Venus in Two Acts

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the ubiquitous presence of Venus in the archive of Atlantic slavery and wrestles with the impossibility of discovering anything about her that hasn't already been stated. As an emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic world, Venus makes plain the convergence of terror and pleasure in the libidinal economy of slavery and, as well, the intimacy of history with the scandal and excess of literature. In writing at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown, the essay mimes the violence of the archive and attempts to redress it by describing as fully as possible the conditions that determine the appearance of Venus and that dictate her silence.

In this incarnation, she appears in the archive of slavery as a *dead girl* named in a legal indictment against a slave ship captain tried for the murder of two Negro girls. But we could have as easily encountered her in a ship's ledger in the tally of debits; or in an overseer's journal—"last night I laid with Dido on the ground"; or as an amorous bed-fellow with a purse so elastic "that it will contain the largest thing any gentleman can present her with" in *Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies*; or as the paramour in the narrative of a mercenary soldier in Surinam; or as a brothel owner in a traveler's account of the prostitutes of Barbados; or as a minor character in a nineteenth-century pornographic novel.[1] Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world. The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon's laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master's bedroom—turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus.

1. "Last night *cum* Dido." The Jamaican overseer Thomas Thistlewood recorded in Latin his sexual exploits with enslaved women: "*Cum sup terr*" ("I fucked her on the ground"). In Douglas Hall, ed., *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica 1750–1756* (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1998), 31. Samuel Derrick, *Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies, or Man of Pleasure's Kalendar for the Year 1793* (London, 1793: reprint Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1982), 83. John Gabriel Stedman, *Stedman's Surinam: Life in an Eighteenth-Century Slave Society*, ed. Richard Price and Sally Price (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

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What else is there to know? Hers is the same fate as every other Black Venus: no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all.[2] Hers is an untimely story told by a failed witness. It would be centuries before she would be allowed to "try her tongue."[3]

I could say after a famous philosopher that what we know of Venus in her many guises amounts to "little more than a register of her encounter with power" and that it provides "a meager sketch of her existence."[4] An act of chance or disaster produced a divergence or an aberration from the expected and usual course of invisibility and catapulted her from the underground to the surface of discourse. We stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand. We only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her. Yet the exorbitant must be rendered exemplary or typical in order that her life provides a window onto the lives of the enslaved in general.

One cannot ask, "Who is Venus?" because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist 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, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. Given this, "it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp [these lives] again in themselves, as they might have been 'in a free state.'"[5]

Out of the World and Back

But I want to say more than this. I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story about *two girls* capable of retrieving what remains dormant—the purchase or claim of their lives on the present—without committing further violence in my own act of narration. It is a story predicated upon impossibility—listening for

2. For an extended account of the predicament of Venus, see Janelle Hobson's *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
3. See M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (London: The Women's Press, 1993).
4. Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New Press, 2003), 284.
5. Ibid., 282.

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the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives—and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved.

Yet how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features? "Can the shock of [such] words," as Foucault writes, "give rise to a certain effect of beauty mixed with dread?"[6] Can we, as NourbeSe Philip suggests, "conjur[e] something new from the absence of Africans as humans that is at the heart of the text"?[7] And if so, what are the lineaments of this new narrative? Put differently, how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from "the locus of impossible speech" or resurrect lives from the ruins?[8] Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to "exhume buried cries" and reanimate the dead?[9]

Or is narration its own gift and its own end, that is, all that is realizable when overcoming the past and redeeming the dead are not? And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self?[10] For whom—for us or for them?

The scarcity of African narratives of captivity and enslavement exacerbate the pressure and gravity of such questions. There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage. This silence in the archive in combination with the robustness of the fort or barracoon, not as a holding cell or space of confinement but as an episteme, has for the most part focused the historiography of the slave trade on quantitative

6. Ibid., 281, 284.
7. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, forthcoming).
8. Stephen Best, "The African Queen," unpublished essay.
9. Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Calvacade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (London: Heinneman, 1993).
10. Reading Sa'adat Hasan Manto's story "Khol Do," in which a father claims the violated body of his daughter, Veena Das writes: "This father wills his daughter to live even as parts of her body can do nothing else but proclaim her brutal violation. . . . He creates through his utterance ["My daughter is alive—my daughter is alive."] a home for her mutilated and violated self." Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 39, 47.

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matters and on issues of markets and trade relations.[11] Loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive.

As a writer committed to telling stories, I have endeavored to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known. For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence.[12] As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing.

