



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## ECHOES IN THE BONE: NELISIWE XABA'S *SAKHOZI SAYS "NON" TO THE VENUS* AND THE CAPTURE OF PERFORMANCE'S IMMATERIAL REMAINS

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Does the captive's dance allay grief or articulate the fraught, compromised, and impossible character of agency? Or does it exemplify the use of the body as an instrument against itself?

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997, 22)

There is a vexed icon whose re-production in contemporary performance, visual culture, and theory eclipses the subject position buried beneath the sign. We call her by another name. The coded pseudonym we ascribe to this sign coheres through a matrix of infinite distortions, effacements, and mutilations (psychic, somatic, and otherwise), which unfolded over time, and have been relegated to the past, even as they flourish in the present. "The Hottentot Venus"—an alias of dishonor—bears overdetermined resemblance to its referent, Sara "Saartjie" Baartman, even as Baartman and all those presumed-to-be Black women endure the violence of alignment with this iconography (see Jackson 2018, 3; Spillers [1987] 2003, 203). To state the matter with minimal opacity, the moniker "Hottentot Venus" *dis*-names South African indigenous woman Sara Baartman (1790–1815). In Afrikaans, the diminutive "-tjie" in "Saartjie" can be deployed as a term of endearment or affection towards a younger person. But in the case of Baartman, and in its nineteenth-century usage, this diminutive serves an infantilizing function to belittle and cut someone down to size, marking one as an inferior and a slave (see Strother 1999, 48; Vasquez 2013, 6). I would proceed to inquire whether attempts to either circumvent this nomenclative annihilation or reclaim it as (subversive) monstrous *potential* would amount to the same

inescapable gesture. As Fred Moten has asked in his work on the cut/rupture of Black performance, does the “illusory” repression of this “scene of objection” (the scene of diminutive effacement in our inquiry) occasion an unavoidable return to or restoration of the scene, since reference to it, even if to announce a “critical suppression,” inescapably re(-)presents it (Moten 2003, 1–6)? The surface of what we know about Baartman’s life is that she was transported from South Africa, displayed, and coerced to perform as an ethnographic curiosity in England and France. In death, her body was dissected for science and some of her physical remains were exhibited in jars for public consumption at the Muséum des Sciences Naturelles d’Angers, and later transferred to the Musée de l’Homme in Paris in the 1970s. In the late 1990s, the South African government and its president Nelson Mandela facilitated the repatriation and burial of Baartman’s remains in Vergaderingskop, a hill overlooking the Gamtoos Valley in the Eastern Cape, South Africa in 2002. The remains were buried in a gated but relatively unremarkable (which is to say un-/anti-monumental) grave consisting of a modest and flat pile of stones and cement. Dignitaries attended the burial ceremony. Indigenous Griqua rituals were performed to lay the remains to rest, and Nelson Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, delivered a speech.<sup>1</sup>

Despite indigenous African ritual’s promise to facilitate closure, Baartman, “the Hottentot Venus” still has not found rest. She is incessantly conjured up in theory and aesthetics, for a number of purposes ranging from evidence, reparation, catharsis, absolution, and redemption. To varying degrees, “The Hottentot Venus” functions as an “afrotrope” in the work of African and African-diaspora artists such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Mawande ka Zenzile, Tracey Rose, Lyle Ashton Harris and Renee Cox, Kara Walker, Wangechi Mutu, Shoshanna Weinberger, and others.<sup>2</sup> Using figural and/or non-representational depictions, they put forth critiques related to picturing the voided personality concealed beneath the repeating icon.<sup>3</sup> In addition to “the Venus” icon appearing in popular culture, there exists a body of work in performance and film created by non-Black (particularly white) artists, where the icon serves several rhetorical, pedagogical, and reparative functions. When mobilized in this manner, the fragments of the icon generate what Black critical theorist Selamawit Terrefe identifies as the simultaneous “muteness and ideological purchase of the Black female imago” (Terrefe 2018, 127). As sociologist Zine Magubane has shown, “the Hottentot Venus” has been theorized to exhaustion in academic articles, books, anthologies, and lectures (Magubane 2001). All these re-productions revisit (and oftentimes re-perform) the many scenes that en-/ungendered this particular African *life* to a status of malleable “marked woman,” a designation that, as Hortense Spillers has observed about the transatlantic slave, bears “markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (Spillers [1987] 2003, 203). If there is no easy way of stripping down the layers of “attenuated meanings” (Ibid.) embedded in this coded nomenclature, what can be said that has not already been rehearsed about “the Venus”? What observations can be made, and which lessons can be learned from turning to those Black artistic practices which attempt this act of stripping down overdetermined meanings ascribed to “the Black woman”? Which (un)intended rhetorical and aesthetic devices unflinchingly reveal what cannot and should not be recuperated in Baartman’s and Black people’s status of ontological/existential negation? What are the limits of performance for the Black?

South African choreographer and performance artist Nelisiwe Xaba's performance contemplations on "the Venus" are an exemplary attempt at "stripping down the layers of attenuated meanings" (Ibid.) associated with "the Venus Hottentot". Xaba's approach involves a stripped down ('minimalist') performance language that draws attention to the limits of figural articulation, as well as the critical stakes of (not) representing the *void*. My attention to Xaba's work aims to situate the practice of "tending-toward blackness" in Black artmaking, which refers to leaning into methods of moving, visualizing, or discussing Black captive personality that eschew problematic representational modes that remain in denial of blackness's suspended status between objecthood and personhood (see Copeland 2013, 143). Instead of monumentalizing "Venus" and incorporating her as a denied but proper Subject of history, Xaba's "Venus" performances draw attention to the Black female body's degraded and absented labor as modern culture's maternal/material inheritance (Moten 2003). (Black) physical remains, as Coco Fusco (1994) argued, endowed modern art/performance with its conceptual and formal aesthetic features, and as Zamansele Nsele echoes, "to rejuvenate modern art, a common ritual for European artists was to visit ethnographic museums, where they would spend time scrutinizing artefacts from imperialistic plunder" (Nsele 2016, 97). Our modern and postmodern aesthetic categories, tools of scientific knowledge, theories of aesthetic judgment, and modalities of curating hierarchies of difference are unimaginable without the Black (female) body as the "principal point of passage" (Spillers [1984] 2003, 155) whose labors continue to be accumulated by and disavowed within those categories.

Xaba's dance work entitled *Sakhozi Says "Non" to the Venus* (2010) hones in on the limits of restitution and elaborates upon the plasticity (*pace* Jackson 2020) of Black corporeal, archival, and performance remains. I draw attention to contemporary tendencies in art institutions where African performers are commissioned to labor for the rehabilitation of Western colonial guilt and white psychic redemption under the guise of "decolonizing the museum." I specifically consider what the dissection and institutional ownership of Sara Baartman's remains yielded for French culture, Western science and aesthetics, and collective white psychic life. I argue that while European institutions are beginning to consider repatriating material objects accumulated during colonialism, the new mode of salvaging ownership of African things invites African artists to act as "surrogates" for those remains/materials that are being repatriated (see Roach 1996). Staged performances, for the museum, perform the same functions as those repatriated materials. I ask: what do these performative engagements with the colonial archive enact for Africans and African-derived persons? Do they usher in symbolic reparations, "perhaps the only kind we will ever receive?" (Hartman 2008, 4). In performing all the "Venuses" again and again, to what degree are African performers relegated back to their colonial a/object status? I posit that these African performances in the West (*Sakhozi Says "Non"* included), no matter how critical or self-aware, are not only received in a manner that buttresses enduring (pre-)Enlightenment racialized modes of looking/feeling/knowing, but also serve a liberal function of rehabilitating the white psyche. *Sakhozi Says "Non"* approaches both issues by invoking the contemporary Black African domestic servant's plasticized and cyborg subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, the performance reveals connections between contemporary capitalist accumulation and Black women's transnational labor.

