

TRUTH IN MOVEMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF CODE-SWITCHING IN PHYSICAL
DIALECTS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THEATRE

YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

April 2015

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Abstract

This paper will discuss my process towards finding authenticity in movement as it pertains to my performance of ‘The Man’ and ‘The Venus’ Chorus’ in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus*. My research details how increased body awareness via internal signals from the muscles and a deeper connection to primary impulses help to address my artistic challenge. My task is to use physicality in performance as a means to express the character’s needs and as a response to stimuli from scene partners. I will create unique physical personas for both my roles in *Venus*, and I will customize a preparation routine to be completed before rehearsals and performances of the play using the following methods: Authentic Movement, The Batdorf Technique, and Richard Pochinko clowning.

“WE have come to be danced
not the nice invisible, self-conscious shuffle
but the matted hair flying, voodoo mama
shaman shakin’ ancient bones dance
the strip us from our casings, return our wings
sharpen our claws & tongues dance
the shed dead cells and slip into
the luminous skin of love dance.”

-Jewel Mathieson

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the generous and extraordinary tutelage of the following instructors: Judith Koltai, Gwen Dobie, Michael Greyeyes, Erika Batdorf, and John Turner.

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1. Introduction

In the early stages of my training at York University, my acting work was hindered by a pattern in which I moved with vigor and largess but without motivation. I learned that my nervous energy was dictating my movement. Through coursework and the application of new skill sets in performance, I feel confident that my hyper-kinesthetic habits no longer pose the greatest acting challenge. However, I now find myself dealing with the antithesis of my original issue: an occasional over-compensation of physical release. At times, my facial muscles and limbs are relaxed to the point of being unengaged and lacking expression.

My acting challenge has altered, but the primary goal of my thesis research remains the same: to find authenticity in movement which occurs instinctively as a response to my scene partners, my emotional state of being, or the internal signals of my own body. Impulse will inspire movement, and these reactions will be the direct result of the verbal or physical cues received from moment to moment. In this way, each exchange is fresh and exciting to play because the stimuli from other actors will vary slightly from one performance to another: different vocal inflections, minute changes in gestural tempo, or even subtleties in eye contact might inspire an alternative movement choice.

To this end, I will continue to train in The Batdorf Technique, Authentic Movement, and Richard Pochinko clowning. Also, I will customize a physical warm-up to relieve nervous energy while simultaneously engaging the body for activity. The sequence I design will facilitate the median between my former overly-energetic movement and my current tendency toward subdued skeletal-muscular release.

As a second means to genuine physical expression, I will continue to examine the mental factors that influence my movement choices. In performance and in everyday life, I sometimes notice that my body will take on a physical template (stance, gait, and gestural choices) to enhance or lessen parts of my identity such as my sexuality or my blackness. I

refer to this as a physical “code-switch”, or, the ability to change my physical dialect to suit a certain audience. Linguists use the term “code-switch” or “code-shift” to describe speakers who go from one dialect to another depending on the circumstances (*Oxford Dictionaries*). This same principle may be applied to my physical choices; which codes do I embody and for whom? My artistic challenge statement will analyze the various ways I have felt pressure to “perform” my ethnicity or my gender. I want to gain insight into these thought processes so that I may question them and not be governed by them.

I argue that my lack of authenticity in movement stems from a lack of physiological and psychological awareness. The more I understand my body’s needs and the thoughts that are dictating my actions, the more I can hope to listen. By listen, I mean to allow primary impulses to guide my physical choices as an actor. A practical means to this end will be ongoing exploration of movement as a response to signals from the viscera and the proprioceptors—nerve receptors of balance, coordination, and the body’s positioning in space (*Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*).

My thesis performance in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus* as ‘The Man’ and ‘The Venus’ Chorus’ is an experiment to embrace my love of movement in a way that serves my acting. I need to marry my instinctual vastness and vitality in physicality with sophistication; each action must be guided by the needs of the performance. In other words, I have the container of the script, but I can still allow myself to play within it. I believe that authenticity in movement can be achieved through work that focuses on somatic practice, improvisation, and actor impulse.

I employ several movement techniques in my continuing practical explorations. For example, Syntonics® and Authentic Movement heighten my awareness of proprioception and strengthen my sensory reflexes, respectively. Syntonics® practice is a self-diagnostic tool for tension relief and ease in movement. Through Authentic Movement, I can use gestural

improvisation to enhance my sensory response to stimuli: light, temperature, touch, sound, and emotional states of being.

Additionally, I re-visit previously studied character building techniques to create the physicality of my characters: *The Man and The Venus' Chorus*. I will use Richard Pochinko clown work to improvise my characters' movement while wearing masks. Also, Professor Erika Batdorf's teachings are essential to finding specific movement choices. The Batdorf Technique involves physically scoring and developing a "character body", whereby the actor negotiates the positioning of the skeletal structure, a gestural vocabulary, and a rhythm for the character's movement.

My thesis provides a thorough examination of my artistic challenge and the preparation I have undergone for my thesis role. The body of my thesis consists of the following components. First, my artistic challenge research document details how I eventually addressed my initial challenge, only to discover a new one. Secondly, I have compiled information about *Venus* and my two roles. My research includes the culture of late 19th century South Africa, the herdsman the western parts of the Cape of Good Hope, the Khoi Khoi tribe, and of course Saartje Baartmann (the so-called Hottentot Venus).

Moreover, I analyze black female iconography and the playwright's views toward the representation of blackness in mainstream media. Portions of the play come from actual court documents and autopsy reports, and I have investigated these verbatim texts in my research as well. Third, I have a proposed rehearsal plan of how I test my hypothesis and apply my training in the rehearsal process.

To conclude my supporting documentation, I enclose entries from my rehearsal and performance journal. The last part of this document is a brief summary of my final thoughts after *Venus* closes, in which I assess my performance in the show and analyze the success of my proposed plan of action.

2. Artistic Challenge Statement

For many years, I have relied on the parallel language of my body to illustrate stories. As an actor, my movement would begin as a conscious choice, but later it would morph into a state of involuntary possession. I was unaware of my actions as they occurred in the excitement of performance. At times I could barely recollect what I did on stage. There was a disconnection between thought and physicalization. The container of the text (the script) and the needs of the character seemed to be irrelevant to my gestural choices.

My first revelation was that sometimes I moved because I felt the need to physically purge my energy. I also moved to mask my insecurities. Finally, I denied a host of physical impulses that I had labeled as inappropriate and replaced them with arbitrary gestures. As a result, my grand physicality was unnecessary and disingenuous. My artistic challenge has been a journey toward finding authenticity in movement as well as investigating the fears that have led to socialized, habitual physicality.

Physical therapist Therese Bertherat states that “movement reveals us to ourselves only once we become aware of *how* we move (or don’t move)” (51). In order to find genuine physical expression, I first needed to know my starting point. I re-visited journal observations about my work in movement courses at York and at supplemental summer training programs starting as early as the summer of 2013. I analyzed my body’s habits in several movement methodologies including The F.M. Alexander Technique®, Viewpoints®, Syntonics®, and lastly Authentic Movement.

In my studio work, my movement was frequently fast, aggressive, large, and at times all-consuming. I equated movement with a feeling of energy; to move meant to be alive. During Alexander Technique® training, there was an insatiable hunger for excess: more breath, more floor space, and more touch. Unfortunately, my hyper-physicality frequently overshadowed the needs of the characters I portrayed. Movement became masturbatory and

did not engage fully with my scene partners or with the audience. How was all this movement serving me, and why was I doing it?

Viewpoints® is a method to “generate movement for the stage” through collaboration and composition (Bogart ix). My training in this technique revealed my tendency to move energetically and take up space, but I would lose cohesive story-telling. I would physically isolate myself: turning my back to scene partners, tumbling on the ground (the floor work obscured me from view), and constantly manipulating the piece by instigating each action. I was not “listening” to the world around me; I was imposing upon it.

Later in the semester, I experimented with letting my colleagues lead the course of events in a given improvisation. A great deal of anxiety came up when I could not control the outcomes of these movement compositions. Impulse work and improvisation were areas in need of improvement, and I needed to abandon self-control.

The next step in my process would be to get an intimate understanding of my own body and the psyche that governs it. In May of 2013, I attended Canada’s National Voice Intensive and studied with Judith Koltai. I had my first encounter with Authentic Movement (exploring sensory awareness through movement improvisations) and Koltai’s method known as Syntonics® (a system of self-diagnostic movements to alleviate tensions and malfunctions in the body). Koltai referred to her work as “body literacy”: a means to ‘read’ one’s well-being from the muscles, bones, nerve endings, and the psyche (“The Purpose of Embodied Practice”).

Syntonics® relies heavily on proprioception, or the sensation of balance, coordination, and movement through space (*Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*). As a participant, I was developing a greater awareness of my body’s positioning from felt sensations and not through my linguistic brain. According to Alexander Technique® teacher Missy Vineyard, “we usually don’t appreciate [bodily sensations’] importance because much of it is processed

below the level of conscious awareness” (59). Most sessions would end with my feeling a sense of bewilderment or even failure. On a subconscious level, however, I had gained a great deal of knowledge in terms of physical self-diagnostic skills. I learned to identify minute sensations in my bones and to undo some of the daily muscular habits that caused fatigue.

Authentic Movement proved equally challenging as there were no assessments or benchmarks in the practice. With eyes closed, my kinesthetic, vocal, or even emotional impulses would inspire my movement “without concern for outcome” (Koltai). This could mean a world of possibilities: a bird chirping outside inspires a dance, the cold air makes me start running, or my loneliness causes me to wrap my arms around my body. The exercises were fully improvisational, but I was plagued by the notion that I could not do them “right”.

This training illustrated how my psychological issues influenced my movement; I was a chronic overachiever. If a task proved challenging, I would double my efforts by doing everything bigger. I thought that I could mask my insecurities by being faster or by taking up more space. Unfortunately, this over-compensation only made my insecurities more apparent. In studio courses at York, I found myself trying too hard to achieve an ideal performance. On stage, I was often troubled with fears that the audience was bored or that the technical proficiency of my acting (vocal delivery, rhetoric, spatial awareness) was sub-par. My addiction to perfection was hindering my creativity.

For practical thesis research, I decided to re-visit Syntonics® and Authentic Movement for a week-long master class in May of 2014. The idea scared me at first which was all the more impetus to do it. Perhaps by conquering my fears I could gain confidence. I purposefully wanted to train in something that I did poorly so I could practice granting myself grace. The second component to my practical thesis research would be a sixteen-day intensive in Richard Pochinko clown technique at the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation

and Performance. Clowning could bolster my improvisation skills and foster a greater sense of play and ease in my performances.

In terms of academic thesis research, I wanted to investigate psychology and sociology. I am curious to know how thought informs action. How am I illustrating both conscious and subconscious thoughts in my movement? Moreover, how do social norms influence my physicality? I hypothesized that my physicality might be rooted in the performance of an expectation, rather than that of an authentic expression.

To begin, I researched the psychology of perfectionism. Jungian analyst Marion Woodman has investigated how an addiction to perfection can influence one's everyday life. In *Conscious Femininity*, she says that "if you are living for an ideal...you lose the natural, slow rhythm of life. There's just a rushing, trying to attain the ideal. The slower pace of the beat of the earth, the state where you simply are, is forgotten" (Woodman 22). This passage resonated with me because I habitually moved at a fast pace. I had spent the past two semesters finding stillness, despite the anxiety that told me to wiggle. Stillness frightened me. Vineyard asserts that once a movement behavior is learned, the brain will protest at the first sign of change (59). Perhaps my need to fidget was just my brain's attempt to maintain the status quo.

In *The Body Has Its Reasons*, Bertherat insists that one's mental history is pivotal in understanding one's body (21). Before Bertherat began physical therapy sessions, she would take her students' childhood upbringing, body image issues, fears, and cultural backgrounds into account (21). Furthermore, Vineyard posits that "belief determines how one stands, far more than muscles do" (68). I adopted these theories and considered the aspects of my past that may contribute to my movement beliefs.

In terms of sociology, I gather that growing up in the conservative American south has impacted the expression of my sexuality. Additionally, my family's religious beliefs have

made me cautious of actions or clothing choices that could potentially incite lust. For example, I noted this in my tendency to collapse my sternum and sometimes fold my arms over my chest: an apology for my breasts.