This writing is personal because this history has engendered me, because "the knowledge of the other marks me,"[13] because of the pain experienced in my encounter with the scraps of the archive, and because of the kinds of stories I have fashioned to bridge the past and the present and to dramatize the production of nothing—empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste.

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence? Is the "terrible beauty" that resides in such a scene something akin to remedy as Fred Moten would seem to suggest?[14] The kind of terrible beauty and terrible music that he discerns in Aunt Hester's screams transformed into the songs of the Great House Farm or in the photograph of Emmett Till's destroyed face, and the "acuity of regard,"[15] which arises from a willingness to look into the open casket. Do the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking (again)?

If "to read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold,"[16] then to what end does one

11. Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
12. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 173–74. Mbembe writes of the arbitrary and capricious nature of colonizing power "in seizing from the world and putting to death what has previously been decreed to be nothing, an empty figure" (189).
13. Das, *Life and Words*, 17.
14. Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 14–22, 198–200.
15. Elaine Scary, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 14.
16. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 17.

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open the casket and look into the face of death? Why risk the contamination involved in restating the maledictions, obscenities, columns of losses and gains, and measures of value by which captive lives were inscribed and extinguished? Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence? Or are the merchant's words the bridge to the dead or the scriptural tombs in which they await us? Such concerns about the ethics of historical representation, in part, explain the "two acts" of the title. I need to revisit and revise my own earlier account of Venus's death in "The Dead Book";[17] and, as well, the two acts announce the inevitable return of Venus, as both "haint," that is, one who haunts the present, and as disposable life. The merchant's account of mortality makes plain the inevitability of the repetition: *Melancholy, dysentery, ditto, ditto*. Rather than the wasted effort of a striking a line through "meager girl" or a "refuse boy," the ledger introduces another death through this shorthand. And it returns the dead to us "in the very form in which they were driven out of the world."[18]

The Open Casket, the Scandal of the Archive

Scandal and excess inundate the archive: the raw numbers of the mortality account, the strategic evasion and indirection of the captain's log, the florid and sentimental letters dispatched from slave ports by homesick merchants, the incantatory stories of *shocking* violence penned by abolitionists, the fascinated eyewitness reports of mercenary soldiers eager to divulge "what decency forbids [them] to disclose," and the rituals of torture, the beatings, hangings, and amputations enshrined as law. The libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past. What has been said and what can be said about Venus *take for granted* the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence.

Confirmations of this abound. Let us begin with James Barbot, the captain of the *Albion Frigate*, who attested to the coincidence of the pleasures afforded in the space of death. It was difficult to exercise sexual restraint on the slave ship, Barbot confessed, because the "young sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good humor, afforded an abundance of recreation."[19]

Falconbridge seconds this, amplifying the slippage between victims and sweethearts, acts of love and brutal excesses: "On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. And some of them have been known to take the inconstancy of their paramours so much to heart, as to

17. Ibid., 136–53.
18. Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," 284.
19. "A Voyage in the Albion Frigate," in *Churchill's Voyages*, vol. 5 (1732), reprinted in George Francis Dow, *Slave Ships and Slaving* (New York: Dow, 2002), 81.

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leap overboard and drown themselves." Only Olaudah Equiano depicts the habitual violence of the slave ship without recourse to the language of romance: "It was almost a common practice with our clerks and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves. . . . I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them [to] gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practiced to such *scandalous excess*, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account" (emphasis added).[20]

The situation worsens on the plantation. Thomas Thistlewood's serial rapes and excremental punishments offer a graphic account of the pleasures exacted from the destruction and degradation of life and, at the same time, illuminate the difficulty of recovering enslaved lives from the annihilating force of such description: "Gave him a moderate whipping, pickled him well, made Hector shit in his mouth, immediately put a gag in it whilst his mouth was full & made him wear it 4 or 5 hours."[21] While the daily record of such abuses, no doubt, constitutes a history of slavery, the more difficult task is to exhume the lives buried under this prose, or rather to accept that Phibba and Dido exist only within the confines of these words, and that this is the manner in which they enter history. The dream is to liberate them from the obscene descriptions that first introduced them to us. It is too easy to hate a man like Thistlewood; what is more difficult is to acknowledge as our inheritance the brutal Latin phrases spilling onto the pages of his journals.