## Performance's Immaterial Remains

Remains are generally understood as material things that can be experienced mainly through touch or visual observation. Visual Studies scholars such as David Marriott (2000) and Leigh Raiford (2003) have expanded upon the economic and libidinal currency of the remains of brutalized Black *bodies*. The currency of these remains is not only predicated upon their "aesthetic value," but also as possessions, things to be gazed upon, and commodities given up for haptic engagement by non-Blacks. The remains, as surrogate objects, undergo the same violence by circulating as commodities sold in a different marketplace, as well as objects gratifying their owners' libidinal phantasies. Black bodily remains (hair, tissue, cells, bones, limbs, mugshots, photographs of their final moments as breath leaves their bodies, etc.) circulate between individuals as well as institutions such as museums, medical research centers, galleries, and libraries. I focus on dance performance to present a broader understanding of what counts as remains in performance theory and archival studies. What does it mean to think of performance, in its ephemerality as (leaving) remains or performance remains? Can performance direct our attention to what bones (the archive) cannot tell us, as well as to performance's own limitations linked to its investments in narrative closure and its hypervaluation and recuperation of the Enlightenment subject's attributes such as agency and will?

I locate non-physical traces of performance, those degraded "immaterial remains" (see Kalibani 2021; Phelan 1993; Jenny Sharpe 2020) that linger during or beyond the moment of performance. José Muñoz calls these "ephemera," defined as "things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. [...] This involves structures of feelings, as they are material without necessarily being "solid" (Muñoz 1996, 10). For Rebecca Schneider, this residue includes "orature, storytelling, visitation, improvisation, or embodied ritual practice as *history*" (Schneider 2011, 100). African aesthetic theorists such as Pitika Ntuli (1988) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2010) draw upon and expand Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu's notion of orature as going beyond the fusion of art forms or the destabilization of the bifurcation between orality and literature sustained in the concept "oral literature." These theorists conceptualize orature as encompassing performance/immaterial evidence. For them, orature undermines systems of valuation that create hierarchies between thought and practice, the artistic and the political, spirituality and materiality, as well as nature or nurture and the supernatural. These ephemeral ontoepistememes have long been repudiated or discredited as antithetical to rigor, as rigor is "owned, made, and deployed through institutional ideology" (Muñoz 1996, 7).

According to these performance theorists, serious engagement with this immaterial archive, then, requires a refusal of the hegemonic conventions and rubrics of defining rigor. It requires a deliberate circumvention of the "academy's officiating structures" (Ibid., 6). Drawing upon Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, Schneider notes how "the privileging of site-able remains in the archive is linked, as is the [Greek] root of the word archive, to the prerogatives of the archon, the head of state [...] the archon's *house* and, by extension, the architecture of a social memory linked to the law" (Schneider 2011, 99). The archon's internment of immaterial modes of evidence is put in service to endow official forms of documentation their superiorized evidentiary integrity. Rather

than acquiescing to the terms of those officiating structures, these immaterial archives gain clarity by leaning into unreliability and elusiveness and asserting those properties as modes of producing *history*. In this view, performance's fleeting status encourages it to evade the veneration of the traditional archive's exclusive evidentiary gravitas. In performance, the archive's unreliability, taken as a given, is open to interpretation and other modes of fabulation that double down on unreliability instead of amending it with an authorial vision/version of the truth. It is less a process of strict memorialization than an intentional process of selective layering and substitution. This is the simultaneous enactment of memory and forgetting, a narration of history through performance. Joseph Roach, drawing from Jamaican dramatist Dennis Scott, refers to this strategy as "echoes in the bone," which encompasses raising the spirits of the dead to "empower the living through the performance of memory" (Roach 1996, 34). In this argument, conjuring the dead/spirits becomes as effective and (un)reliable a tool of performing memory as the solid archive's narration of History.

Peggy Phelan made an insightful observation about performance (theory) as "the attempt to value that which is nonreproductive, nonmetaphorical [...], to learn the value of what cannot be reproduced or seen (again)" (Phelan 1993, 152). She and other performance theorists such as André Lepecki find in disappearance a radical anti-capitalist and anti-capture attribute of these non-reproductive immaterial remains. Schneider's response to Phelan challenges the latter's tethering of the immaterial to disappearance or nonreproducibility (Schneider 2011, 91). In this way, she follows Moten's astute characterization of Black performance's (non)ontology and its mode of production as "the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance," as simultaneous forgetting and *invention* (Moten 2003, 5). If it is true that performance remains, what do we make of these remains when they are subsumed in the house of culture? My argument, rather than reiterating the storied debates about the ontology of performance as (either) disappearing and/or remaining, maintains that the machinations of antiblack capitalism co-opt all sides of the debate. That is, while those non-reproductive and immaterial aspects of performance may have provided a way out of capture, it is precisely that refusal that becomes attractive for institutional accumulation and co-optation. Both the non-reproductive and reproductive accounts of performance's ontology are susceptible to capture. As I show in the Musée du Quai Branly's invitation to Nelisiwe Xaba to create a performance about Sara Baartman, valuing that which is nonreproductive is exactly how art museums absorb performance's purported ontological refusal and employ it as labor for the museum's endowment.

In the prescriptive ending of Phelan's essay directed at "museums whose collections include objects taken/purchased/obtained from cultures who are now asking (and expecting) their return" (Phelan 1993, 166), Phelan rejects a logic of preservation as that which should catalyze the museum's repatriation of objects. However, it is precisely this logic of preservation that has prevailed in the repatriation process, not in the way she critiqued, but, rather, the preservation of immaterial remains in the form of performances brought in as substitutes replacing repatriated objects. These officiating structures have absorbed the radical potential that may have lied in ephemeral proof. They have arrested and domesticated the very modalities that critique the museum for self-refurbishment and durability in capital. The argument I am making here is that

institution-facing critique is the raw material ready to be repurposed to endow the institution's fruition. Every critique of the museum gets co-opted as an improvement manual for the museum and other officiating structures. If the ontology of performance is defined by its resistance of easy capture (see *Ibid.*, Lepecki 2007) then the museum's domestication of performance becomes a way of capturing that resistance. Black performance, as Fumi Okiji asserts, cannot help but be critical (Okiji 2018), and it is constrained to do so within institutional parameters in ways that fortify the institutional structure and its foundation. Museums ultimately co-opt, restrain, manage, and commodify Black fugitivity and Black critique.