During scene work and movement classes, I frequently thought of caressing, hugging, or kissing other participants, but I was flooded with a sense of guilt and dismissed these impulses. I distinctly recall rehearsing a scene from *Uncle Vanya* during my first semester at York. I played Sonia in a scene with the object of her affection, Dr. Astrov. One day in rehearsal, my acting teacher flatly asked, “Alicia, have you ever thought of kissing him?” Everything inside me shouted: YES! However, I replied to my teacher in a small voice, “Well I guess so, but I don’t think I should.” The idea of fully owning my sexual attraction was too much to admit publically.

It seemed that my attitudes about sex were preventing my body from provocative impulses in scene work. Vineyard states that once a human experiences a negative episode, she will harbor the unpleasant physical sensation of that moment (59). She continues, “what I believe is a conscious choice amounts to a subconscious aversion to a memory of uncomfortable bodily feelings” (Vineyard 59). My formative years were rife with diatribes about the dangers of sex. Perhaps the physical recollection of those unpleasant memories could be the subconscious drive to avoid expressing my sexuality on stage.

I also began to consider the implications of my identity on the whole. What are some of the body habits I have internalized as a black woman from the American south? I have been accused of not being “black enough” due to my speech, the neighborhood I lived in, or even my clothing. Sometimes I had to dial-up the performance of my ethnicity in order to be accepted by my own community. I learned to flip in and out of hyperbolic *blackness* at the right times to avoid being mocked.

From an early age, there was an immediate calculation whenever I entered a room; I gauged what version of black I needed to be. This largely depended on how many other black people were in the room, if there were any at all. I found myself quite isolated in professional and academic settings. Thus, I would try to adapt my public persona to please the majority of the group. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, WEB Dubois explains this conundrum: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (9).

Sadly, this self-consciousness led to performance in everyday life. There was rarely a moment where I could be free to express myself in the manner that was instinctual. It was a constant internal negotiation. “*Will I lose their respect if I talk like this?*” I thought. “*Maybe I can’t flick my wrist or be too loud because that would make me look like a stereotype.*” Often times, I found that I would alternate between the educated black professional and the brash, rowdy rebel. In both of these scenarios, there is a marked shift in my walk, my stance, and even in the way I gesticulate in conversation.

My physicality and my dialect have a distinct signature whenever I am around other African-Americans. I move with much more fluidity, broader gestures, and a sense of musicality. I have a wider stance and a lower center of gravity. Around my family, I love to clap, point, and stomp when I talk; they do too. Interestingly enough, depending on where we are, my family and I might completely abandon our everyday physicality for a subtler, more reserved presentation. We speak a certain body language around each other, but we translate ourselves in the presence of outsiders. This habit has stayed with me well into adulthood.

Whenever I was surrounded by people of other ethnicities, I felt the need to assimilate my body and voice to the dominant patterns of the group. My body became much more linear and rigid. My center of gravity felt higher, my stance narrower, and my gestures were

clipped, calculated movements. Especially in the environment of higher education, I was actively trying to seem “less black” in an attempt to be accepted by my mostly Caucasian peers and professors. For example, the stereotype of the “angry black woman” in popular culture is frequently associated with snapping her fingers and waving them in someone’s face. I consciously avoid this gesture in professional settings to distance myself from the trope. Tulane University Professor Melissa Harris-Perry suggests that this behavior falls in line with a sociology concept known as “the politics of respectability”; or, the idea that my socially acceptable behavior will somehow earn respect and negate racism (62). I believed that if I behaved like everyone else, then I would be treated the same way. US history, however, and my own personal experiences have proved otherwise.

In the field of linguistics, the term code-switching refers to one’s ability to alternate from one dialect to another in order to suit a given situation (*Oxford Dictionaries*). I believe that this concept also applies to how I move. There are several physical dialects that my body can “speak”. For instance, I move in one code to demonstrate bold and unapologetic blackness. I flip into a different code to show my very contained, “good girl” physicality: hands folded in my lap, legs firmly pressed together at the knee.

I have noticed many people, especially women and people of colour, perform a coded way of moving depending on their audience. Ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are a few of the physical codes I have witnessed. A specific set of physical dialects (“the good girl” and “the assimilated black student”) were so ingrained in me that I had been performing them on stage, even when they didn’t suit the context of a given play. There was such a strict notion of propriety that any deviation would trigger panic.

My academic research helped to articulate key goals for my practical research. What is my unique expression of blackness, femininity, and sexuality and how can it translate into my physicality? How could I embrace my identity without being hindered by it? I needed to

cultivate a new form of self-expression—one that neither perpetuates stereotypes, nor sterilizes my persona into generic assimilation. Perhaps authenticity in movement could be forged after I gained a greater understanding of my identity beyond my social conditioning.

As a first step in practical research, I began experimenting with uncharacteristic movement patterns in studio classes during the winter 2014 semester at York. In Viewpoints® training, I learned that the key to successful movement collaboration was through patience, active listening, and stillness. Eventually the thoughts of self-judgment were replaced with acute focus directed on my peers. I studied the stage picture and determined how best to contribute. Sometimes, I would just be silent or still and let other collaborators take center stage. Switching my attention led to major strides in the class. The goal changed from how to “get it right” into how to build a better ensemble.

In May of 2014, I traveled to Naramata, British Columbia to train with Judith Koltai in a week-long master class that included Authentic Movement and Syntonics®. Both methodologies proved beneficial in physical awareness and finding a greater capacity for impulse-based movement.

My re-visit to Syntonics® was remarkably different than the first time. Now that I had an appreciation for stillness, I could take time and focus on single actions rather than the end result. The workshop included several afternoon lectures about the F. Mezieres method of physical therapy, a great influence on Syntonics®. In 1967, Mezieres challenged traditional kinesiology notions with the theory that nearly all physical tensions or malfunctions were due to lordosis: a shortening of the posterior chain of muscles (Mezieres). Furthermore, once the posterior chain was liberated this allowed the client a host of movement possibilities (Mezieres). I was eager to understand how I might invite new information into how I moved.

I noticed that lordosis in my lower back was causing occasional discomfort there and in my hip socket. Through a series of exercises, I was able to relax taut muscles and stand

without tightening in my lumbar spine. Funnily enough, I discovered that I had been arching my lower back to give myself a more pronounced backside. In actuality, this was not a natural part of my posture. This training has allowed me to identify some of my everyday movement patterns that are insincere. I trust that this will translate to my work on stage. After a week in Syntonics®, I grew to relate to the world with what felt like a brand new skeletal-musculature.

Furthermore, Syntonics® gave me an acute understanding of how I move. Instinctually, my body began to stretch in a way that had more ease and economy of movement. I was no longer moving for movement's sake, but moving in a way that was necessary to do a function. On stressful days, my body might revert to old habits that cause heightened anxiety or physical discomfort. Thankfully, now I can identify the moment that unpleasant emotions start to alter my body and choose another response. In the future, I can apply this technique to stage fright. Syntonics® has given me strategies to listen to my body and attend to my needs.

Authentic Movement training was another major component to the master class. During movement improvisations, I noted some distinct changes in my physicality. Silence and stillness prompted a subtlety in my gestures that I had not known before. I found myself articulating my pinky or my eyebrow as opposed to doing pirouettes across the room. My movement had shifted from macro to micro. I attribute this to several factors.

Firstly, the sessions began with guided meditations, at times we met as a class outdoors. The environment of Naramata had such a calming effect; each day I was surrounded with mountains, a seascape, and rich, colorful plant life. This led to regaining what Woodman refers to as the deep internal rhythm of the body and of the earth (22). Secondly, I had a greater sense of confidence in my capabilities as a performer. Thirdly,

working with eyes closed felt less presentational. Everyone worked with eyes closed, so it was actually impossible to make an impression on others.

Koltai personally commented on my work in Authentic Movement. She said, “Your work is delicate and precise. You only move when you need to” (“The Purpose of Embodied Practice”). It seems as though my body was finding its own way to unique expression. A few instances stood out in my journal entries. I stood still in the center of the studio and angled my head towards the window to feel the heat on my face. On another day, I placed one hand on my stomach and the other on my heart. I breathed into those places, gave a gentle massage, and smiled. The physicality was so true and very much alive, despite my small gestures and slower pace. Authentic Movement revealed a brand new way of moving; therefore, I found what I had sought.

To delve further into improvisation and impulse-work, I decided to put myself into unfamiliar territory. I wanted to see how my body would respond to brand new information. By learning a new skill set, I would alleviate the pressure to achieve. As an absolute beginner, the idea of perfection seemed rather silly which meant that I was free to fumble.

In July of 2014, I traveled to Manitoulin Island, Ontario to train under the guidance of John Turner, master clown and founding member of the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance. This training was conducted on remote farm land and required camping. I had never camped a day in my life until this course. Thankfully, the combination of unfamiliar surroundings and a new performance methodology led to some worthwhile discoveries.

My standard response to a new class is to analyze the process and interpret the instructions into concise intellectual terms. However, a busy summer with extensive travel meant that I did not have the energy to “figure things out”. Turner commented that fatigue meant minimal resistance: without rest the body resorts to primal instinct (“Richard Pochinko

Clown Technique”). the camp environment proved yet another arena in which I had no control. There was an odd liberation in the setting. Without bright lights and mirrors to greet me each morning, I found that my vanity had all but disappeared.

While on these informal camp grounds, my physical and verbal presentation was closer to what I experience around my family. Physically, I had a sense of music, and my body had lost the previous rigidity I associated with academic settings. There were no other black people in this course, yet somehow I felt free to express my blackness. It was not ostentatious or done as a means to be accepted. I was simply allowing my voice and my body to register the first response to a given stimulus.

I frequently found myself speaking in what felt like my mother tongue, or specifically what is referred to as African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). In one journal entry, I commented that I was easily spending 90% of the time speaking organically in AAVE with only about 10% of the time in my “academic” voice, closer to a General American dialect. For the majority of my career, my speech pattern has been the exact opposite.

Exhaustion continued to colour my work for more than half the course, so I did not have the energy to code-switch into my scholarly General American voice. My speaking was much more honest, daring, and truth be told much more vulgar. Once I abandoned my taboos, I realized that I had been holding back a great deal. Clown training was the ideal place to delve deeper into the parts of my personality that I felt were off-limits.

The creative process was much easier without my self-imposed censorship. Pochinko clown technique involves improvised movement exercises, exploring parts of the persona by creating masks, and finally showcasing the masks in brief interludes called “turns”. During “turns”, I started to experience a fuller spectrum of emotions, including the ones I had denied myself in previous coursework. My tendency was to filter certain negative, sexual, or

stereotypically “black” movement impulses in a given scene. Clown training promptly rid me of this habit. There was only enough energy to execute my first choice.

I was tasked with creating six character masks that would represent the six facets of my personality (Appendix A: Photo 4). These parts would ultimately make up what Turner refers to as a “Baby Clown”: an innocent but fully-realized clown. The masks were born out of improvisations without the aid of actual language, but sounds and non-sense speak were encouraged.

Two masks in particular were very freeing and allowed me to express parts of my psyche that had been dormant. The very first character mask that I created was intensely sexual. As “The Sugar Succubus”, I slithered and slinked through the room with a wide stance. I stood with my mouth wide open and my tongue licking my bottom lip. The torn shirt I wore from the wardrobe chest exposed my mid-drift. Normally I would cover up my body, but within this character I felt unashamed.

My last character mask had a tremendous impact on me as well. “The Fisherman” was an exploration of isolation and fear. He was the physical embodiment of loneliness which I experience as a heavy, gravitational pull. He moved with sluggish, pain-staking steps; each movement bearing the weight of his grief at being alone. I felt shame about my personal struggles with loneliness and frequently stifled the emotion during coursework at York.

Lonely was yet another state of being that I had labeled “inappropriate.” I was afraid that I would simply collapse onto the floor in a sobbing frenzy and not be able to stop. My “turn” with this particular mask had its fair share of yelling and weeping, but dramatizing this emotion lifted the burden of it. In the future, I am confident that accessing this emotion in a scene will be much easier. The important lesson I took away from clown training was to make peace with the things that scared me. Also, insecurity and fear were major hindrances on my impulse-based work.

In summation, I learned that finding authenticity is not merely about my physicality; it is an emotional and verbal exploration as well. This journey is helping me to embrace my genuine speech. I am an academic and can articulate myself in a scholarly fashion. However, this formality does not have to influence my everyday life. My true voice exists somewhere between two vastly different worlds.