Upon entering the archive of slavery, the unimaginable assumes the guise of everyday practice, which we can never fail to forget as we gape at the grim faces and stripped torsos of Delia, Drana, Renty, and Jack, or recoil from the mutilated body of Anarcha, or admire a naked Diana, so lovely that even "the most splendid apparel cannot give any additional elegance."[22] Others appear under the pressure and incitement of discourse: A flagellant and a Hottentot. A sulky bitch. A dead negréss. A syphilitic whore.

Infelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands give birth to the characters we stumble upon in the archive. Given the condition in which we find them, the only certainty is that we will lose them again, that they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry. This is the only fact about Venus of which we can be sure. So is

20. Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: J. Phillips, 1780), 23–24. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (1789; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1995), 104.
21. Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, 72.
22. Stedman, *Stedman's Surinam*, 248. Delia, Drana, Renty, and Jack were the photographic subjects of Louis Aggasiz's study of polygenesis; Aranchna was one of the eleven enslaved women experimented on by Morton Sims, the founder of gynecology. See Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006).

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it possible to reiterate her name and to tell a story about *degraded matter* and dishonored life that doesn't delight and titillate, but instead ventures toward another mode of writing?

If it is no longer sufficient to expose the scandal, then how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive? To imagine what could have been? To envision a *free state* from this order of statements? The dangers entailed in this endeavor cannot be bracketed or avoided because of the inevitability of the reproduction of such scenes of violence, which define the state of blackness and the life of the ex-slave. To the contrary, these dangers are situated at the heart of my work, both in the stories I have chosen to tell and in those that I have avoided.

Here I'd like to return to a story that I preferred not to tell or was unable to tell in *Lose Your Mother*. It is a story about Venus, the other girl who died aboard the *Recovery* and to whom I only made a passing reference.

The Second Act

Two girls died on board the *Recovery*. The captain, John Kimber, was indicted for having "feloniously, wickedly and with malice aforethought, beaten and tortured a female slave, so as to cause her death: and he was again indicted for having caused the death of another female slave."[23]

On 7 June 1792, Mr. Pigot, the counsel for the prisoner, bellowed the name Venus in his cross-examination of the surgeon Thomas Dowling, one of the two witnesses from the crew of the ship who testified that they had seen Captain John Kimber murder a Negro girl. According to the surgeon's testimony, the captain flogged her repeatedly with a whip and "successively for several days, very severely" causing her death.[24]

Venus was not that Negro girl but another one who died at the hands of the captain and who was mentioned briefly during the trial. Pigot questioned the surgeon about her:

> Question: Was there not a girl bought of [the trader] Jackamachree, who was in the same state as the girl we have been talking of?
> Answer: I do not know.
> Question: Was there not a girl of the name of Venus?
> Answer: There was.
> Question: Was she not in the same state?
> Answer: Not that I know of.[25]

23. *The Trial of Captain John Kimber for the Murder of Two Female Negro Slaves, on Board the Recovery, African Slave Ship* (1792), 2.
24. *The Whole of the Proceedings and Trial of Captain John Kimber, for the Murder of a Negro Girl* (1792), 14–15.
25. Ibid., 25.

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"There was another girl on board the Recovery . . . whom they named Venus, and she too had the pox."[26]

When the captain was acquitted for the murder of the first girl, he was also found not guilty of the second charge. "As there was no evidence to support the second indictment, than what supported the first, the jury also acquitted the prisoner on it."[27]

These were the only words spoken of Venus during the trial.

I wrote two sentences about Venus in "The Dead Book," masking my own silence behind Wilberforce's. I say of him: "He chose not to speak of Venus, the other dead girl. The pet name licensed debauchery and made it sound agreeable."[28]

I decided not to write about Venus for reasons different from those I attributed to him. Instead I feared what I might invent, and it would have been a romance.

If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates. Then Venus could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises, soothed her with "soon, soon" and wished for her a good return.

Picture them: The relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents; a sailor caught sight of them and later said they were friends. Two world-less girls found a country in each other's arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility.

The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed.

In a free state, it would have been possible for the girls to attend to the death of a friend and shed tears for the loss, but a slave ship made no allowance for grief and when detected the instruments of torture were employed to eradicate it. But the consolation of this vision—a life recognized and mourned in the embrace of two girls—was at odds with the annihilating

26. *Trial of Captain Kimber for the Murder of a Negro Girl* (1792), 19.
27. *Trial of Captain John Kimber for the Murder of Two Female Negro Slaves*, 36; *The Trial of Captain Kimber for the Supposed Murder of an African Girl, at the Admiralty Sessions* (1792), 43.
28. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 143.