### Redemption in Creative and Academic Works about Baartman

The general impulse in artistic representation has been to visually approximate Sara Baartman's anatomy by abstractly re-producing "the Venus" as anatomically freakish. In 2015, at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown (Makhanda), director Sylvaine Strike presented a performance titled *CARGO: Precious* in collaboration with producer Georgina Thompson, choreographer P.J. Sabbagha, musician Concord Nkabinde, and the Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative's Nosiphiwo Samente danced the role of Baartman alongside a cast of male characters, most of whom presented as Black. The aim was "to explore the untold part of Saartjie's extraordinary story, especially the journey between the two continents of Africa and Europe" (Fortune Cookie Theatre Company 2018). In an interview, Thompson posits, "so basically the story is a fantasy. It reflects on Saartjie Baartman and what she might have gone through on that trip from South Africa to Europe" (Africa Is a Country 2014). Thompson's statement about *CARGO: Precious*' intention to "fantasize" about what Baartman "might have gone through" (*Ibid.*) relies on an underlying assumption about empathy among a presumed community of women that recurs in narratives by white feminist artists. A few years prior, choreographer Robyn Orlin also worked with a cast of Black women to produce a piece titled ... *have you hugged, kissed and respected your brown Venus today?* which premiered at the Grand Theatre of Luxembourg on November 16, 2011. The intention was to expose the "scandal" of Baartman which, as Orlin wrote in the synopsis, was not known to most Europeans. Orlin also provocatively used an image from Candice Breitz's *Rainbow Series* (1996) for publicity, artworks that deploy a technique of pasting and suppressing image cut-outs of white woman's faces upon images of Black women dressed in traditional Ndebele garb. The suppressed image recalls ethnographic portraiture exemplified by figurations of Africans in *their natural habitat* circulated around the world in the form of postcards. One of the cut-outs is what appears to be a white woman figure originally figured in Early Renaissance Italian painter Sandro Botticelli's painting titled *The Birth of Venus*. Breitz's gesture in the collage, and by extension Orlin's, attempts to collapse all women under the brush of relational universal femininity. While the formal assembly of these fragments and contexts in her collages is remarkable for its dense staging of "the Venus" trope's multiple signifying functions in art and aesthetics, it also gestures toward acts of eclipsing and symbolic mutilation through cut-and-paste techniques. It arrives at a parasitic substitution and problematic analogizing that repeats in contemporary representations of Baartman. While these pieces were received warmly due to their innovative staging and edgy fine art techniques, many questions linger concerning their intentions in staging "Venus" as a mode of galvanizing

simultaneous memory and absencing, proving, as Athinangamso Nkopo asserts, that Black women “are called into solidarity coalitions in order to vivify the action and clarify the urgency of cause; they are less agents and more fodder, prop and evidence of violence” (Nkopo 2022, 99). In that vein, white-authored performances about Baartman have demonstrated the pitfalls of the analogizing gestures of allyship.

Zine Magubane advances a critique of Baartman’s “theoretical fetishization” (Magubane 2001, 818). This “theoretical odyssey” (Ibid., 831) moves from using Baartman’s biological features as evidence to critique her capture, to positioning her as an antithesis of European aesthetic standards, and some arguments are geared towards proving the African as an essential non-voluntary foil for European juridico-politico-philosophical reflection about freedom, consent, rights to property etc. In her supremely optimistic reading of Willie Bester’s *Sarah Baartman* sculpture, Katherine McKittrick notes “the creatively scientific possibilities with which Sarah Baartman has posthumously provided us” (McKittrick 2010, 114) and venerates Bester’s act of “put[ting] Baartman back together” (Ibid., 126). She treks an alternative path from ones that understand Baartman as scientifically condemned. Creative works about Baartman, for McKittrick, enhance what she calls “the promise of science” (Ibid., 125), which purportedly “bring[s] forth a less adversarial and less oppositional relationship with science” (Ibid., 123). She insists that it is not an effort to deny the violence inflicted upon Baartman but a different way of reading the violence through “a framework that honours a commensurately scientific and creative space” (Ibid.). This framework of reading colonial violence (informed by a particular interpretation of theorist Sylvia Wynter) reserves curiosity for what science can do *through* Baartman as well as what Baartman does *for* both creative works and science. Silence ensues, however, when we consider how Baartman’s endowment of scientific reflection may recapitulate rather than eschew the violence. McKittrick calls for a “peer[ing]outside” of the violence against Baartman that endows science and that we consider instead how creative works about Baartman “intervene in, and nourish, our understandings of science” (Ibid., 114). In other words, Baartman and creative works about Baartman must continue to labor as such labor demonstrates the alternate possibilities of science. In this formulation, Baartman must labor yet again, differently, and pedagogically, but labor nonetheless, for scientific reflection and refurbishment. This approach requires the highlighting of science’s potential by compelling Baartman to remain a poetico-theoretical *middle passage* bridging the gulf imposed between science and art.

Refusing to confront Baartman’s position in abyssal negation, scholars inject power/agency where it was structurally denied. McKittrick’s recuperative reading above finds an interlocutor in Mbongeni Mtshali’s engagement with Nelisiwe Xaba’s “Venus” diptych. For Mtshali, reading Xaba’s “Venus” dance works for “humor and pleasure” may allow us to “envision a more capacious and resistant vision of black women’s historical power and agency” (Mtshali 2020, 36). Here, there is a positivist revision of historical archival voids enabled by structural violence, turning them into narratives of capacity and pleasure. This invention of agency or pleasure in the archival tomb also anchors Pumla Gqola’s discussion of Baartman. The writers whose work Gqola analyzes in relation to Baartman “move beyond writing back to older traditions. Instead, uncover and discover the textures of crafting “epicentres of our agency”, the vast possibilities available to imagining historic

subjects as human without focusing on their bodies as their sole point of reference" (Gqola 2012, 102). The emphasis on agency here is geared towards participation in the humanist soirée despite being uninvited and unwelcome. The goal is to fashion a historic subject out of the historically condemned, as opposed to blowing the lid off history. This restless, but also exhausted, drive to avoid confronting the ambivalences and irreparable negations of history also moves in the pages of Jennifer Nash's critique of "archives of pain." Reading Renee Cox's self-portrait titled *Hot-En-Tot*, an artwork referring to Baartman, Nash takes issue with "the Black feminist theoretical archive's "deep investment" [...] in the Black female body's woundedness which comes at the expense of capturing the possibilities of Black women's pleasure" (Nash 2014, 31). Her careful effort to create an alternative archive of Black women's pleasure, which she admits is fraught with contradictions, comes close to reinforcing the historical revisionism and exculpation she aptly critiques. Coming from a slightly different angle, Hershini Bhana Young takes issue with "the historical and present-day limits of liberal, capitalist notions of individual agency" (Young 2017, 1). Her notion of "illegible will" refrains from locating "will" in legible individual agency but reads Baartman's bodily gestures "to conjure the ghostly possibilities of her agency within the close confines of free and unfree labor" (Ibid., 31). In this instance, even as agency is irreducible to the individual, it remains a ghostly possibility. That is, the scholar must strain (or limit) the imagination by alchemizing the terror of impossibility into ghostly possibility.