Similarly, my physicality is a complex and evolving hybrid. At the beginning of my thesis research, I had no clue how to control my ever-moving body. Currently, I face the exact opposite; sometimes my body and face are not fully expressive in the work. In particular, my eyes can sometimes take on a glazed expression as they find a fixed point. Last year, I had genuinely struggled with training my eyes to stop bouncing around the room. In the winter 2014 semester, both my acting and movement professors had mentioned the occasional disconnection in my gaze. I witnessed this strange new habit in footage taken from a film acting workshop. There is such a thing as too relaxed, and I had found it.

Also during a scene study course, I was far too subdued. I had to explore bold sexuality: close contact, kissing, and heavy petting. I had no idea where my previously outsized movement had gone because I desperately needed it. My director kept telling me to be brave and that physically there was more opportunity. It took the entire semester to reach the intensity that the scene demanded.

In light of my progress to date, this recent hiccup can be seen as useful. I now have a clearer understanding of the various degrees of movement intensity. Pochinko clown technique teaches the students to express movement impulses on a scale of 1-6. I began my graduate degree at level 6, and now I hover at level 1 or 2. After experiencing both extremes of physicality, I can work towards finding a balance, continuing to observe how my body negotiates space both on stage and off.

3. Dramaturgical Research and Script Analysis

The first task in my actor's process is to understand the author's intent and the central themes of the play. In my first reading of *Venus*, I inferred that Parks' writing was aiming to evoke empathy for the title character and to defame her colonizers. Scene 31 is a prime example wherein The Man and The Brother objectify the "big bottomed girl" whom they will eventually market as a freak show act—the Venus Hottentot:

THE BROTHER.
Shes grown.

THE MAN.
As they all do.
Big Bottomed Girls. Thats their breed.
You were at one time very into it.

THE BROTHER.
Big Bottomed Girl. A novelty.
Shes vigorous and meticulous.

THE MAN.
An "African Dancing Princess" ?

THE BROTHER.
The Britsll eat it up.
Oh, she'd make a splendid freak. (*Venus* 22-23)

This exchange seems like the frank assessment of a product, void of any empathy for the object in question: a human being. The fact that I am playing two oppressive constructs in one role, a misogynist and a slave owner, presents an interesting conflict. How can I humanize what I hate? To separate my personal judgments from the character, I began to envision The Man as strictly business-minded; I decided to remove pathos. He sees an opportunity, weighs the risk, and then capitalizes on it.

My initial assessment, however, was soon influenced by deeper readings of commentary of the play. Essayist Harry Elam Jr. speaks to the complexity of identity in *Venus* as the playwright "disrupts stereotypical depictions of black and white identities" and depicts more than "a simple picture of oppressive whites and exploited blacks" (285). Rather

than the narrative of helpless victim and cruel villain, Parks empowers The Venus with moments of sexual agency and displays scenes of love and sensitivity from one of her colonizers, The Baron Docteur (Elam 285). Theatre scholar Shawn Marie Garret calls The Venus a “sexpot” and a “third-wave feminist” who “should possess sexual presence and power in performance” (24). Perhaps the author subverts expectations and complicates these relationships on purpose. The audience cannot simply choose a side; this story is not simply good versus evil.

The remarks from the playwright about her work swayed my opinion even further. In a *Public Access* interview, Parks states: “I was drawn to [The Venus Hottentot] as a subject because of her name, Venus, love, and I write a lot about love in my work” (Chaudhuri 35). I want to find love in my portrayal of The Man because the author points to the emotion as a central theme in her writing.

Parks was reported to have criticized the original production of *Venus* due to the concept of director Richard Foreman lacking genuine love and eros (Garret 3). Foreman admits to his production featuring a “bumbling, shy” Baron Docteur awkwardly courting The Venus in almost laughable romance (“Remarks on Parks”). In a transcribed interview with theatre scholar Shawn-Marie Garret, Parks comments that: “*Venus* was much more straightforward than Richard made it...It is an erotic play...It was a sexual draw; it was about getting turned on” (qtd. in Garret 24). The playwright’s frank comments led me to re-imagine my character as a creature driven by love, infatuation rather than reverence, and lust.

Another fascinating surprise came from Parks’ denial of using her shows as activism—detailed by quotes from the book *Suzan-Lori-Parks: Essays on Plays and Other Works*. The playwright insists: “If you get boxed in, then you start thinking of yourself as boxed in and saying, ‘Hey, you gotta represent! You gotta talk about the issues!’ I’m not somebody who’s battling issues” (Garret 16). In 1994 she told *The New York Times* that she

“never wanted to be a spokesperson for the [black] race” (Richards C3). These comments lead me to believe that a fierce political statement is antithetical to the intention of the piece. The author does, however, state the following in her 1995 essay titled *Possession*:

“Theatre for me is the perfect place to ‘make’ history—that is, because so much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to locate—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real life—the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.” (“Possession” 4)

The above quote supports my original assumption, but contradicts several other public statements from the playwright. Parks seems to have some conflicting comments about her own work. I am unclear about her writing manifesto: does she use her writing as a vehicle for social change or does she not?

The author’s public statements can be mysterious and complex, and at times she makes it difficult to draw a singular conclusion. The use of dichotomous opinions is present in her non-fiction writing and in *Venus*. My best hypothesis is that her words, whether they are in essays, plays, short stories, or even interviews, are meant as rhetorical. It could mean that she challenges her audience with questions, but does not answer them. I am inclined to take this approach while trying to decipher her writings.

Originally, I looked at *Venus* as an opportunity to challenge historical narratives and point to social injustices; however, at times the playwright avoids such direct conclusions. Perhaps if I try to illustrate my own political beliefs in this performance, I will miss the simple act of telling a story about love. Distilled and simplified characterization will lend itself to my artistic challenge of finding authenticity and primal impulse in movement. Without my over-thinking inner-activist at work, I can focus on my instinctual physical responses to my fellow actors on stage.

In subsequent readings of *Venus*, I tailored my script analysis to the superficial context clues in the text, as opposed to guessing at the subtext or social commentary. I notice two reoccurring devices in the play: the action of counting and itemization as well as the on-going references to spectacle and spectator. UCLA English professor Lisa Mendelman references the play's "on-going numeric and corporeal listings" in her essay *Resonant Silence* (136). "In The Mother-Showman's capitalist agenda, as in The Docteur's medical examination and any other colonial project, exteriors can be counted, itemized, defined, and distinguished" (Mendelman 136). There seems to be a great deal of repetition in the lines themselves, almost as though the characters are echoing each other.

In terms of spectator versus spectacle, I find myself constantly asking: who is being watched and when does the object in question actually want the attention? Some authors suggest that Parks' writing aims to implicate the audience in the act of publically humiliating The Venus. "It anticipates and satirizes the impulse to flee, putting the spectator in a double-bind. Neither staying nor going, the play implies, absolves anyone of the sin of complicity, a word ubiquitous in *Venus* criticism (Larson 203): complicity in voyeurism, in exploitation, in theatricality" (Garret 20).

In the author's notes for *Venus*, Parks references several writing devices that are specific to her style: a (*Rest.*), or a brief pause, a Spell which is "an elongated and heightened (*Rest.*)", and the use of parenthesis around dialogue to indicate a whispered, sotto voice (*Venus* 7). Parks' glossary of terms gives me a clearer understanding in terms of vocal delivery and moments of creative license.

The Spell is of particular interest to me as this is "a place of great (unspoken) emotion" and "a place for an emotional transition" ("Elements of Style" 16-17). Suspended silence provides a great opportunity to enrich stillness with emotional substance, or to explore gestural communication. Without dialogue, movement will be the focus of the story telling.

To indicate a Spell, the playwright writes the characters' names in capitalized letters without dialogue. For instance, I have a Spell with The Brother and The Girl which reads as follows:

THE BROTHER.
THE GIRL.
THE MAN.
THE BROTHER.
THE GIRL.
THE MAN. (*Venus* 27)

Parks does not supplement these moments with stage directions or suggested emotions. It would seem as though these moments are open to interpretation; thus, these interludes could lend themselves to improvisation and impulse exploration.

In addition to text analysis, I want to enrich my roles in *Venus* with historical context. The director of my thesis production, Jamie Robinson, has envisioned The Man as a wealthy, land owning member of the Khoi Khoi tribe: a people located along the western coast of Cape Town, South Africa. My character makes distinctions between himself and The Venus: "That's their breed" and "Their kind remember everything" (*Venus* 22, 24). Interestingly, in this directorial concept both characters are of the same heritage, so The Man's condescending remarks might speak to a class distinction rather than a racial one. My research supports this theory.

According to the anthology *The Cape Herders*, Khoisan people maintained a self-sufficient and class-based society until the arrival of European settlers in the late 17th century (50). As a herding tribe, they had power over other groups, especially the hunter-foragers who depended on them for cattle (30). The villages of these herdsman typically had servants who were very poor Khoi Khoi members or people from lower hierarchical tribes (30). Therefore, the dialogue demonstrated in Scene 31 could have been common place, given the history of the culture.

The story of *Venus* occurs during the lifetime of Saartje Baartmann, 1788-1815, a time in which the British would achieve full colonial rule of South Africa (*The Cape Herders*

96). During this period, military savvy and education were two ways for a Khoi Khoi member to work alongside his colonizers, thus leading to possible wealth and independence (85). Two historical figures exemplify prosperity and cooperation with the British in the early 19th century. In 1802, Captain Ruiters Beesje was paid by the government to recruit other Khoi Khoi for the Cape Corps (90) (Appendix B: Character Research—The Man). A man named Bretagne Jantjes, who was a wagon owner, worked as an interpreter and was frequently called upon to help testify in court or to assist missionaries (103). I can potentially use either of these high status Khoisan tribesmen to give a back-story to my character, The Man.

The second character that I play in *Venus*, The Venus' Chorus, is an additional part not in the original list of roles. Director Jamie Robinson conceived of two additional characters to act as a chorus in order to illustrate the complex psyche of The Venus. Robinson has presented me with an exciting opportunity to develop the character through research and improvisation. The director and I will work in tandem to devise this persona during the rehearsal process. I want a better understanding of the actual historical figure before I portray some aspect of her in *Venus*.

As a woman of the Khoi Khoi, Baartmann might have had numerous responsibilities within the tribe. Women distributed food; they were in charge of counting, butchering, and dividing up shares (*The Cape Herders* 43). Specific instances in *Venus* support the idea of Baartmann's math capabilities and financial savvy. In Scene 22 and Scene 25, she and her boss, The Mother Showman, count several hundred dollars of earnings from their freak show act (*Venus* 49, 59). The Venus goes on to negotiate her salary because she knows that her solo act earns the most money for the show. She states: "You pay us each 5 coins a week. We're all paid equal but we dont draw equal...I'm thuh one they come to see. I'm thuh main attraction...I should get 50 a week. Plus better food, uh lock on my door and uh new dress now n then" (*Venus* 62-63).

It was not out of the question for some Khoisan women to come into power, thus substantiating the growing ambition of the play's protagonist. "Women could own stock in their own right, and in some cases became regents or temporary chiefs" (*The Cape Herders* 47). The text has clear examples of how The Venus craves a higher status. She wants a public display of the love affair she has with a French anatomist known as The Baron Docteur. "He'll leave that wife for good and we'll get married...The Doctor will introduce me to Napoleon himself" (*Venus* 137). The Khoi Khoi had very rigid class mobility, which was seldom crossed except for marriage into a higher class (*The Cape Herders* 42). The Venus demonstrates this by her desire to marry the wealthy doctor.

In the autopsy notes taken by French anatomist Georges Cuvier, the doctor mentions that Saartje Baartmann "spoke several languages, had a good ear for music, and possessed a good memory" (Mitchell 42). By some interpretations, Parks' heroine can be seen as autonomous, driven, and intelligent. However, some widely held European beliefs about the real life historical figure and her people were quite contrary.

The Khoisan had been described by some European settlers as "the wild Hottentots" and "closer on the great chain of being to apes" (*The Cape Herders* 15, 98). In the anthology *Black Venus 2010*, Sander Gilman explains how Baartmann's tribe was slandered by the speculation and prejudicial interpretation of colonizers.