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violence of the slave ship and with virtually everything I had ever written. Initially I thought I wanted to represent the affiliations severed and remade in the hollow of the slave ship by imagining the two girls as friends, by giving them one another. But in the end I was forced to admit that I wanted to console myself and to escape the slave hold with a vision of something other than the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic.

In the end, I could say no more about Venus than I had said about her friend: "I am unsure if it is possible to salvage an existence from a handful of words: the supposed murder of a negro girl."[29]

I could not change anything: "The girl 'never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of words' that allowed her to be murdered."[30]

I could not have arrived at another conclusion. So it was better to leave them as I had found them. Two girls, alone.

The Reprise

I chose not to tell a story about Venus because to do so would have trespassed the boundaries of the archive. History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror. I wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history—the rumors, scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts, impossible metaphors, chance events, and fantasies that constitute the archive and determine what can be said about the past. I longed to write a new story, one unfettered by the constraints of the legal documents and exceeding the restatement and transpositions, which comprised my strategy for disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements and which enabled me to augment and intensify its fictions. Finding an aesthetic mode suitable or adequate to rendering the lives of these two girls, deciding how to arrange the lines on the page, allowing the narrative track to be rerouted or broken by the sounds of memory, the keens and howls and dirges unloosened on the deck, and trying to unsettle the arrangements of power by imaging Venus and her friend outside the terms of statements and judgments that banished them from the category of the human and decreed their lives waste[31]—all of which was beyond what could be thought within the parameters of history.

The romance of resistance that I failed to narrate and the event of love that I refused to describe raise important questions regarding what it means to think historically about

29. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 137.
30. Ibid.
31. See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

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matters still contested in the present and about life eradicated by the protocols of intellectual disciplines. What is required to imagine a free state or to tell an impossible story? Must the poetics of a free state anticipate the event and imagine life after man, rather than wait for the ever-retreating moment of Jubilee? Must the future of abolition be first performed on the page? By retreating from the story of these two girls, was I simply upholding the rules of the historical guild and the "manufactured certainties" of their killers, and by doing so, hadn't I sealed their fate?[32] Hadn't I too consigned them to oblivion? In the end, was it better to leave them as I found them?

A History of Failure

If it is not possible to undo the violence that inaugurates the sparse record of a girl's life or remedy her anonymity with a name or translate the commodity's speech, then to what end does one tell such stories? How and why does one write a history of violence? Why revisit the event or the nonevent of a girl's death?

The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power.[33] The archive yields no exhaustive account of the girl's life, but catalogues the statements that licensed her death. All the rest is a kind of fiction: sprightly maiden, sulky bitch, Venus, girl. The economy of theft and the power over life, which defined the slave trade, fabricated commodities and corpses. But cargo, inert masses, and things don't lend themselves to representation, at least not easily?

In *Lose Your Mother* I attempted to foreground the experience of the enslaved by tracing the itinerary of a disappearance and by narrating stories which are impossible to tell. The goal was to expose and exploit the incommensurability between the experience of the enslaved and the fictions of history, by which I mean the requirements of narrative, the stuff of subjects and plots and ends.

And how does one tell impossible stories? Stories about girls bearing names that deface and disfigure, about *the words exchanged* between shipmates that never acquired any standing in the law and that failed to be recorded in the archive, about the appeals, prayers and secrets never uttered because no one was there to receive them? The *furtive communication* that might have passed between two girls, but which no one among the crew observed or reported affirms what we already know to be true: The archive is inseparable from the play of

32. Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 94. See also Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
33. Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 128–29.

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power that murdered Venus and her shipmate and exonerated the captain. And this knowledge brings us no closer to an understanding of the lives of two captive girls or the violence that destroyed them and named the ruin: Venus. Nor can it explain why at this late date we still want to write stories about them.

Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of "what could have been," according to Lisa Lowe, "symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods."[34]

The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.

The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. "Fabula" denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience and event."[35]

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object,"[36]

34. Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 208.
35. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 7.
36. Moten, *In the Break*, 14.

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if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity. By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a "recombinant narrative," which "loops the strands" of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl's story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.[37]

Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man.[38]

The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.

Admittedly my own writing is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive. It depends upon the legal records, surgeons' journals, ledgers, ship manifests, and captains' logs, and in this regard falters before the archive's silence and reproduces it omissions. The irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot know and that will never be recovered. This formidable obstacle or constitutive impossibility defines the parameters of my work.