The transubstantiation efforts chronicled above arrive too hastily at the soothing counternarratives of pleasure and agency. I concur with Saidiya Hartman's argument that such mobilizations of the imagination as an instrument of closure are too impatient to "respect what we cannot know" in the archive (Hartman 2008, 3). The only certainty about Venus we can have, according to Hartman, is that she will remain uncontainable, elusive, and impossible to suture to perfect closure (Ibid., 6). This sentiment is echoed by Nelisiwe Xaba's statement on the first piece of the "Venus" diptych where she draws attention to "the impossible task of understanding or accessing the thoughts of the dead [...] the rigidity of the archive open[ing] itself up to the interpretations of the living" (Xaba 2013, 169). In the wake of Christina Sharpe's critique of redemption in *Monstrous Intimacies* (the tendency to assuage shame as the interminable inheritance), I wonder why neutralizing readings that recuperate pleasure, humanism, possibility, and agency "despite" colonial violence persist as necessity? Frank B. Wilderson (in conversation with Jaye Austin Williams) also critiques compulsory redemption by stating, "So here you are [...] as a black person, liv[ing] a life for which there is no redemption. And yet you are forced to *make* redemption in everything you do; to show them a world unlike your own—to spare them the "indignity" of having to encounter you" (Wilderson and Williams 2016, n.p.). My own itinerary follows these thinkers' rejection of a redeeming (counter-)narrative about/for Baartman, which is echoed by Nelisiwe Xaba's dance work. Redemption is a compromised political strategy because in its latent or overt religious articulation, it "replaces a real reckoning with history (state brutality, colonialism, slavery, apartheid, ethnocentrism, truth and reconciliation) and its consequences with a symbolic sacrifice; it demands that some atrocities remain unspoken and unspeakable" (Sharpe 2010, 73). The redemptive posture, in attempting to move beyond and peer outside of murderous colonial violence, subdues Black suffering and bolsters agency and pleasure as anachronistic replacements. Redemption hypervaluates the "evidence" of pleasure in domination (as if to say

“domination is not that bad” if it licenses slivers of pleasure) while remaining strategically silent about the brutal scene’s endowment of the economy of pleasure. The Black suffers *in* pleasure. Both Black wounding and pleasure endow the Other’s pleasure. Pleasure is neither antiblack violence’s antidote nor its sliver of respite in the pits of suffering. There is not yet a peering outside of the violent *scene of Baartman’s subjection*, despite attempts to bracket it for more heroic and restorative narratives. As Yvette Abrahams, writing about Baartman, has argued, it remains crucial to emphasize the ongoing nature of the brutality since, “nowadays the whip may be less physical and more mental” (Abrahams 1997, 35).

### Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus

*Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus* is a 25-minute-long performance in collaboration with other artists. It was originally commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in 2009. The museum, named after France’s former head of state, which houses more than 1,000,000 art objects and artefacts from Africa, the Americas, and Asia accumulated during colonial conquest, mission, and trade. They approached Nelisiwe Xaba and other artists to each produce a performance as part of *Body in Motion*, the last program of the museum’s season dedicated to the body (Verdon 2008). In my writing about the piece, I demonstrate how it has become customary for European and North American museums that house colonial collections to excavate those collections and exhibit them anew with an intended critical and self-reflexive approach. These museums and other arts/cultural institutions commission contemporary artists to critically engage with their colonial archival materials and pose questions about a range of topics such as memory, reparation, repatriation, and reconciliation etc. (see Copeland 2013, 25–64). However, these invitations to decolonize museum collections are drafted against the contemporary African artist’s interests and towards European rehabilitation.

Originally titled *After all home is not rosy*, the piece’s title changed during the creation process as a result of France’s former minister of Interior, Overseas, and Territorial collectivities, Brice Hortefeux, and former President Nicolas Sarkozy’s harsh anti-immigration laws. In 2007, Sarkozy succeeded Jacques Chirac as President of France. Prior to the presidency, he served as Minister of Interior in Chirac’s administration. As a minister in 2003, he oversaw an exponential increase in immigrant deportations and a reduction in the number of asylum-seekers (see Marthaler 2008, 387). Upon becoming president, he inaugurated a Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development. The title *Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus* is a reference to President Sarkozy saying no to (African) migrants, and Xaba spells his last name in isiZulu as “Sakhozi.” *Sakhozi Says “Non”* is a meditation on the journeys of ordinary African women who are forced to travel to Europe in pursuit of work. Xaba began meditating on the optimism of African migrants who leave their homes, some forced to seek asylum due to war or other socio-political upheaval and destabilizations (often enforced by Western imperialism), who arrive in France and suffer because of antiblack racism and xenophobia. Most of these Africans end up in domestic servitude positions like cleaning, cooking, and taking care of European children and senior citizens. She considered African migrant laborers’ (and her own) difficulties in attaining immigration documents, as well as

their constant subjection to strict border scrutiny at European ports of entry. She also connected Baartman's experience and the plight of contemporary African cultural workers who are expected to appease the variant modes of exotic voyeurism by European audiences.

In *Sakhozi Says "Non" to the Venus* the audience walks in while Nelisiwe Xaba forms a rectangular enclosure on the floor by lining up white paper cut-outs shaped like humerus bones. In the beginning, Xaba wears a pair of black heels, a black fishnet body suit, a sleeveless zip-up coat with spikes, and a black pleated skirt. The black pleated skirt resembles *isidwaba* (a leather pleated skirt traditionally worn by married Zulu women) and she carries a white travel hat box. She walks around within the rectangle with wandering eyes, a seeming sense of wonder, curiosity, and intrigue—like a traveler arriving in an unfamiliar foreign place, uncertain about how she is going to be received. She looks up and down, side to side, places the bag on the floor, and folds out the white inner lining of the skirt she is wearing. Thereafter, she kneels and gnaws one of the life-size paper bones before lying on one side, resting on the right hip, bone in mouth, while her eyeballs move in an automated staccato pace from side to side. There is a sound of dogs barking as she crawls across the enclosure in a manner that resembles a canine. At a later stage in the piece, she disrobes and wears a short tassel skirt. She also puts on a maid's outfit—a white apron with images of a passport's visa pages printed on it. As she removes the spikes on her vest in mechanical arm motion, the face remains expressionless. The face's passive affective grammar counteracts the vitality of the rest of the body. This is a break of flow between what the lower part of the body is expressing and the face's indifference to expressivity. She then removes the vest to reveal a black tight-fitting fishnet body suit while executing spinal undulations, a recognizable movement trope in African diasporic theatrical dance works by artists such as Vincent Mantsoe, Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora, and Germaine Acogny. These movements tropes are attached to African folklore and ritual and have circulated beyond that realm and entered the various venues of Black modern and popular culture. Their repetition over time has granted them a reputation where they are expected to appear in African-derived dance.