"Buffon, the French naturalist, credited the black with a lascivious, apelike sexual appetite, introducing a commonplace of early travel literature into a pseudoscientific context... the black's position on the scale of humanity was antithetical to white's...the lowest exemplum of mankind on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot." (Gilman 16)

My understanding of this deeply troubling history is essential in my portrayal of the character. She was not only marginalized; she was considered non-human.

In *The Book of Days*, author Robert Chambers gave a first-hand historical account of the Hottentot Venus freak show act. Baartmann was “led by her keeper...being obligated to walk, stand, or sit as he ordered her...She was often heard to heave deep sighs in the course of the exhibition and displayed great sullenness of temper” (Mitchell 64-65). Again, this proves Baartmann as more than a one-dimensional victim stereotype. She did not stand idly by and take the punishment without expressing her disapproval. I can use this in my portrayal of The Venus’ Chorus. I want to show the nuances of this character, perhaps I can physically show her conflict during moments when she is not permitted to speak.

4. Rehearsal Plan of Action

Prior to starting rehearsal, I have pursued two goals to facilitate my acting process for *Venus*. First, I am continuing my physical practice in The Batdorf Technique and in the style of Authentic Movement as taught by Judith Koltai. Second, I will prioritize physical wellness as I recover from a minor injury that occurred in January of 2015.

Body awareness and tension release exercises are part of my daily practice. From The Batdorf Technique, I use the method of targeted stretching to trigger deep yawns. The initial phase of this process alleviates the stiffness in the major and minor joints (fingers, toes, knees, shoulder socket, femurs within the hip socket, etc.) by rotation, bending, and extension of the surrounding muscles.

The body then responds to this relief with sighs, groans, and eventually a yawn. Over time, the yawns will coordinate with the stretching, occurring simultaneously, and the extremities of the left and right sides will move independently of one another. Batdorf refers to this as a “full body yawn”: as the body engages the bones and major muscle groups, the torso instinctively twists to awaken the spine (Batdorf). Finally, the body will balance the pulling and contraction with immediate relaxation.

This activity is designed as a cycle: rest until a discomfort is identified, articulate the areas that need attention, and finally reset to stillness. The more I practice, the more specificity I find in my internal body awareness, and I can isolate the particular stretch that will generate continuous yawning. Batdorf recommended this exploration upon waking up because the body is in a fully relaxed state and one feels the weight of her/his body in relationship to the ground (Batdorf). In addition to a quick morning stretch, I use this method to prepare for performance.

Physical release practice provides a number of benefits to my actor’s process. Relaxation combats stage fright by slowing the heart rate and helping to quiet the barrage of

self-judgments that might hinder my primary physical impulses. With specific body work, I can undo habitual muscular tension that might limit my range of motion and in so doing prevent injury. Finally, this practice will translate to my work on stage as I can anticipate the onset of problematic physical tendencies (for example breath holding, clenched fingers and toes, over-active facial muscles) and sense them before they affect my performance.

Authentic Movement technique continues to foster organic physical expression and impulse response. Similar to The Batdorf Technique, this method involves internal scanning, but now I include external stimuli to inspire actions. This form of deep body awareness translates into an ability to acutely “listen” to the bodies of my scene partners through observations of their breath, stance, and facial expressions. My performance in *Venus* affords me plenty of time to witness without dialogue, so I can use this study of the body during moments of silent interaction. Is there a collective pace of movement? When I change my positioning or close distance, how does this affect my scene partner physically?

In my solo practice of Authentic Movement, I frequently find myself running around the room to counteract the cold temperature or slapping major muscle groups to get blood moving in my body. The sensation of warmth and of my own pulse helps me to observe my breath cycle. From there, I visit my psyche: what is the dominant emotion I feel in this moment and how can I physicalize it? I experiment with micro and macro responses to sensation, anything from rolling my eyes to doing cartwheels. In this way, I am attempting to find the happy medium between hyper-activity and hyper-relaxation. Once the rehearsal process begins, I will apply this principle to the container of the text, experimenting with variations of intensity for my reactions within a given scene.

Later, I marry the physicalization to verbalization. If I experience pain in my lower back, I moan for it as I stretch. I whimper at the thought of my exhaustion while shrinking into the fetal position. Sometimes I feel the need to dance, and often sing along as I move. In

this state of play, I introduce the lines, infusing the words of the script with the emotional quality of my current state of being. Eventually I plan on using this technique to help memorize my lines from *Venus*, and as a way to explore various acting choices.

I find that the skills in The Batdorf Technique and Authentic Movement take time to develop, therefore; I have afforded myself several weeks to practice in short, ten-minute explorations. As of January 2015, I have been using both practices during my physical warm-up for the winter mainstage production at York University: Joan Littlewood's *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. Over time, I trust that my practice will promote a faster connection to primal physical impulses.

My body is instrumental to my practical thesis research, and I must ensure my health while undertaking rigorous physical work. In early January 2015, I suffered a dislocated tailbone during a dance rehearsal for *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. This was a minor setback to my physical practice, as I was limited in lower body movements for a short while. The incident has made me vigilant about stretching and proper execution of my warm-up.

Currently, I am undergoing physiotherapy once a week. I have also added a short yoga sequence into my performance preparation to support the alignment of the sacrum: downward dog, upward dog, and child's pose. A key component to both methodologies that I study is an acute sense of interoception—awareness of stimuli arising from within the body (“interoceptive”). I listen to the pain receptors as they tell me how far I can challenge my body. Each day, I adjust my sequence of physical practice depending on my needs. For example, as my injury heals I can try deeper stretches to articulate my spine.

In Graduate Movement Two, Batdorf insisted that students work from their “happy animal” and to modify the activities to suit an injury (Batdorf). She proposed that the injured human body will instinctually move in a way that promotes healing. After my injury, I frequently sensed the need to lengthen my back; my muscles felt sore and had responded to

the pain with aggressive contractions. I decided to do some yoga postures—a practice that I had not performed regularly for months. Thankfully, this knowledge base and my flexibility have helped to expedite the healing process. I hope for full recovery before my thesis performance in order to have full range of motion and freedom in physical expression. In the event that I still experience discomfort; however, I will have to work with the injury in a healthy, sustainable way.

Once the rehearsal period begins, I will incorporate advanced movement improvisation methods from Richard Pochinko clown technique and The Batdorf Technique into my preparation. The first three weeks of rehearsal have allocated time for actors to schedule improvisation and exploration with the guidance of the director. I plan to meet with my director, Jamie Robinson, to discuss my artistic challenge early in the process, and then demonstrate how I might use various movement techniques to personalize my roles in *Venus*.

I will use clown exercises and mask work to find gradations of physical expression. According to Pochinko clown master teacher John Turner, performers explore the physicalization of emotional states on a scale of one to six, known as impulse levels (Turner). Pochinko clowning uses exercises from Lecoq neutral mask work to facilitate heightened emotions. To reach impulse level six, I might do an exercise known as “The Goodbye” wherein I visualize the emotional circumstances, environment, and the tactile interaction as my character parts from a loved one.

Another useful activity is what Turner refers to as “walking the mask”: I can use any of the six masks I created over the summer and embody the physicality of these personas (Turner). Each mask has a distinct personality that is reflected in the stance, the walk, and the gestures. I can rehearse text while in a mask, to experiment with how the nuances of the mask might inform my roles in *Venus*. The “Sugar Succubus” mask has a great deal of frank sexuality that might serve my portrayal of The Venus’ Chorus. There could potentially be a

combination of masks that influence a character as well. I might use the feet of “The Fisherman” and the head/neck relationship of “Daddy’s Plastic” for The Man. Later, I add costume pieces to this exploration to determine how the clothing influences the physicality of the character. For example, a certain pair of shoes might change my gait, or a tight fitting garment could affect my breathing.

An advanced phase of The Batdorf Technique known as Kinesthetic Transference will also serve to create distinct physicality for both my roles in *Venus*. For The Man and The Venus’ Chorus, I will build what Batdorf refers to as a ‘character body’, establishing specific physical choices in the skeletal structure: feet, stance, pelvis alignment, spine, chest, neck, carriage of arms, and head placement (Batdorf). There are a number of subtleties in the development of a character body. For example, do the feet of the character turn-in or turn-out? Perhaps the left leg brushes on the stride while the right comes down with a heavy thud. I might adopt a pelvis tilt slightly upward on one side, or a sinking shoulder.

In my character body work, I choose these physical attributes based upon the character’s personality and status. The Man is of higher economic status than The Brother and The Girl. What does power look like in a human body, especially in a man? I might experiment with a raised sternum and widened shoulder setting. In terms of pace, he may walk or gesture at a relatively slow tempo—the leisure of having the upper hand. My experiments in the studio will primarily be guided by conclusions I have drawn from the script.

Eventually, I will consider the several variations of the character body and let my intuition make the final decisions. The latter half of this work is about finding the flavour of the character through dancing or other free-form activities. I move until it feels ‘right’, and then I begin speaking the text. There is no way to concretize this part of the process; I simply trust my instincts.

Once I have chosen these physical characteristics, I go on to explore the musical quality of the character body. I can walk or dance while in character and allow my tempo to change in accordance to the music I use as an underscore. The music might dictate the movements, moving in time with the rhythm, or I might actively work against it to find a unique speed. This work can also be done with a metronome or a single repeated tone, a musical drone note—timing the duration of movements in four counts, then eight, then sixteen—in order to find a pace that feels organic for that character.

One final exploration of character body will involve multi-tasking: setting out a physical task while speaking text and maintaining the specificity in my character body choices. The activity could be as simple as folding laundry, but the real challenge comes from juggling the tempo, skeletal structure, and gestural habits while simultaneously speaking text with emotional investment. I imagine this will require the greatest amount of time and practice.

My written rehearsal preparation has a two-fold approach. In the first phase, I gage the broad concepts of the play as they pertain to my characters' needs. I separate the scenes of the play into sections, units of action, and re-name them according to that unit's main idea. Each time there is a clear thought shift or a change of intention for the character, this denotes a new unit. For *The Man*, I have broken Scene 31 into twelve units. Unit one happens from pages eighteen to nineteen; I call this 'The Brother's sketchy pitch.' The action shifts when *The Man* stops belittling *The Brother* and starts to seriously contemplate the deal on the line "I need to think on it" (*Venus* 19). Unit two, 'double yr money', happens as *The Man* listens to *The Brother's* now somewhat plausible business venture. In unit three, 'first fall', the focus of the text is brought to *The Girl* on the line "(You don't know her?)" (*Venus* 20).

Each character has a trajectory of story, and I must determine the ultimate goal of the character by the play's end: a super objective. I will infer this super objective for both roles,

as this is not explicitly stated in the text. The Man may have the super objective ‘to acquire possessions’ and become the wealthiest member of the tribe—not just to own objects but essentially to own The Venus. As The Venus’ Chorus, I could choose the super objective ‘to marry the doctor’ which ultimately means escape from slavery, as well as guaranteed food, shelter, and love. Therefore, every action is in support of her wooing The Baron Docteur.

The next phase of my text work will analyze the smaller portions of the play: the scenes and the units of action within them. With each scene, I decide on a moment before; what are the given circumstances prior to this exchange? In Scene 14, as The Venus’ Chorus, I will witness The Venus in bed with The Baron Docteur (*Venus* 109). Perhaps prior to this scene I perfume myself or help The Venus into her negligée. Again, this information may not be stated outright in the text, so I use context clues to make an informed choice.

I go on to identify the character’s objective for the given scene. The Venus eats chocolates as The Baron admires her beauty, and my character interjects by speaking the names of the chocolates in French (*Venus* 109). My objective for this scene might be ‘to seduce’ because I am an extension of The Venus, and every step closer to the doctor’s love is one step closer to freedom.

Lastly, I interpret each line of text. I consider the wants, the potential risks, and the means whereby the character may achieve her goals. Chapter six of my thesis will include a photocopy of my promptbook which provides a clear example of how I mark my script. In a binder, I keep a photocopied page of text as well as a blank page that immediately follows in order to note my line-by-line analysis.

On the script pages, I will write my movements in the scene, known as blocking. I also mark down directorial feedback; these might include suggestions to try at the next rehearsal. My script notations are always in pencil, as the creative process is on-going, and choices may potentially change. On the blank page, I choose an objective for each unit as

well as an obstacle—the roadblock that prevents the achievement of the objective. An obstacle may be the external opposition of another character, or an internal struggle within my character’s own psyche. A good barometer to find the obstacle is to think as the character would and ask myself, “What is keeping me from getting what I want?” The final component is called the action, or, the various ways in which the character will pursue these objectives. This is written as a playable verb to allow for specificity in my acting choices.