The necessity of recounting Venus's death is overshadowed by the inevitable failure of any attempt to represent her. I think this is a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved. In retelling the story of what happened on board the *Recovery*, I have emphasized the incommensurability between the prevailing discourses and the event, amplified the instability and discrepancy of the archive, flouted the realist illusion customary in the writing of history, and produced a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical. Counter-history, according to Gallagher and Greenblatt, "opposes itself not only to dominant narratives, but also to prevailing modes of

37. The notion of recombinant narrative is borrowed from Stan Douglass, but I was introduced to the idea by NourbeSe Philip's unpublished essay.

38. See Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," *Representations*, no. 92 (Fall 2005): 9.

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historical thought and methods of research."[39] However, the *history* of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing.

If this *story of Venus* has any value at all it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers. A relation which others might describe as a kind of melancholia, but which I prefer to describe in terms of the afterlife of property, by which I mean the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril.

For these reasons, I have chosen to engage a set of dilemmas about representation, violence, and social death, not by using the form of a metahistorical discourse, but by performing the limits of writing history through the act of narration. I have done so primarily because (1) my own narrative does not operate outside the economy of statements that it subjects to critique; and (2) those existences relegated to the nonhistorical or deemed waste exercise a claim on the present and demand us to imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended. The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.

My effort to reconstruct the past is, as well, an attempt to describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present, that is, the forms of death unleashed in the name of freedom, security, civilization, and God/the good. Narrative is central to this effort because of "the relation it poses, explicit or implied, between past, presents and futures."[40] Wrestling with the girl's claim on the present is a way of naming our time, thinking our present, and envisioning the past which has created it.

Unfortunately I have not discovered a way of deranging the archive so that it might recall the content of a girl's life or reveal a truer picture, nor have I succeeded in prying open the dead book, which sealed her status as commodity. The random collection of details of which I have made use are the same descriptions, verbatim quotes, and trial transcripts that consigned her to death and made murder "not much noticed," at least, according to the surgeon.[41] The promiscuity of the archive begets a wide array of reading, but none that are capable of resuscitating the girl.

39. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, "Counter-History and the Anecdote," in *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 52.
40. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.
41. *Trial of Captain John Kimber, for the Murder of a Negro Girl*, 14; *Trial of Captain John Kimber for the Supposed Murder of an African Girl*, 20. The surgeon testified that brutal floggings on board the slave ships were customary.

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My account replicates the very order of violence that it writes against by placing yet another demand upon the girl, by requiring that her life be made useful or instructive, by finding in it a lesson for our future or a hope for history. We all know better. It is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths; and it is much too early for such scenes of death to halt other crimes. But in the meantime, in the space of the interval, between too late and too early, between the no longer and the not yet, our lives are coeval with the girl's in the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom. In the meantime, it is clear that her life and ours hang in the balance.

So what does one do in the meantime? What are the stories one tells in dark times? How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future? Michel de Certeau notes that there are at least two ways the historiographical operation can make a place for the living: one is attending to and recruiting the past for the sake of the living, establishing who we are in relation to who we have been; and the second entails interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past.[42] Along the lines sketched by de Certeau, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* offers a model for a practice.[43] When Dana, the protagonist of Butler's speculative fiction, travels from the twentieth century to the 1820s to encounter her enslaved foremother, Dana finds to her surprise that she is not able to rescue her kin or escape the entangled relations of violence and domination, but instead comes to accept that they have made her own existence possible. With this in mind, we must bear what cannot be borne: the image of Venus in chains.

We begin the story again, as always, in the wake of her disappearance and with the wild hope that our efforts can return her to the world. The conjunction of hope and defeat define this labor and leave open its outcome. The task of writing the impossible, (not the fanciful or the utopian but "histories rendered unreal and fantastic"[44]), has as its prerequisites the embrace of likely failure and the readiness to accept the ongoing, unfinished and provisional character of this effort, particularly when the arrangements of power occlude the very object that we desire to rescue.[45] Like Dana, we too emerge from the encounter with a sense of incompleteness and with the recognition that some part of the self is missing as a consequence of this engagement.

42. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
43. Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).
44. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 97.
45. Slavoj Žižek has described this as a practice of enthusiastic resignation: "Enthusiasm as indicating the experience of the object through the very failure of its adequate representation. Enthusiasm and resignation are not then two opposed moments: it is the 'resignation' itself, that is, the experience of a certain impossibility, which incites enthusiasm." "Beyond Discourse-Analysis," in Ernesto Laclau, ed., *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990), 259–60.

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