The soundtrack has switched to a string composition, which is followed by a gospel song, as she lays out what appears to be white cloth with a visa passport page printed on it. She also pulls out a pillowcase and white powder, which she sprinkles all over the white cloth, before rubbing the powder on her skin, imprinting three vertical lines from her forehead down to her chin, donning these white lines as a kind of white mask. When she sprinkles the white powder, it falls lightly and levitates in front of her face, threatening to overshadow her dark face. A recording of Dorothy Masuka singing "Kulomhlaba Siyahlupheka, Abamnyama basosizini," which translates to "In this world we are suffering. Black people are draped in sorrow" plays in the background. There is emphasis on references to other Black women artists who had to travel and work in Paris, such as Sara Baartman, Nina Simone, and Josephine Baker. Nina Simone's recording of *I Put a Spell on You*, is included in the piece, and Xaba re-performs iconic Josephine Baker movements, particularly the wide smile and virtuosic gesture of crossing eyes, which has become one of the prime signifiers for recognizing Baker's *danse sauvage* performances in Paris. This is one of the primary moments where she makes obvious connections to Baker, drawing on familiar iconic gestures and tropes from Baker's performances in France. Xaba's analogizing gesture with antecedent performances

by Simone and Baker risks blurring the particularities of their historical conditions of emergence/un-making. The transatlantic slave trade cuts Simone and Baker in particular and enduring ways that foreclose any claims to sovereignty and citizenship in the anti-Black and imperialist USA, forcing them to turn to equally anti-Black and imperialist France because of its meagre promises for Black (American) artists to thrive within that negrophilic economy. Xaba, as a South African Black woman, cannot lay direct claim to that history while colonialism, slavery, and apartheid cut Black South Africans in entangled and ever-lasting ways. The decision to conflate her condition with that of Baartman's, Baker's, and Simone's, is revelatory insofar as it draws attention to the crisis of the amalgamation of will and coercion such that they become indistinguishable instruments for the Black's effacement. In other words, Xaba's decision to conflate these performers occurs with an awareness of each performer's geo-historical specificity, while creating awareness about a structure that requires Black female subjectivity to remain ambiguously positioned in relation to the Human, irrespective of the name-place from which they emanate.

Moving away from a desire for neat representation or attempts at endowing the void of Black subjectivity with wholeness, Xaba turns to stripped down or abstract minimalist movement that straddles the space between the figural and the non-representational. Mundane movements such as cleaning, crawling, swinging a suitcase, and blinking her eyes form part of the piece's central movement vocabulary. These movements, sometimes executed with a deadpan facial expression while facing the audience, are sometimes juxtaposed with suspended elongated movements and poses. The general movement vocabulary is comprised of small quotidian movements as well as contrasting extended limbs in a manner that is consistent with ballet and modern/contemporary dance forms. A video of an eye is projected on the floor, inside the rectangle, at times, and this corresponds with the piece's investigation of voyeurism. As she kneels and crawls on the floor, she balances a large-sized animal bone between her teeth, blinking and crossing her eyes.<sup>5</sup> The soundscape is cacophonous, string instruments superimposed over sounds of barking dogs. The movement choices in *Sakhozi Says "Non" to the Venus* confront a problem that haunts Black choreographers in the global contemporary dance scene; namely, the primitivist interpretations of their work, even as they produce highly complex conceptual dance innovations. As Xaba has stated, her work cannot escape this reception, as the formal interventions of her work described above are sometimes ignored (see Ramalapa and Xaba 2012, n.p.). This is also the norm for African and African Diasporic performances in the West, which are often publicized, consumed, and reviewed as highly energetic, pulse-y, sexy etc., thereby erasing their formal modernist/contemporary interventions. When African choreographers refrain from producing a joyful affective register and exuberant kinetic quality (as is evident in Xaba's practice), critics and scholars dismiss their work as derivative and mimetic of European/North American conceptual dance originals. African dancers are often construed as natural performers, or natural entertainers when they foreground Africanist elements, and this erases the labor of complicating and intervening on those forms deemed traditional or indigenous.

Xaba also encompasses elements of Zulu dancing, especially *ukusina*, a movement encompassing high kicks typically performed with an articulate spine (and in the French context, this movement resonates stylistically with the can-can). By contrast, her execution of the Zulu dance leg extensions

is performed with a vertical spine and rigid torso. She performs these aspects of Zulu dancing without the “exuberance” and “high energy” typically associated with these dances. In an artist statement she avers, “In slowing down these movements—in performing them out of context—I also look at the exotic expectation of the black body” (Sichel 2009, n.p.). She refrains from surrendering to these expectations, but she is aware of the exotic expectations which impose those tropes even if they are not present. The slowing down and out-of-context presentation of traditional Zulu dance, for example, are neither a total embrace nor a rejection of European exotic expectations. This is a position of neither resistance nor resignation/giving up, but the position often taken by the “indifferent native” (Macharia 2016, 188). In the performance, Xaba’s position is an inevitable one, she “cannot not perform” the position of the native (informant) (Ibid.).

In the small rectangular performance space, the interspersions of post-modern/contemporary dance and traditional Zulu dance is less a seamless syncretism characteristic of some Afro-fusion dance; rather, the interspersions amplifies the entanglements and irreconcilable dissonances between the forms. Xaba also demonstrates technical proficiency in ballet. This technical proficiency is not carried out to exalt (her own practice through) classical ballet. Her eclectic sampling of techniques is not about elevating (herself through) technique.<sup>6</sup> Xaba’s anti-colonial stance is enacted through this deliberate detachment from a demonstration of technical prowess in Modern dance and Ballet as the primary intention of the performance. The treatment of these dance forms in *Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus* is not reducible to a reaction and response to Europe (European funding notwithstanding). The slowing down of the Zulu dance is a process of enacting heresy on Zulu tradition as well, disrupting those elements deemed sacred within it.<sup>7</sup> It also pays homage to Zulu dance as a complex knowledge system and practice transmitted from dancing body to dancing body across multi-directional generations. Dissociating the dance from its usual context and familiar affective state creates a space for an alternative deciphering protocol, one that foregrounds indeterminacy. This disruption is a process of repetition with revision, invention, and erasure.

The breaking of line and flow in the movement vocabulary of *Sakhozi Says “Non”* goes beyond a critical skewing of the straight line in a similar fashion championed by white Euro-American (post-)modern dance “pioneers.” Instead, it demonstrates the complexities of line itself. It directs attention to the Black (dancing) body as the paradigmatically non-linear, slant, and out-of-line antithesis to form, which whiteness has continuously defined itself against, while paradoxically appropriating it (see Gottschild 2003). For this reason, there is no precolonial state of purity prior to entanglement. This impurity is often only read at the level of culture, but it is an ontological question for the Black. Frantz Fanon’s explanation arrives more precisely at this point when he states, “In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people, there is an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 89). That impurity is not merely a cultural crisis for the Black that can be easily remedied through claims to cultural mixing or the preservation of cultural origins. For the Black, as Fanon posits, impurity points to the Black’s ontological negation, or a condemned status where the Black exists as “not.” Xaba traces that negation through her own dancing body, as well as Baartman’s encounter with discourses of science, aesthetics, philosophy, and medicine which produced her as the “Hottentot Venus.” These discourses concocted the idea

of the Black female body as “paradigmatically dis-aesthetic or a monstrous irregularity” (Jackson 2018, 620). This idea also describes an ontological incapacity for elevated sensation. If Joseph Roach defines the eighteenth-century meaning of “aesthetic” as “the vitality and sensuous presence of material forms” (Roach 1996, xiii), then to be condemned as paradigmatically dis-aesthetic, for the Black woman in this *Weltanschauung*, is to inhabit a *deform* or an ontological impurity. It is to be devoid, *a priori*, of the capacity for vitality and sensuous presence. It marks the Black (female) body’s incapacity for and indispensability to Enlightenment sublimity.