In Scene 3, the second member of The Venus’ Chorus and I narrate “a brief history of chocolate” (*Venus* 156). I have a line that reads as follows: “ ‘Chocolate is the damnable agent of necromancers and sorcerers,’ said one French cleric circa 1620” (*Venus* 156). My objective might be “to educate.” My obstacle might come from the notion that this statement defames chocolate—the very substance that mirrors my character’s person: a brown, exploited, colonial product. In short, I must fight against the obstacle that I degrade myself. As a playable action, I may choose ‘simmer’ or ‘wring’ to illustrate a sense of sarcasm in the line.

As a final step in my rehearsal explorations, I want to integrate central themes and motifs into movement; I will experiment with these concepts in improvisations. For example, can I use the idea of counting in my gestures? Perhaps in one of the plays *Spells*, I might try a variation of the same physical choice as a repetition. As *The Man*, I could find ways to itemize and fetishize the various physical attributes of *The Girl*.

Throughout my process, I plan to keep a rehearsal journal to report my findings. Each improvisation session, I will begin by asking a question as it pertains to movement. For instance, how does *The Venus’ Chorus* carry her chest, and does that change depending on her audience? Once my character bodies are solidified for both roles in *Venus*, I will provide a detailed analysis of their physical attributes.

5. Selected Journal Entries

(1) January 27

Last Friday I met with my physio to discuss my injury. Apparently, it was only a minor dislocation of my sacrum, no danger of breaking or fracturing the bone. As I landed on my back, the sacrum twisted out of place. I dislocated it on a diagonal.

Going forward, I have to be conscious of any activity that twists my lower back as it would be counter-intuitive to the healing process. Sadly, this will affect my warm-up routine because I can't do rotating or side stretching in the torso. I will make the adjustment. My health improves. I no longer need an Advil to get through the day.

Today was the company read-through of the script, day one. The first read was a chance to hear the text from my scene partners for the first time. I was acutely aware of how much the dialogue isolates The Venus—the blunt ways of itemizing her in the verbatim texts. It was pretty disturbing to hear spoken aloud.

Jamie tells us to keep in mind a few literary devices as we explore text in table work: poetry, counting, perspective, and intensity. Where does the dialogue become poetic with the use of paired lines, rhyming, alliteration, etc.? He mentioned a motif of counting—not just the actual naming of numbers but the idea of repetition in speech. Suzan-Lori Parks calls this technique 'Repetition and Revision' or 'Rep & Rev'. Jamie says he wants to use the repetition as a means to provoke the audience. The lines get steadily more intense as they build to a moment of emotional height.

Much to my delight, the director gave us notes of advice about movement. He says in improvisation and exploring scenes that the actors should think in terms of curves and orbits. The curves are present in the body of the Venus and in the set design. Several scenes reference orbits in the play. Also, Jamie asks us to consider a cycle of forward and reverse, this hearkens to the parts of the play that are told in reverse time order. I will keep this in mind when exploring character body tempo and gesture.

Lastly, the director wants us to keep in mind our perspectives as we deliver our lines. The lines can be direct address to the audience or spoken in relationship to a scene partner. The perspective is especially interesting during my choral moments. I will ask myself 'to whom' do I direct this statement and 'for whom', for whose benefit?

(2) January 29

Today's rehearsal turned my interpretation of The Man on its head. I was under the impression that I, as The Man, am in an accord with The Brother, especially as I agree to the business deal.

We explored various conflicts within the scene. We are friends of a sort, but there is a deeply ingrained social / cultural history of prejudice just beneath the surface. There are moments where I resent The Brother. As he objectifies The Girl, my new response is to shame him. Originally, I assumed that I would congratulate him. The lines seem to imply that I like the frank assessment of the merchandise.

Now, Jamie is steering me more towards siding with The Girl. She and I are allies. We are both black and members of a colonized people. This is not a laughing matter for me. As I agree to the business deal, in some ways I betray The Girl and my own people. I know the potential ridicule and cruelty she might face. So this decision to let her go abroad with The Brother weighs heavy on me.

In the back story, Jamie mentions an incident in the past in which The Brother raped The Girl. This is supported by the text. The Brother says in scene 29, "Remember me? About twelve years ago...It's partly why we've come. I want to love you properly, not like I did back home." And later in the scene he forces himself on her again.

My character is privy to this information. I understand that The Brother, a childhood friend, has abused one of my people. It adds gravity to the business deal. How can I trust this person? I have to find a way to justify saying yes. This changes how I envisioned the character quite a bit. He's not so cheerful and chummy as I thought.

Even stranger, I had no physical impulses today. What brave new world is this? I think I was struggling to reconcile the fact that all of my original instincts were void now. I thought of The Man as this lecherous, smarmy guy. He was maybe slinky and serpentine in how he moved, constantly drooling over the "Big Bottomed Girl". Now she's my ally, or rather, I'm hers. I don't objectify her as blatantly and ruthlessly as The Brother.

Also, I'm meant to show my wealthy status. So far I find this to be stoic, eagle-like. I sit, perch, and survey. Only occasionally do I covet The Girl, maybe for a half-second, I flip into a vulture. But then I remember myself and who I am; I snap out of that. This new persona will take some time to develop.

The director said to play and use the space, but I wasn't sure how to go about that with all these new attributes for the character. Not to mention the dreaded script was in my hand. I had to keep referring back to it. Okay going forward: 1. establish new actions for the scene, 2. get off-book, 3. explore an animal to embody for movement.

(3) January 31

Scenes 27 and 24 explored the relationship of The Venus to her spectators. While I don't play the Venus' Chorus until later on, it was interesting to witness her public humiliation as a neutral party. I play one of the bystanders who happens upon her freak show act.

I felt a sense of guilt and shame as I gawked and laughed at her. I imagine Gabi, The Venus, must have felt awful. To stand by as people poke and prod and carry on. My comrades are all very competent actors, and at times it was hard to stomach the sight of it all. I had to stop at one point because it upset me too much. It was all I could do not to cry. It triggered bad memories of my travels in Asia. How anything from a day wandering the market in Indonesia to taking pictures on the Great Wall of China could be disrupted by ignorant folks trying to gawk or treat me like an animal at the petting zoo. It took me back to the little Korean girl who furiously rubbed my forearm to see if the "dirt" would come off. This isn't just a play for me, this actually happened to me in real life. I sat there looking at Gabi and I thought, "My God I have been here." I was so sad and then in such a state of rage. I stood by as The Grade School Chum orbits, paws, and rubs her. I'm uncomfortable even now, just recollecting it.

I wanted to grab Gabi and take her off that platform. It was just too real for me. I wanted to rescue Gabi, to make them stop touching her. "Yeah, it's so easy for you all," I thought. "This is just pretend for you." Will they ever understand this experience? Being made to feel less than human... this ugliness, this worthlessness, this depression, this rage. To know that this story about a woman 200 years ago is really just a premonition for what I experienced in my lifetime. There are deeper implications at work here! After the rehearsal, Patrick hugged Gabi as she quietly sobbed. I was ready to put my fist in someone's face... or go home. Spent.

Today will be in my memory as I play this scene: the shame and disgust, the sense of embarrassment all the while in public. The saddest part is, this scene is absolutely historically accurate. There's documentation of what went on while the Hottentot Venus was paraded around Europe. This all actually happened. How do I channel this anger? How

can I use it? Will I be able to embody this rage and humiliation non-verbally? Lord knows. But I do have to work on not blaming everyone for a lack of empathy. I can't expect everyone to get it. Maybe they did empathize and did feel bad about it, but chose not to say anything. I have to appreciate the people who try to understand, but forgive the people who don't. Must move on.

(4) February 4

Had some real demons come up today. At first, all was well. We had a workshop in West African dance technique, followed by a working session to learn choreography. I'm experienced in other forms of dance, but not this kind.

I was aggravated at how long it was taking me to retain simple dance phrases. There were tricky cross-patterned arms to coordinate with alternating leg movements. This is my Achilles' heel as a dancer: cross-patterning while traveling. *Why can't I pick up this sequence?!* The perfectionist had returned.

Well, seeing as how this was my very first time to try West African dance, I shouldn't expect to be a master at it. Then later as we learned the sequence for The Venus' Chorus, I was again upset. The choreographer kept telling me to "be free". She said I was controlling the placement of the arms and trying to "make it pretty". She wanted more chaos. Damn this inner control freak won't quit!

I was nervous and too cautious. I wanted to get it right rather than trusting myself to play in the dance. The choreographer also caught me anticipating—I would have a slight pause before I fell. The fall is very Modern dance technique, a la Martha Graham, just wild and almost out of balance. Mine was too safe.

The demon jealousy decided to rear her ugly head too! Some of the other women were taking to this technique with much more ease and facility, especially the woman in the leading role. As childish as it was, I envied her body too. She's so slender and tall; she has the ideal body for this work. *She's so thin, look at how graceful she is. No wonder she got this part, she's so much better at this than you.*

I had to quiet these negative thoughts coursing through me. They told me that I was inadequate, awkward, clumsy, too short, or too fat. I'm not normally a jealous person; I dunno what came over me today. Well the task is to re-gain confidence. How do I trust myself to be enough? Focus on my actor work and remove my ego. Do my job.

(5) February 21

So today in rehearsal we went over Scene 31 and I did the latest version of The Man. So far he's come together psychologically, but not physically. Funnily enough I had on my schedule that today I was going to go into the studio and do some character body. I was going to start building him, now that I have a clearer sense of who he is and what he needs.

We get into rehearsal and Jamie points out how feminine Samantha and I are. He says things like "leaning on your hip" or "popping your foot off the ground" or "putting your hand to your chest in moments of shock" those are all very feminine things. Sliding or skating with feet as opposed to planting the foot on the gait. He listed all the things to avoid.

I find it really interesting that all the habits that are feminine are contracting, shrinking, shifting weight, tilting. And all the habits that are male, or that we associate as male, are solid, sturdy, and have a degree of certainty to them. With the feminine it's the gliding, the floating, the popping—not necessarily being static. It's much more fluid. I'll try to suspend my personal beliefs about gender norms for the time being. But the more I think about it, Jamie is right. This is what I observe in men and women just walking down the street. He's definitely onto it.

I went into the studio today and I took a photo of the work that I've compiled so far (Appendix A: Photo 1). The Venus' Chorus was so simple for me to do. It's like that already existed in me: the ability to go into hyper-feminine physicality. This included a sense of being fluid, viscous, spinning, circles, and undulation. I'm illustrating a part of The Venus as she grows into womanhood. That mature part of her psyche is coming to light and I want to illustrate that in my movements. For The Venus' Chorus I mostly did Authentic Movement—just relied on sensations to tell my body how to move.

Whereas The Man is going to be a direct contrast. I want him to appear hyper-male so that I have a clear distinction between the two characters. I didn't have as much success with The Man today. I got some broad concepts about his physicality. He's very crotch-centric with a slower tempo in movements. He deals with expansion in the ribs and with the gestures of the arms. There's a lot of width, and I'm experimenting with a wider set shoulder girdle and wider stance. Maybe next time I can try a lower center of gravity?

The animal that came to mind was a hawk. He swoops down to observe his domain. He surveys his land and he has this great moment where he's crouched. Also, he has a slight tilt

of the head. Versus The Venus' Chorus that has fluidity at the base of the skull. This will read as a floating and almost gelatin like physicality. The Man is some sort of a bird—hawk, eagle, or vulture. He's very calculating and he likes to think before he makes the next decision. I am definitely thinking about a slight tilt of the head when he examines something closely. I will employ some animal work for The Man, but I don't think The Venus' Chorus needs it.

The Venus' Chorus is a bit esoteric and relies mostly on intuition. I suppose the joke is on me because this is a recipe for traditional gender roles if I ever heard one. The movement of a woman is based on feelings and the movement of a man is based on thoughts! (I swore before this process began that I wouldn't let my own personal politics get in my way. When will I stop being self-righteous and just do the bloody work?) The Man works much more like a construct; he's much more linear. These explorations fall in line with the Marion Woodman book I read that spoke of the various kinds of creative processes. I'll try it both ways and see what I find.

