but also in relation to the audience (108). Although the scene ends with her line, Venus’s desire to control the viewing of her body, to engage privately and corporeally, and to thereby script the potential intimacy of the interaction cannot be realized in the context of their relationship or in the theatrical spectacle itself. The script includes few stage directions for characters’ actions, but those it provides in the subsequent, ever-shorter love Spells further disturb Venus’s interest in emotional intimacy. In response to her next “Love me?” question, The Docteur answers “How couldn’t I? / Yr lovelier than ever” (114). Initially, The Docteur’s physical actions—he turns from her and masturbates—indicate his primary interest in her as a sexual object; now, after his emphasis on her exterior underscores his relation to her not as an intimate subject but as a desirable object, he returns his attention to the anatomists in the room and the medical project at hand (106; 114).

These discrepancies in the desire for physical and emotional intimacy resonate through the concluding scene of the play-within-the-play, in which all that can be realized is physical desire and all that can be captured is the performance of intimacy without true intimacy. While the scene’s opening stage direction indicates that The Docteur and The Venus watch from separate vantage points, suggestive of their distinct perspectives as spectators, “The Bride-to-Be, masquerading as a Hottentot Venus, and / The Young Man stare at each other” (153). In the brief Spell that follows, the stare indicated by the script’s staging direction suggests a mutual look, as opposed to

the one-way, subject-object gaze of previous Spells. Immediately thereafter, The Young Man says, “Tell her Im smitten” (153). Despite any connection established through this interocular exchange, his affect still requires not just articulation but also literal translation. As in Fisher’s biological construct of love, the visual stimuli produce his lust and attraction—biological experiences that he immediately interprets as love. His comment and The Uncle’s response, “I think she knows,” highlight the complicated layers of mediation in any intimate engagement. The audience both on stage and off is presumably aware of The Bride’s disguise, as is The Uncle, but each individual’s awareness hinges on an ability to accurately distinguish the exteriors and interiors in the scene before them. In an attempt to obviate language through a signifying gesture, The Young Man kneels before her as he articulates his constancy to “True Venus” (153). The empty signifiers abound: his performance of culturally-recognized romantic “love” is as false as The Bride’s “true” identity. Alongside this empty love, The Young Man’s comments also betray his sexual desire and its convoluted relationship to the performance of love, as he tells his Uncle, “put that on yr tongue then in her tongue then in her ear” (153). Again, The Uncle’s comment establishes his unique ability to both read and communicate the truth of physical and emotional corporeality: “She promises constancy but / as we lose uh skin layer every day / so will she shrug her old self off” (153). Caught up in his lust and attraction to The Bride’s false exterior, The Young Man blindly ignores the nuances of his Uncle’s comment: “Shrug all you want but keep thuh core” (154). With yet another empty gesture towards a superficial form of love, The Young Man purports to love her based on the intimate knowledge of her interiority, a subject he has, in fact, entirely ignored. The dual audiences may appreciate the dramatic irony of his line—of course, her “core” is his Bride-to-Be—but only Parks’s audience can see the painful further twist of the spectacle-within-the-spectacle, which replicates the early stages of The Doctor’s desire to conquer/own Venus’ exotic, novel body right down to the gift of the red heart box of chocolates, as well as the women’s unrequited desire for the deeper emotional intimacy that the gift represents. Because dramatic irony relies on the audience’s privileged access to information and the ability to accurately read exteriors based on this interior knowledge, the device exists in tension with intimacy. Positioning the external audience as the subject who knows what the internal character/object does not, *Venus* stages the reverse of loving intimacy built on self-disclosure between two subjects. Instead, the play offers dramatic irony as a troubling equivalent of “intimacy”—the knowing of something seemingly interior (that the Bride-to-Be

plays the Venus), that in fact is only the disconcerting *mise en abyme* of infinite role-play. Through her layered spectacles, Parks thus illuminates the problem of love and emotional intimacy in the theatrical construct, in which relationships are hierarchical, identities are performances, transmission is incomplete, and intimacies are fantasies. Fittingly, the play-within-the-play ends with a "Love Tableau," another artistic form in which all that can be rendered are the empty signifiers of love and desire. As the curtain falls, The Docteur applauds this painful performance of realized male sexual desire and frustrated emotional intimacy. With an added twist of irony (for those who recognize it as such), Parks's own audience will face the same fate in a matter of minutes, as the other curtain descends following "A Scene of Love" (162).

As Parks writes, "Theatre is the place which best allows me to figure out how the world works," and indeed her sharp critique of love, desire, and intimacy resonates beyond the theater's fourth wall (*The America Play* 4). The play's closing tableau features Venus and a crowd of spectators. "Kiss me," she repeats, embodying the expression of desire for intimate physical contact with her audience (162). And yet, like the emotional intimacy Venus seems to seek within the play, the connection cannot occur. Intoned through and in tension with dramatic irony, her interiority can only be the audience's own construct and hence a projection of affect. *Venus* and Venus, the ideoaffective resonator, thus reverberate with the audience's own desire: to engage not just as objects in passing or in a subject-object gaze without interiority, but in a mutual subjectivity that is the never-quite-satisfied desire and inherently incomplete intimacy that we call love.

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