### Echoes in the Bone

There is currently a lively debate in the arts, humanities, and social sciences about the repatriation of African cultural objects back to countries from where they were transferred or from where they were plundered during the colonial period. Economist and writer Felwine Sarr and art historian Bénédicte Savoy received a commission from French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 to prepare a report that called for France to re-evaluate its policy on repatriating artefacts housed in French museums. In 2017, Macron delivered a speech in Ouagadougou announcing a five-year plan for the “temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage returned to Africa” (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 27). This is a resurgence of a restitution conversation that took place in the late 1970s which was “forgotten, or rather, successfully repressed” (Savoy 2022, 1). Macron’s campaign also includes acknowledgment of France’s active involvement in colonization, war, and genocide in the continent. However, in an Afropessimist reading, these grand gestures only seek to insert Macron into history as the true protagonist of decolonial restitution in order to create a feel-good image of a selfless and benevolent French government. The gestures are political publicity maneuvers aimed at acknowledging past catastrophes while suppressing France’s ongoing pillaging of African materials and exploitation of natural resources. This is why scholars such as Manthia Diawara respond to the restitution process as “yet another ruse created by the west to distract Africans from the true problems that they face” (quoted in Strother 2020, 928). Other critics see Macron’s move, staged with strategic dramaturgy on African soil in Ouagadougou, as a public relations ploy to deflect attention from France’s increasingly hostile immigration policies as well as the shady presence of French military troops in West Africa (Strother 2019, 5).

The Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac alone holds 70,000 of the 80,000 African artefacts currently in France. In my view, African (descended) artists are called in to perform in the West as *substitutes* for repatriated objects. These performance interventions meant to decolonize European institutions and offer Europe an opportunity to confront, reflect, and heal from their enduring colonial practices enact the opposite. Under the guise of redress and as an active re-imagining of colonial legacies, I observe that contemporary African performance is mobilized to redeem Europe’s collective psyche to a state of re-equilibrium and cathartic resolution (see Wilderson 2010). African performers are required to do the work of healing and re-dressing their own colonial dispossession. Europeans reflecting on their historical atrocities require Africans to stage again that brutality for Western consumption and pedagogy. Redemption takes the form of European institutions licensing spiritual and cleansing ritual practices from Africa (what I am

understanding as immaterial heritage) now neatly and strategically packaged as performance art. This cleanup job, or spiritual domestic servitude, is the culmination of a perverse absolutism that masquerades as (symbolic) reparation or justice. Given the representational economy's synecdochical penchant—the thirst for ones that (are rewarded to) stand for the whole—these artists' individual performances and their ideological stances are often burdened to represent the desires of the entire continent. In my view, Nelisiwe Xaba's choices in form, content, and concept reject and expose these appetites.

Despite the recent and growing debate on repatriating African artefacts, in most cases, colonial museums are still reluctant to relinquish the plundered artefacts from their possession. They either obfuscate or refuse to acknowledge colonial theft as theft. With regard to the repatriation of human remains not much has changed since 2007, when Séverine Le Guével, then head of the international relations at the Musée du Quai Branly, was asked about the museum's position on the repatriation of human remains and other artefacts. Le Guével remarked:

First, the bodies have never functioned as human remains. Secondly, they were (for the most part) given to the explorers who brought them back, not stolen or taken without permission. Plus, they're not identified. We don't know who they belong to. Thus, they've become art objects; ethnographic objects. That makes a difference. Therefore, they should be preserved like art objects and cannot be destroyed [...] And it's also important to consider all objects that contain human remains. If we were to honour the claims for everything that contain human remains, it would mean giving away the entire collection of the Musée du Quai Branly, anything that contains a bit of bone, anything that contains a skull. (Quoted from Price 2007, 5)

This paternalistic relationship to African objects (human and non-human) extends to the colonial museum's assumption about African nation states' supposed natural incapability and dependence, in need of European institutions as stewards and saving graces. This is not simply a game of economics. It raises question about the political ontology of things. The being of these artefacts is malleably defined and determined by the whims of European museum directors, despite some of their significance as sacred objects with spiritual reverence. Masks and severed human bones transmogrify to become either art or ethnographic objects when it is convenient for those things to signify as such for the museum. This is an incessant historical problem identified by philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu who posited, in the context of an exhibition of African art curated by Mary Nooter, where African objects with sacred value were exhibited as art objects, "In unison, all the objects 'chant,' as they have been orchestrated to sing, that any interpretation is permissible and acceptable because cultural representation is never an objective presentation of facts" (Nzegwu 1994, 227–229). Le Guével's statement, despite its semantic-taxonomical hair-splitting, fails to demonstrate that any serious thought has been put behind the cataloguing of "artefacts" into the different categories she mentions.

The repatriation movement's emphasis on cross-continental dialogue conceals the impossibility of such dialogue in the event of Europe's continued incapacity and unwillingness to confront what Le Guével fears as "giving away the entire collection of the Musée du Quai Branly" (Price 2007, 5).

Some French art dealers and collectors have responded to Macron's nebulous call for temporary or definitive restitution by initiating definitive restitution in their own hands without recourse to public officiating structures (Saar and Savoy 25). As commendable a gesture as that is, Le Guével's fear of letting go of the museum's collection can still be traced in recent utterances by certain other museum directors. Kwame Opoku, in response to Tristram Hunt, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, has aptly characterized this fear of disappearance as a "fiction of the troubled imagination of a Western Museum director, who dreams one night and hallucinates that he will get up and find his museum empty" (Opoku 2023, n.p.). Opoku also criticizes Hunt's prescriptions for the repatriation process to occur only through a vaguely defined and "evil" universalism as well as the circumvention (if not excision) of politics by concentrating solely on the objects themselves. This demonstrates that the very being and becoming of the European museum is constituted by the perennial possession of African objects (animate or inanimate, material or immaterial), where the violence of (dis)possession is softened by crude universalisms and the deployment of words such as preservation.

The linear movement from dispossession to re-dress in the museum's commissioning of African performances obfuscates how these performances are a form of, rather than anathema to, African dispossession. From the African artist's perspective, these performances are meant to provide symbolic reparation, to speak back to European domination, and to repatriate irreplaceable dispossession that spans beyond the theft of cultural artifacts. As Spillers notes, this void, for Africans in the New World is irreversible due to what she calls the incalculable "*theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (Spillers [1987] 2003, 206). Loss, then, is not a fitting grammar for this irreparable and unmournable void, this non-recuperable "severing of the captive body from its motive will" (Ibid.). That theft of the body is what Michele Wallace insists on discussing alongside these objects, the human bodies as cargo that circulated within the same imperial economy of pillaging, kidnapping, and destruction. She argues that "the fate of these objects was not unrelated to the fate of the human bodies also removed from Africa under less-than-ideal circumstances—some of them sold or just handed over and some of them kidnapped" (Wallace 2004, 467). As Peju Layiwola has also stated, when British soldiers invaded the empire of Benin in February 1897, not only did they pillage (sacred)objects/artefacts, but they also desecrated memorial shrines, set villages on fire, and "mow[ed] down hundreds of Benin soldiers" (Layiwola 2014, 87). This is what Sarr and Savoy refer to when they posit, "destruction and collection are the two sides of the same coin" (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 14). Their statement attests to the fact that these objects were not merely found, but Europeans murdered and enslaved African people, and destroyed villages, to accumulate the objects they chose not to destroy. Colonial violence flattened out the difference between the objects and the creators of those objects and rendered them fungible. African stolen lives (reduced to objecthood) through murder, maiming, and slavery cannot be repatriated. These are the lives that the repatriation movement has yet to fully conceptualize. Repatriation cannot repair a certain colonial irreversible theft. My focus on this theft of African people is less an anthropocentric fixation than an attempt to expose the fissures of the object-orientation logic espoused by prominent voices in the restitution debate. It drives my point home about the impossibility of restitution for the dead, as well as the contemporary museum's capture of African performance as another iteration of the theft of the body.