(6) February 25-26

Today we had a make-up class for the time missed last semester while Erika Batdorf was away. We get to have two more sessions in the Batdorf technique. It really helped to solidify some of the character body work for the Venus' Chorus. We were sounding, and then physicalizing the response to that sound (for example, the sound of "ahhh"). What does "ahhh" feel like? What does the sense of "ahhh" bring about in the body? For me, it was a wonderful sense of relief. I think I wrote immediately after that class that it felt like "post-orgasmic bliss". It was restorative.

In the course of this, I felt fluid, chocolaty, and all things Venus' Chorus. I started to massage my arms, neck, and shoulders. I needed to feel the warmth of my hands to trigger a calm and pleasurable sigh. The sound I made was the physical embodiment of relief. I started with the stretch/yawn exploration while sighing out the sound "ahhh". It was a very useful exercise. I could explore sounding while moving certain parts of my body. I exhaled a sigh as I flexed my feet or rolled my head. For some reason, I had the impulse to wrap myself in the curtains and rub my face against the velvety covering. I listened: my skin wanted to feel warm, cozy, and enveloped. I felt like a cat, or I suppose like a baby. This was agreeable.

Then in the second half of the class, group improvisational movement, I found myself feeling impulses for affection and coziness with others. But I denied myself that because I

thought my colleagues wouldn't like that. I don't know whether that's true or not. I kept thinking: *I see, I want...I can't, I mustn't*. It took me back to Paul Lampert's acting class; he speaks of this a lot. This super charged energetic space where you can't have the thing you crave because the action of touch is definitive and ends the tension. I also thought of Uta Hagen acting work that I learned from Melee Hutton. In zone of silence activities, there is a desperate want but you can't speak it. There's no way of getting it. You have to struggle between two opposing states of being. That's what I found today. So that is useful for the work. There are lots of moments where The Venus' Chorus would like to jump onto The Baron Docteur or would like to protect The Venus from harm. In so many moments The Venus' Chorus really wants a particular thing, but can't have it.

I felt a real, honest devastation at one point—a crumbling. So much uncertainty with how I stand with some of my classmates. We work as silos some of the time; I don't always feel a sense of trust and camaraderie within the group. Erika would encourage us to engage and look at each other. Some members of the group just pulled away, sat in corners, and cried. Maybe that is what they needed that day. I can relate to feeling pressure and being overwhelmed to the point of self-isolation. Everything in me wanted to reach out—put my hand on someone's back, hold them, soothe them. My instinct to nurture came in so strong. I actually extended my hand to one of my colleagues to help her off the ground. She swatted me away. It was a small gesture, but it hurt me. Later, I rationalize this incident as her need to be alone and my not understanding that. At the time, my insecure judgmental demons said that I repulsed her. That simply isn't true. But when I get into a state of "I am unworthy", I tend to go to some pretty dark places. Silver lining: this is a useful state of being to have ready emotional access to in Scene 11. I can use this for when The Baron Docteur tells The Venus that she must abort their baby. I still have some of the residue of that group improvisation right now. Heavy. Sad.

The following day, I did some more character body research and studio time with focus on The Man (Appendix A: Photo 2). The last time I did this, I got really far with The Venus' Chorus. I was kind of stumped with fresh ideas for The Man. I explored this time with a different vowel sound. Taking what I learned from the session with Erika Batdorf, I applied this technique to the sound of "oh". Instead of saying the "ahhh" (smooth, feminine, legato), I explored the short sound of "oh" (wide, short, abrupt). It made me think of a square or a box. I noticed my voice had a deeper pitch too. Through this exploration, I found a lovely shoulder setting. My pelvis is slightly forward. With the feet, I've chosen to slow down the gait. I'm going to walk heel-ball-toe. The entire foot doesn't hit the ground at once; there's a sequence. He's feeling his terrain, and then planting the foot. I think that this will lend itself to moving slower and more deliberately.

As far as gestures go, I found this really great vocabulary. Thinking in terms of an eagle, he has a move where he spreads his arms out and he has a wide setting—"eagle wings". I found another gesture where I ball up one fist and then surround it with the other hand as a claw. "Swoop and Perch" is another one. I have a low center of gravity, my knees are bouncing, and I'm heading downward. As I do this, my arms extend wide to the side. There's a great opportunity on the line "Big Bottom Girls. That's their breed" to explore the "swoop and perch." This is a chance to poke fun at The Brother by being bombastic. The last gesture that I discovered; I call it the "low crouch." The left leg is turned-out, and the right leg is facing front. I am down in a crouch, and my knees are bent. My pelvis is low to the ground. It's like a squat, but not completely down. I have one heel that's popped off the ground and both elbows are bent and resting on my knees. From here, I can tilt the head right or left. It looks very animal-like; I'm a fan. Great day! It was very productive and I have a better sense of what The Man should look like.

(7) March 7-8: The Strike Begins...

Meanwhile, across town, we witness a very different kind of performance. This time I am on a picket line. My back is aching, and I am freezing. I am picketing for four hours a day, five days a week. Effectually, constant movement without proper rest started to negate some of the physio and massage I've had. My sacroiliac joint is just hollering at me, yet again. I consulted my physio who advises less reps on my at-home exercises. I will be fine, but I felt nearly at 100% health until this recent set back. I had hopes that my next appointment for treatment would be my last. Time will tell.

During this strike, it's been fascinating to watch a different kind of privilege play out. In my thesis I do talk about feeling Other, feeling small, and having to perform my identity. I felt like today I was performing the identity of the working class. And that across the picket line some people were performing the identity of the upper class. I got to watch that play out physically: with gestures, with intensities, tones, volumes, curse words, middle fingers, and accelerators. Watching all that play out was quite the case study.

We still managed to get in a few rehearsals. Off-campus, we did a read-through of the script. Jamie says we're in good shape. He gave the note to pick-up cues. I get that note a lot: pick up the pace, "take the air out". I guess sometimes my thoughts are processing too slow. I just need to let the words come out of my mouth. Think on the line and hope that the work has already been done. I just need to stay in the moment and respond to what's being given

to me, rather than try to orchestrate how I respond. That's a good thing to notice that I keep getting a reoccurring note about my cues and my timing.

Then, the following day, Celia and I got together and worked with Jamie on The Venus' Chorus dialogue. We worked on the pacing of Scene 3, A Brief History of Chocolate. He says it should work like jazz and that we should have these alternating rhythms. In some parts, it should sound like spoken word poetry. I liked that idea, so we decided to play with that. At one point when we rehearsed this scene, Jamie told me NOT to move. This was a departure from previous scenes where The Venus' Chorus is exceedingly active. In Scenes 19, 14, 11, and 7 he encouraged us to move: spin around in circles, wiggle, writhe, melt. For this one scene he said, "No, don't use your hands." I literally had to pin them behind my back at one point because I wanted so desperately to use them. I wanted to express myself, but Jamie said "No, don't do that." It was a kind of torture for me, but it was a good challenge. Eventually I did find a way to endow the text with meaning, verbally, rather than with my body. I'm interested to see how this scene evolves. Other than that, I wait and I picket. One day at a time.

(8) March 12-13: On deck week

Still on strike but the show must go on! Today we had the good fortune of being granted access to the space in the FFT. We got to play around a bit on deck. The set is fully built at this point. It's sturdy and it's capable. I found it really lovely to have that much space and opportunity to just PLAY. It was beautiful: the set is gorgeous. I loved it! We went through Scene 31. I felt this rush of energy knowing that there was so much room available to stretch, breathe, and expand.

Jamie looked up at me and said, "How does it feel?" I didn't even say a word. All I did was lift my arms up and spread out my fingers on an AHHHHHHHHH. It felt refreshing. I was invigorated by that. We did an Italian run-through on Wednesday in the alternate space at Shakespeare in Action. The pace and energy behind the Italian really lent itself well to a lot of the scene work. I'll keep that in mind as a barometer to help "take the air out". I'll get more economy, efficiency, and I think specificity in my acting choices.

The unfortunate thing—we're on a strike. Not everyone was at the rehearsal, but they can't be forced to go. We have to just accept the fact that potentially this show could happen with missing people. We either cut them all together or just have a pause where their line should have been. This is frustrating; it's an incomplete show. They've chosen to do what they wanted to do and I have to respect them. But it seriously affects morale.

Overall, I think today (Thursday) went well. I felt very free, very lively, but I didn't feel like I HAD to move in order to fill that space. I think the old version of me would have walked into that big, huge set and looked up at that stadium seating and thought *Oh my God, I have to be bigger than life!* The Alicia I am today recognizes that I have all that within me and that I choose to use my movements intelligently and in a way that's motivated. That was a very nice evolution for me as an actor: to walk onto a big stage and not feel dwarfed by it. I feel worthy of it.

(9) March 16-17: Jesus Effin' Christ / "Tech Week"? / Towards a Poor Theatre

We received a pretty crushing blow on Monday. We won't be allowed the use of the space. (Including the set, the fully constructed set I might add. It's totally functional and safe. We've already have a safety walk and everything.) We got shut down. It's all or nothing. If a hundred undergrads don't get to participate in tech, than ten grads don't get to use the venue. I was stunned. For a while, I was in a state of denial. I think I skipped the first two in the stages of loss, and I went right to this weird vacuum of time. It's like I didn't fully fathom what just happened.

Yeah, I feel hurt. Physically and emotionally. All the picketing has taken a toll on my body. I kicked my multifidus muscle in my lower back outta wack, again. So now I need more physio and more massage therapy. For two and half weeks, we rehearsed with missing actors and the momentum behind the show really started to drag. Feels like this thesis is falling apart. Luckily, the others eventually decided to return, and not a moment too soon. I'm not even that angry. I'm just tired and too disappointed. I don't have the energy or the wherewithal to get mad. I just feel at sea and frankly...abandoned in a lot of ways.

I was talking to Jamie about the show and something that he said really stuck out to me. He said, "Even in spite of everything. We lose set, we lose costumes, we lose sound, we lose props, we lose all this stuff and that's devastating in its own right." Then he says to me: "The biggest devastation is knowing that another black play won't get produced." And it hurt my heart because it's true. This would have been the chance to be in a 300 seat proscenium house, presenting to: the world, the public, the undergrads, to other schools of the university, to acting for non-majors students, to anyone else they'd like bring along. It would have been a great transition for York from a mostly white, (often male) canon into some more diversity and inclusivity. Having black folks at the forefront and as the protagonists—the center of the narrative. That would've been great. Maybe it coulda been

inspirational for the school groups who were to attend. We coulda inspired a high school student. We coulda planted a seed, but now we'll never know.

'Nuftha thing Jamie brought up that took me aback. He said, "oh are you writing your journals in your dialect?" Nope. Well, every now and then, but not really. My initial impulse was to say, *HELL NAW. Don't nobody write no scholarly papers in their dialect. You so cray.* But is that actually the case? Did I make that up? I've never had to pontificate in my dialect and then put that on paper. I'mma try it out.

(10) Friday March 20: Da One Hitta Quitta / Opening Night

So we've just done the first performance which serves as a preview, opening, and final dress. Everybody and they momma was there from the thesis panels and faculty. I can't believe it, but we made it work! We got it together, thank de LAWD. I will admit that there was a bit of a lag in the pacing, and I think that was due to exhaustion (not just physical but spiritual). Also, there was a part of me that was a bit crestfallen and I thought that the play would look amateur to an audience. That it would look less finished and not special somehow. That saddened me a bit. I thought that it wouldn't be taken very seriously. But I was wrong, thankfully.

Act one was slow, but act two really shined. It was maybe the best I've ever done The Venus' Chorus. The Man coulda had more energy and a bit more intention. I think I still conveyed the story pretty well. I was definitely in response to my scene partner. I was breathing, on my voice, and in the moment. That's my checklist; provided I achieve those things everything else is just icing on the cake. There was a moment as The Man where I wasn't really conscious of my character body. So hopefully it translated despite the fact that I wasn't consciously doing it. Maybe it had become subconscious competence.

The Venus' Chorus, WOW! What a whirlwind. How spectacular! I had so much fun. That was the most fun I've ever had doing that part. I remember Jamie saying, "Just PLAY. And if you make a choice, make a big one. You're free now. Move whenever you want, however you want." I was like AH YEAH, DAS WHAT'S UP! TIME TO WIL' OUT! But funnily enough, I didn't lose the container. I was unleashed, but still staying true to great story telling.
VICTORY!!!!!!