When engaging with the Musée du Quai Branly archive during the research phase, Xaba was struck by what she calls “the discord between the extensive documentation of her (Sara Baartman’s) body and the physicality of her being, and the absence of any idea of her mental state or thoughts during her lifetime” (Xaba 2013, 169). This discord is unsurprising, as absence and excess are typical of the archive which tells little of Black subjects, except, as Saidiya Hartman puts it, “stories that exist [that] are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses” (Hartman 2008, 2). Xaba’s recognition of the discord provides a crisis where she can either surrender to the fantasy of recovering interiority and narrative closure for “Venus,” or ask different questions about representational form, speculation, and the ends of narrative closure. The Musée du Quai Branly commission throws her in at the deep end, forcing her to confront some of the following questions: What is narrative recuperation for the “narratively condemned” (Sharpe 2016, 17). Are there underlying desires, other than those laid out on the surface, for her invitation to create a performance intervention on one of the most controversial instances of anti-Black terror? Whose rehabilitation is occasioned by this performance? In the bottomless shaft where she has been thrown, she must account for what the remains can tell us and what they have been structurally conditioned *not* to narrate. If (her) performance *remains*, as performance studies scholars have argued convincingly, then what do the remains of her performance endow to the museum? If performance remains, then, like other remains, does it enter the domain of capitalist property relations? If what remains possesses value and potential to participate in capitalist property relations, then performance as remains can also be owned, captured. This is because contemporary capitalism operates beyond the exchange of material goods (such as fossils, aesthetic objects, and bodily remains) and includes immaterial value. To put it differently, if her performance *remains*, that signals that it enters a system of value, of property relations, where aspects of it are open to being owned by the museum, in a similar way that the museum possessed Baartman’s physical remains. If the museum understands what has become performance studies’ mantra of “performance remains,” then Baartman’s repatriated physical remains can be exchanged for a different set of remains—performance remains. Decolonial performance, in this instance, is not the complete refusal it promises to be for the Black. In performing the “Venus” in perpetuity, African performers cannot help but be condemned back to their colonial a/object status, and their performances prototypes of contemporary immaterial theft.

Because some of Xaba’s research for the “Venus” diptych took place in Paris, she also meditates on Black American performer and icon Josephine Baker who gained fame by performing *danse sauvage* which encompassed primitivist tropes that have contributed majorly to Modernist aesthetics. While Baker and “The Venus Hottentot” are not collapsible, both provide a noteworthy precedent for those performers who became iconic (and relatively wealthy in some cases) for performing versions of *danse sauvage*. “The Venus Hottentot’, as African feminist Ayo Coly posits, had little control and knowledge of the intentions of her captors, or the larger ideological implications and pre-established notions that her “*les sauvages*” construction signified which preceded her arrival (Coly 2008, 259). Coly continues, “Unlike Baartman, Baker possessed the foresight into and an astute awareness of the ideological repercussions of her staging of racial difference” (Ibid.). However, Baker’s foresight neither ceased nor reduced the violence of European

structures of fantasy. Baker's subversion of the stereotype repeated as much as it subverted the fetish (see Cheng 2011, 42). Nelisiwe Xaba confirms Coly's argument about foresight, since for her in *Sakhozi Says "Non" to the Venus*, "This [is] a choice. It's not like Sara Baartman who had no choice, a contract or costume [...] My challenge is how do I use my body in a way that exhibiting it does not degrade it" (Ramalapa and Xaba, 2012, n.p.). Xaba, as a performance artist creating work 200 years after Baartman's physical death, has the foresight to tease out the continuities and breaks between Baartman's condition and contemporary conditions.

The figure of the collaborator-as-implement haunts both Baker's and Xaba's performances. What do we make of Baker performing African stereotypes, or Xaba accepting the invitation to perform at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris? The aim of these questions is not to be accusatory or disproportionately direct heat towards the implement, but to examine the concept of collaboration in its myriad and contradictory permutations. Knowingly collaborating with a museum that had liberal but essentially un-transformative politics, or willingly recycling anti-African stereotypes with the self-belief that they are being subverted are questions that ought to be brought up alongside celebratory thick description of these artist's tact and innovation. Baker became Fatou, who in the show went down a tree like a monkey (with the monkey's favorite treat, bananas around her hips). According to Françoise Verges in "BANANAS: Racism, Sex, and Capitalism," Baker was aware of critic Fernand Devoire's praise of her performance, which stated, "In the eyes of Paris, you are the virgin forest. You bring to us a savage rejuvenation" (quoted in Verges 2016, n.p.). It is worth noting that the savage rejuvenation mentioned by Devoire happened alongside the development of the Negritude Movement in Paris, which called for retentions of (strategically) essentialized notions of African rhythm, modes of philosophizing, and a revival of other visual-artistic accoutrements. Negritude was also rubbing up against the long-existent frenzy of European negrophilia, which Baker was aware of and capitalized upon. Baker's performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées also drew from the US minstrel tradition. *Sakhozi Says "Non" to the Venus*, then, cites Baker to trace a maternal/material *heritage* of avant-garde performance's ties to racial capitalism, fetishism, aesthetic judgment, and the coeval interplay of desire and disgust (see Verges 2016). Her "Venus" performances emerge out of the knowledge of and foresight about the condition and position of these Black performance predecessors in relation to capture often constru(ct)ed as entertainment. It is this foresight, I argue, that raises the stakes even more for both Baker and Xaba.

Baker's and Xaba's astute awareness of the ideological repercussions of staging racial difference raise the stakes for what their authorial conceptualizations challenge, as well as what they recapitulate. They are both inevitably entangled and complicit by virtue of intentionally citing the primal scene. When they both enter the drama of re(-)presentation, they are haunted by the figure of Baartman and structures of fetishism and fantasy attached to her, their knowing or lack thereof notwithstanding. The knowledge and foresight are not powerful enough to either suspend or stall the haunting. The staging of "self" and primitivism in "their own terms" with this knowledge of the lucrative benefits of what poet Lesego Rampokolong calls "ethnic prancing" (Oliphant 2010, 23) implicates the artists in a form of *self*-commodification that contradicts their foresight-driven subversive exercises. It becomes clear that Blacks may have no terms of their own in this (neo-)colonial order, despite their deployment of foresight as an attempt to re-fashion *scenes of*

*subjection* in their own terms. The racial stereotype stubbornly sticks to the surface, indistinguishable from the subversive or counter-hegemonic gesture (see Cheng 2011, 42). This is why in Xaba's work the Black female body is approached through a somewhat tentative/non-spectacular back-and-forth dance, toward and away from the promises and traps of figuration, legibility, and visibility. Recognizing or retroactively endowing Baartman with the gift of subjectivity assumes that subjectivation is antithetical to captivity, when subjectivation for the Black is a form of captivity. It remains unclear why Baartman's subjectivity, agency, and pleasure must be recognized in the political present. Nelisiwe Xaba's project seems less concerned with recognition or reclamation of subjectivity in this manner. Rather, the piece draws attention to the anti-Black historico-political apparatuses of the "not-yet-past Enlightenment" (Jackson 2018, 621) that calibrate(d) the coherence of subjectivity in the first place. It appears to be less concerned with re-assembling or gnawing at the scraps of a subjectivity long denied to Black people.

### Exit

The performance theory argument about performance's ephemerality/immateriality being a form of rigorous evidence has been absorbed as a how-to guide for the extraction of that evidence, the capitalist churning of the (deliberately) anti-/ante-rigorous but unreliable ephemera into a coagulated value form, arresting performance to become one of the ornaments populating what Michele Wallace calls the prison house of culture, the archival house of the head of state (e.g., Jacques Chirac). Few contortionists are as supple and adaptable as anti-Black capitalism (tied to the state). The argument that "performance saves" (Schneider 2011, 99) sets up those savings' availability as wealth, as investable capital. "Performance saves" elaborates performance's alt-archival capacities, it is an argument for performance's similarity to the logic of the archive, only now appearing as a minoritized archive endowing performance theory with its reputation of avant-gardism and radicality.

If we return to the epigraph of this essay, the captive's dance, with its complex riddles and transient refusals is also characteristic of the *self*-betraying uses of agency. What Hartman describes in the epigraph as the use of the body as an instrument against itself bespeaks a wish for a form of transcendence whose success hinges on failure or incapacity to transcend. The captive's dance is a fleeting enigma where memories of enduring battle, the perennial resistance of the object (Moten 2003), and compromised coalition meet and commiserate. It must stage (and thus re-produce) *self*-devoration while criticizing devoration as a force that conditions both its fruition and evisceration. For recognition, it must slit its own throat, so to speak, and jive compliantly to the spell-binding beat of "Shut up and dance!" It is required to "corpse" (Marriott 2016) itself by parading itself as the emblem of human vitality, something it is simultaneously defined against. It must execute its duty of misrecognizing itself in human figuration, in motion, and (over-)identify with the phantasmic shape or misshapen phantasm that it is not. It can only exist and be embraced (which is to say situate itself appropriately to be effortlessly managed) if it betrays the knowledge of its own location in the gaping mouth of social death and opt to chant a heroic tune of agency, pleasure, and will.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This brief description is paradoxically the kind of perfect summing up this essay is critiquing. Discreet acts of harm such as dissection and exhibiting constitute, but do not exhaust, the anti-black violence I am describing, which is ultimately unknowable and unrepresentable. However, the re-counting of these details is intended for the reader who is unfamiliar with Baartman. I include the incomplete summing up of Baartman's life to draw attention to how any critique of how Baartman's life is narrated also falls into the trap of relying on narration to critique narrative. This is the impasse of narrative. In this case, narration is critiqued for its unavoidable re-presentation of violence. However, the critique happens by way of re-producing the very pitfalls of narration. Ultimately, the narration of violent acts against Baartman can only scratch the surface and cannot pin down the vast gap of what we cannot know about Baartman's circumstances. For more on the dangers of re-producing the primal scene of violence through narrative, see Hartman (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson define afrotropes as "those motifs that continue to structure the afterlives of slavery—as a shorthand way of referring to the recurrent visual forms that have emerged within and become central to the formation of African-diasporic culture and identity" (Copeland and Thompson 2017, 3). The details of the artists I mention are as follows: Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (1996); Lyle Ashton Harris, *Venus Hottentot* (2000) [in collaboration with Renee Cox]; Tracey Rose, *Venus Baartman* (2001); Mawande ka Zenzile, *Letter for Sarah batman to Josephine Baker* (2011); Shoshanna Weinberger, *Buffed Under Ozone Rain* (2012); Kara Walker, *Camptown Ladies* (1998); Wangechi Mutu, *Le Noble Savage* (2006); Wangechi Mutu, *Chorus Line* (2008).

<sup>3</sup> If non-representationalist aesthetics derives its political efficacy from how much is not said or figured literally, then what does the constant return to charged iconography of the "Hottentot Venus" (especially the enlarged buttocks) in visual representation make possible or obscure? What are the lessons provided by non-representationalist Black feminist theory and aesthetic praxis? Through Zakiyyah I. Jackson's theorization, we glean how "the Black female," rather than being an empirical sign, is a material metaphor made to cohere through figuration and projection in aesthetic, literary, and scientific representation (Jackson 2018, 619–620.) As signifier, "the Hottentot Venus," bears no stable resemblance to the referent since "the Black female body" is neither equivalent to its iconography nor its fleshly representationalist doubles (Ibid., 621). The intention here is to understand how an icon produced from different directions, and through contrasting motives and power maneuvers coalesced into a materialdiscursive metaphor masquerading as empirical.

<sup>4</sup> Saidiya Hartman (1997) theorizes this as accumulation and fungibility. For a discussion of blackness and plasticity, see Jackson (2020). For a discussion of plasticity that focuses on possibility, see McMillan (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Dogs, although treasured in popular culture as "man's best friend," invoke a different meaning in the piece. The sound of dogs barking also conjures up memories of terror, in particular, apartheid violence where dogs were trained by police to terrorize Black people. As a result, dogs are still understood as an extension of this anti-Black prerogative. Attempts at inter-species relationality are difficult in this context, where dogs and other animals are still positioned higher than the Black, rather than as "humanimal" companions. This companionship between the dog and the Black is only established in racist thought when both are signs of debasement. Xaba's crawl references this debasement as a meeting point between the Black and the dog, where the dog also has capacity to move up the chain and be Man's companion. Black people's tense relationship with dogs is not a result of an onto-epistemological order where they see themselves as inherently positioned higher than dogs in a hierarchy of species. The tension, rather, has been produced through racial terror, using dogs as conduits for the policing and brutalization of Black people. (See Bennett 2020; Ndebele, 2006.)

<sup>6</sup> Here I invoke Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's discussion of technique and black aesthetics (Harney and Moten 2013, 48).

<sup>7</sup> I am using "heresy" in a way that Sylvia Wynter uses it in "Sambo and Minstrels" (1979). In this essay, Wynter argues that those elements of cultural expression deemed heretic and outside of the Norm inevitably get co-opted into the Norm. In other words, the Norm absorbs these heresies such that they continue to exist, but their existence is licensed and managed by the custodians of the Norm. As "licensed heresies," they are repurposed to carry out the work of the Norm (Ibid., 149).

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