After the show, Jamie says to me, "A lot of growth for you tonight, eh? You found so much new stuff." That was exciting to hear my director say that I've grown so much. Made me feel good. I was so aware of my impulses and owning them. I felt proud. I'm really happy with

it. For tomorrow night, The Man just needs to pick up the pace and have more of a definitive character body.

Thanks to my warm-up I wasn't horribly nervous. I mean, I had an increased heart rate. Beyond that, I wasn't constricting my muscles or shaking so that meant that I did a good warm-up. I have Erika Batdorf's lovely technique to thank for that. I started with stretch/yawn, sensing blood/breath/gravity, stretching large muscle groups, and articulating the spine. Then I just went into play. I found some playful physicality in The Venus' Chorus. At one point, I was just doing open Viewpoints with a motif of circles. It wasn't fully blocked. There are moments of this show that Jamie said, "Just go for it." I have no idea how the scene is gonna look because it changes. Every. Single. Time. This is exciting / terrifying / invigorating. I think we rocked it. I'm pleased.

6. Prompt Book Excerpts

A simple 2 year investment. Back me
and I'll double yr money no lets think big:
I'll tripple it.

THE MAN. ^{*counter*}
You need a girl. Wholl go all that way to be a dancer? ^{*pull the rug out*}

THE BROTHER.
Finding the girls the easy part.
(Rest.)
That girl for instance.
Shes good. Vigourous and meticulous.

UNIT # 3: FIRST FALL

FALL
THE MAN. ^{*sink*} as an
(You dont know her?) → aside
#1 /are you kidding me? /

THE BROTHER.
Cant say I do.
Yll back me, Man? Say yes.

THE MAN. PIVOT ^{UNIT # 4: Timbuktu/flowers}
Scheme #3 remember? ^{*dangle*}
You went to Timbuktu.

THE BROTHER.
What of it.

THE MAN. ^{*scrape*}
Timbuktu to collect wild flowers? /are you fucking nuts? /
Wild flowers to bring back here.
"Garden Exotica" admission 2 cents. ^{*mock*}
^{*reminisce*}

THE BROTHER.
They didnt take. Our soils too rich.

THE MAN.
I lost my shirt! ^{*punish*}

THE BROTHER.

And like a lizard another's grown back in its place. Back me!
This time I've got a sure thing.

I've done tons of background research. This schemell bite!

UNIT #4

THE MAN.

An African Dancing Princess

(10) A "Dancing African Princess"?
chewing

THE BROTHER.

The English like that sort of thing.

UNIT #5: Second Fall

THE MAN.

(11) (You really dont remember that girl?)
stab FALL #2

THE BROTHER.

Not from this angle.

(Rest.) *shame

Theres a street over there lined with Freak Acts
but not many dark ones, thats how we'll cash in.

THE MAN.

(12) A "Dancing African Princess."
simmer

THE BROTHER.

Im begging on my knees!

UNIT #6: Make the deal

THE MAN.

(13) Get up. Youve got it. *swallow*

THE BROTHER.

Just like a brother!

THE MAN.

I am yr brother. *wring*

THE MAN / THE BROTHER.

Heh heh. Heh heh. *grit*

UNIT 4: African Dancing Princess

UNIT
OBJ
(4) Brother gives me
concrete proof /to
decide

OBS
I don't trust him.

ACT
chew
twist

UNIT 5: Second Fall

OBJ
(5) Brother hides
his face / to
punish

OBS
The brother is a
womanizer. He doesn't
see a problem with
what he's done.

ACT
insist
stab
simmer
shame

UNIT 6: Make the deal

OBJ
(6) Brother shakes
my hand / to
comply

OBS
I despise The Brother,
but I need to please
the white folks.

ACT
swallow
wring
grit
clench

7. Conclusion

The second and final showing of *Venus* was informative and very validating. Collectively, the ensemble and I seemed to have much more energy and ease in the performance. We needed another “kick at the can” to negotiate space, scene transitions, and actor/audience relationship. In hindsight, I realized that I had internalized a note from Jaime several weeks ago that influenced my performance on opening night. Jamie asked me to “play the entirety of the space” in preparation for the Sandra Faire and Fecan Theatre. Even after moving to a smaller studio, I still applied physical and vocal choices that were originally conceived for a much larger venue.

I made adjustments on closing night to improve visibility for myself and for my scene partners. Sometimes this would result in a tiny pivot of my body or a higher center of gravity—to accommodate the view of those seated in the back row. Moreover, there was no pressing need for vocal projection with the audience literally at my feet. The intimate setting meant that I could address the people in the crowd directly and as individuals. The previously spectacular and presentational quality of the choral work, especially in the first scene “The Overture” and in Scene 3 “A Brief History of Chocolate”, gave way to direct, one-on-one conversation with the audience members.

It was a fascinating evolution, and I feel it implicates the audience far more in the tragic tale. Without a safe distance, the bystanders seem more complicit—like kids huddled around the school yard bully, close enough to interject but too afraid. Many people approached me after the show to comment on the emotional gravity of the piece. Most said the performance was “upsetting to watch” and quite heart-breaking. True to Jamie’s goal, the production demonstrated the prejudice and perversion of history.

In terms of growth, this is challenging to chart over the course of only two performances. Ideally, I would have reported on how the integration of technical elements

influenced the performance and which were the moments that I chose to capitalize on the ample space. The modified presentation afforded me some victories all the same. As The Man, I re-visited the character body attributes before the second showing in my warm-up. Samantha (The Brother) and I did a quick run of Scene 31 while fully dressed just before we were called for the top of the show. We spent a few moments in free-form movement as well: stomping around the space, shooting calculating glances toward one another, occasionally speaking text but mostly grunting or mumbling. This was an excellent exercise to get into character and establish relationship with my scene partner. The Man finally had the specificity in physicality that I sought on the first night.

The Venus' Chorus kept the same sense of freedom and play; however, this time I was more aware of balancing the stage picture. I found many opportunities to show different levels of height, to build diagonal lines, or to use my gestures to direct the gaze of the audience. My goal was to enhance the story telling and support The Venus as the focal point. How could my body language frame her or compliment her?

On closing night, I had truly "listened" to the world around me. Open Viewpoints was still in motion, and I managed to apply Suzan-Lori Park's writing device of "Rep & Rev" to some of my gestures. At times I could remember rough blocking Celia and I devised on the previous night. Whenever a clear photographic memory came to mind, I would re-discover that action (repetition) and then alter it to suit the given stimuli for that particular moment (revision). Other times, I would throw away a previous choice all together and experiment with a brand new gesture. Overall, I am content with the discoveries I made in the short run of this show.

I am happy to report great satisfaction and achievement regarding the greater challenges of my thesis. The work within The Venus' Chorus helped me to define a nice gradation between stillness and large-scale physicality. There were moments of relaxation

and calm (like in Scene 14: melting in a lover's haze or lazily resting on a table), balanced with explosive and energetic outbursts such as running, crawling, or dancing. I surprised myself at times with how quickly I could shift from one edge of the spectrum to the next; it was a thrill to play.

My journey to find “acting on impulse” was exemplified in my portrayal of The Venus' Chorus. The blocking was constantly in flux, and I had no choice but to respond in the moment. For maybe the first time, there was no shame or hesitation in exploring my sexuality on stage; I felt empowered. In Scene 14, I was unapologetically massaging and caressing my body in front of an audience—allowing my hands to mirror the romantic touches between The Venus and The Baron Docteur.

There was another moment of acting on impulse as The Man in Scene 31. I had a reflexive response to turn away as The Girl gyrates her backside toward me. On closing night, I realized how disgusted I felt at the thought of her dancing for strange men or being prostituted for money. The anguish of that moment made me spin away and turn my back to the audience.

My secondary tasks had incremental progress as well. I still wrestle with perfectionism and negativity from time to time, but I continue to exorcise those demons with healthy coping methods. During the strike, I had the opportunity to read Dr. Brené Brown's theories on shame resilience and vulnerability in her book *Daring Greatly*. This research was medicinal to me during the precarious and troubling parts of this process. Brown states: “Wholeheartedness, at its very core is vulnerability and worthiness: facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough” (29). “I am enough” or “I am daring greatly” became my mantras before walking onto stage; this practice continues in my day-to-day life. Brown made another astute observation: creativity is always a vulnerable act

(34). Often times I felt stressed and unprepared, so I consciously trained myself to re-direct my thoughts into positive affirmations.

Finally, I set out to customize a physical warm-up and attend to my health; my efforts in both arenas are on-going. The Batdorf Technique serves as a skeleton for my preparation before a performance (Appendix A: Photo 3). I heighten my awareness of the various internal processes of my body, the movement of blood for example, through vigorous activity followed by rest. The stretch and yawn process proves most helpful in stretching large muscle groups.

My lower back injury did not hinder my performance, thankfully. My physiotherapist confirmed that my sacroiliac joint and sacrum were in proper alignment before the run of the show. I did, however, push my flexibility and muscular endurance to the limit after the first showing and was frightfully sore afterward. An extended warm-up for the second showing helped to address those issues. I can flag “knowing my limits” as an area of improvement. I must learn to work *with* the injury, not in spite of it.

There were several elements of my practical research that I was unable to execute due to the nature of the showings. Originally I had proposed the Pochinko clown technique of “walking the mask” which involves finding the physicality of a character by adding external pieces. Without the use of costumes, I can only infer how the process may have gone.

For The Man, I was eager to use his riding boots because they gave my gait a definitive bass sound as the heel hit the floor (Appendix B: Costume Renderings). I only got to experiment with the boots for about three rehearsals before the strike. This costume piece was essential to my understanding of The Man: his powerful stride, his intimidation, and his weight. The hat and the suspenders would have been useful additions to the character as I could have used them to gesture or punctuate thoughts. With the Venus’ Chorus, I gather that wearing the smooth, lycra material would have lent itself to more tactile exploration.

More than halfway through the process, the sudden addition of picket duty claimed the free time that I had previously allocated for private studio work. I made an executive decision to forgo the clown work as a means to build character body, but I still implemented clowning technique in rehearsals to facilitate acting on impulse.

Despite the setbacks, I was able to apply the majority of my practical research to the performance. Throughout my work as *The Venus' Chorus*, I improvised using the Viewpoints® principles of Shape (the contours or outlines of bodies in space), Spatial Relationship (distance between objects), and Topography (floor pattern or movement over the landscape) (Bogart 65). Authentic Movement worked well for Scene 9 as the emotional stimulus influenced a gesture. The Baron Docteur forces *The Venus* to have an abortion, and as *The Venus' Chorus* I translated this moment of devastation through collapsing inwardly, contorting, and wringing my limbs.

I employed Pochinko clowning technique by embodying various “impulse levels”. For example, in Scene 9 The Baron Docteur gives the cue line “Did your dresses come today?” (*Venus* 127). This triggers a celebration at impulse level 6—the highest level of psychological and physiological response. The moment quickly passes, however, and as *The Venus* states “No one visits. You don’t want me seen,” the sadness knocks me all the way down to disappointment at impulse level 1 (*Venus* 127). Finally, my previous observations on the Batdorf technique are proof of how the methodology was fruitful for my performance preparation.

As I reflect on the work as a finished product, I would like to extrapolate on areas of my research in need of further clarification. The characterization and function of *The Venus' Chorus* was very fluid until the final weeks of the process. Celia Aloma (the other member of *The Venus' Chorus*), Director Jamie Robinson, and I finally solidified the concept in which

the two choral roles were extensions of The Venus. They were not separate beings but actual parts of The Venus' psyche made manifest.

A book by New York Institute of Technology professor Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions*, provided the context for this characterization choice. "In traumatic alienation, [The Venus] removes herself from her own bodily experience... The victim of exploitation can become divorced or alienated from her own body in the moment in order to survive" (Griffiths 42). The Venus compartmentalizes herself as a response to abuse. Thus, my purpose was to physicalize her emotional states of being and to act as conduit to that which was too frightening to express outwardly.

Early in the process, I had speculated on black female iconography and celebrity. My curiosity behind the topic was more imagistic and intuitive than scholarly: I wanted to channel these images and embody them physically as The Venus' Chorus. To that end, I compiled photos of iconic black women that inspired me with their confidence, beauty, boldness, and *joie de vivre* (Appendix B: Character Research—The Venus' Chorus). The photos tell a fascinating story in terms of body language as well, especially in the hands.

In my Artistic Challenge Statement, I also spoke about my need for a deeper understanding of stereotypical representations of black womanhood and how they apply to the play. Essayist Michael D. Harris mentions the Jezebel as "the sexual primitive" and how Saartje Baartmann's association with this title meant that her reputation "justified the legal and social strategies to contain her" (164). My defense of The Venus in her trial (Scene 21) was made more urgent by my understanding of the historical context. "Not only were black women described as animalistic and aggressive, they were sometimes cast as vile seductresses" (Perry 56). I fought to humanize her against a litany of prejudicial mythology.

Funnily enough, I would confront the exact opposite trope, the Mammy, for a few brief scenes as a member of the spectators viewing The Venus on her whirlwind tour. The

Mammy is an “asexual cipher and servant whose only job was enthusiastic service to the whites employing her” (Harris 166). Scenes 27, 24, and 21 featured me as a silent onlooker who hid behind my boss, The Brother. The circumstance forced me to behave as the dutiful servant, despite my instinct to lash out at the crowd that degraded The Venus. Melissa Harris Perry describes this dilemma: “black women must adhere to a rigidly controlled public performance of themselves” (62). I have frequently contained or filtered my responses to social injustices; it seemed as though life was imitating art.

My spectator character would have donned the quintessential servant outfit of a long skirt, apron, and bonnet—hiding her figure in billowy fabric and muted colors (Appendix B: Costume Renderings). In each scene, Jamie wanted the members of The Venus’ Chorus to slowly reveal the brown, lycra catuits that we wore underneath. As the show went on, we would remove the pieces of the spectator uniform one by one until our true nature was made clear.

To conclude, I leave this process with a great sense of pride and satisfaction. The evolution of the piece into a smaller, bare-bones production was not detrimental to my work, perhaps it served to heighten my use of the acting craft. Without technical elements, I simply had to use my own person and the other bodies in space. The incidents surrounding the strike re-established a life motto of mine: you have to *make* theatre happen. If anything, the adversity I faced strengthened my resilience as an artist, and I hungrily await the next opportunity to perform.

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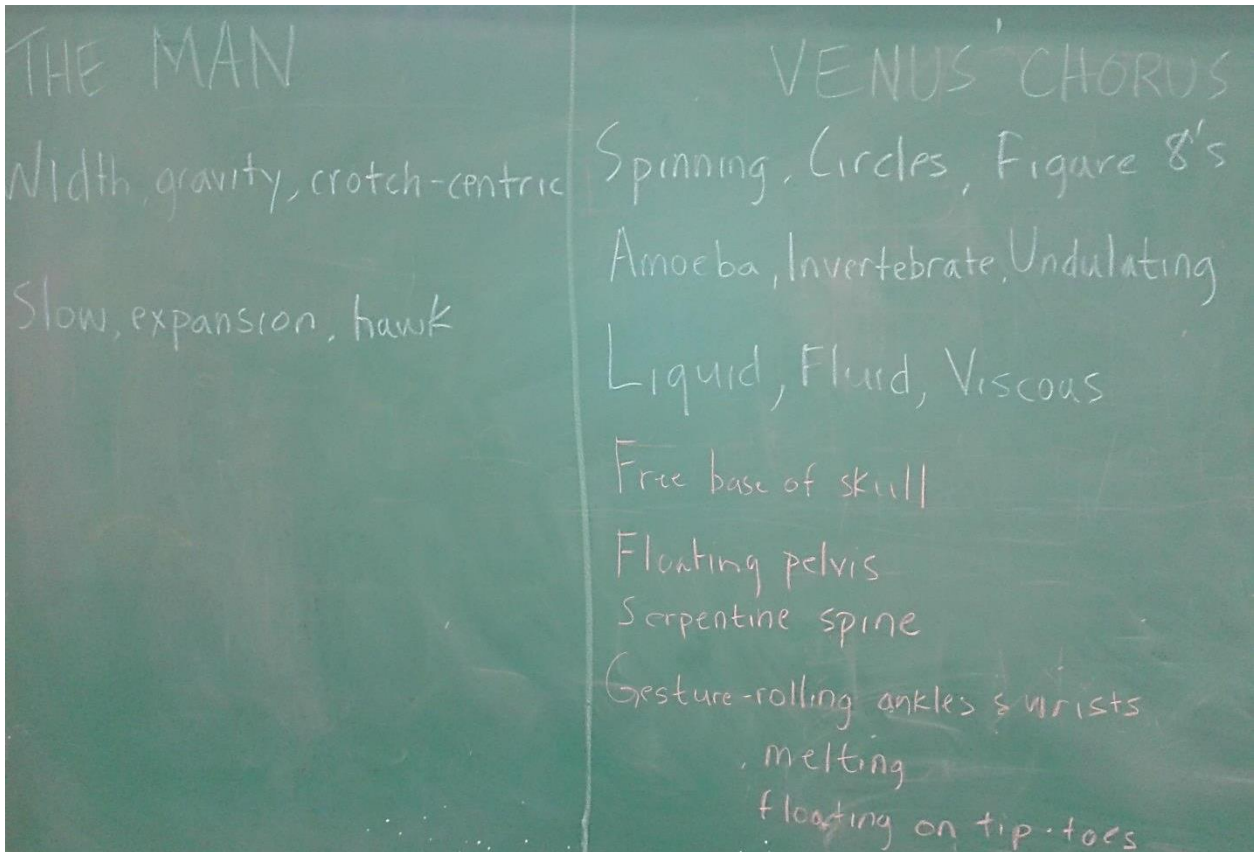
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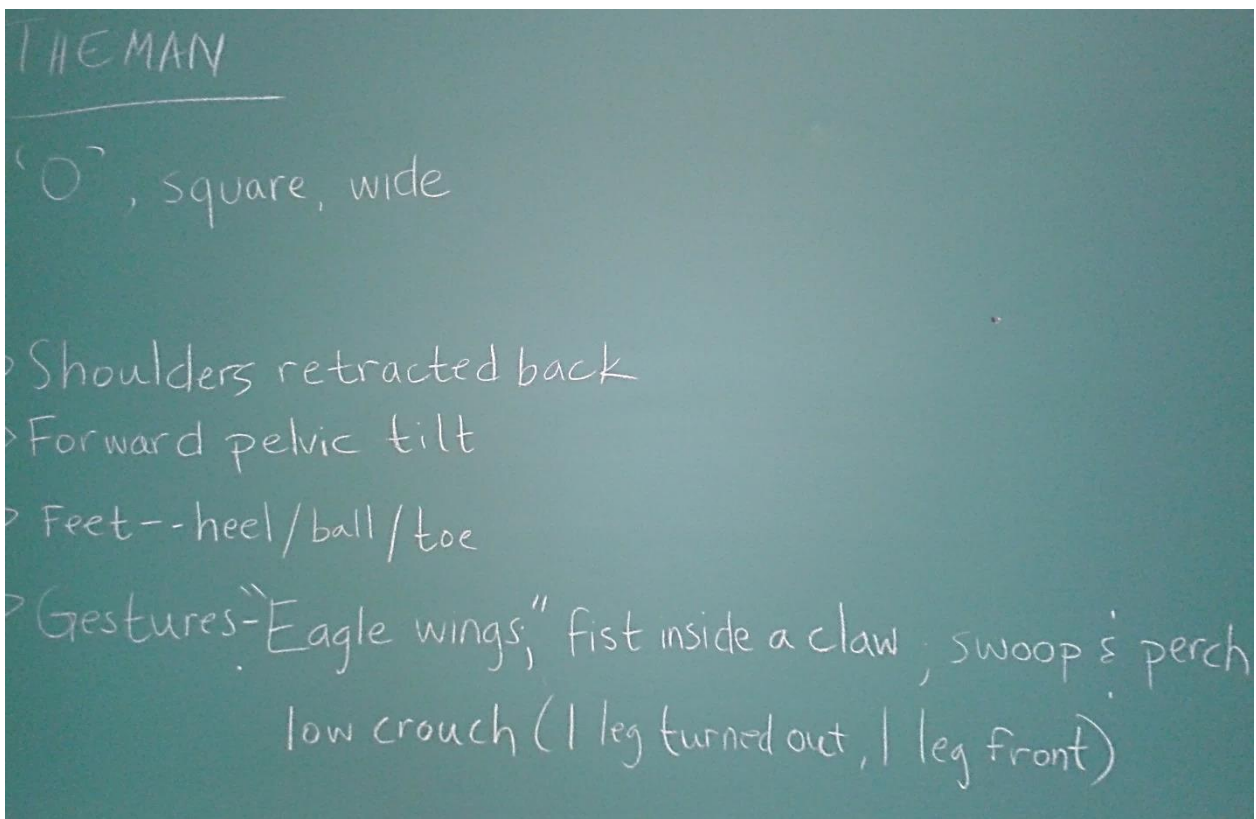
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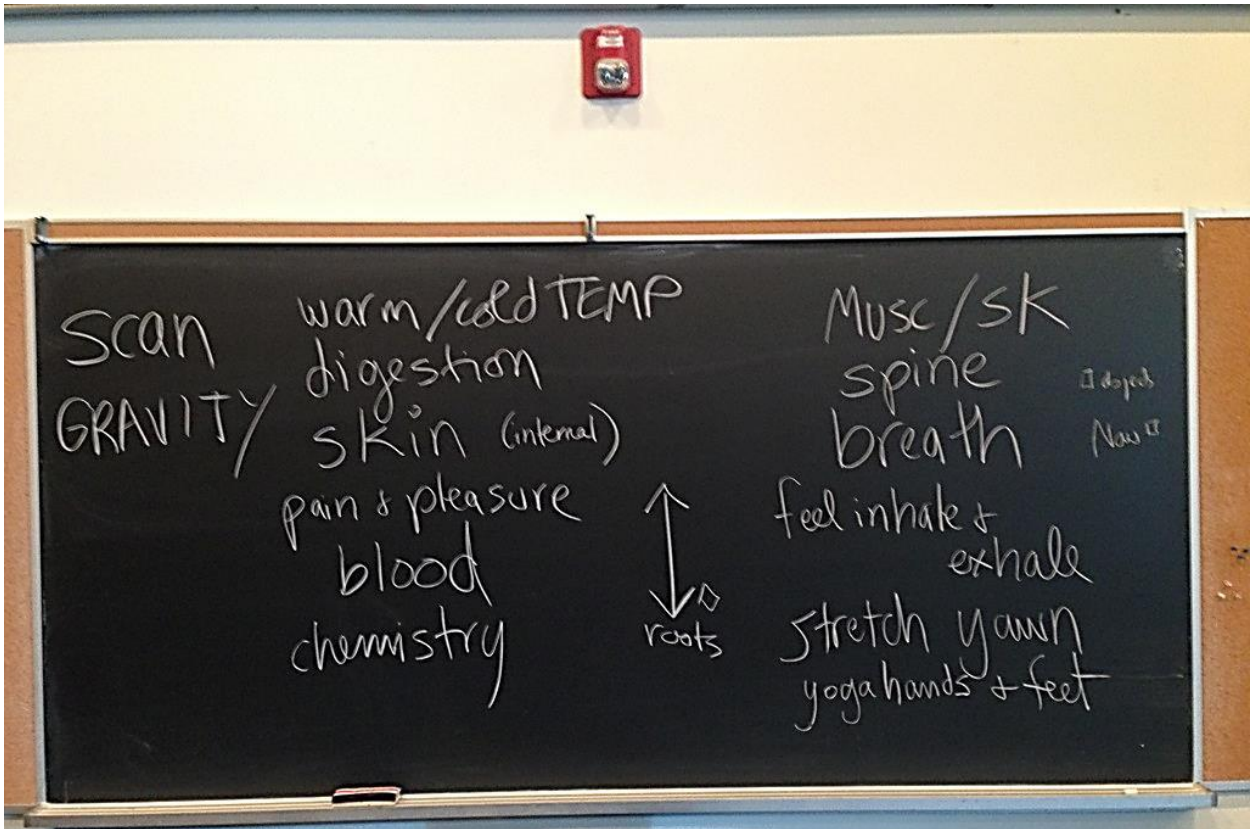
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(1)



(2)



(3)



(4)

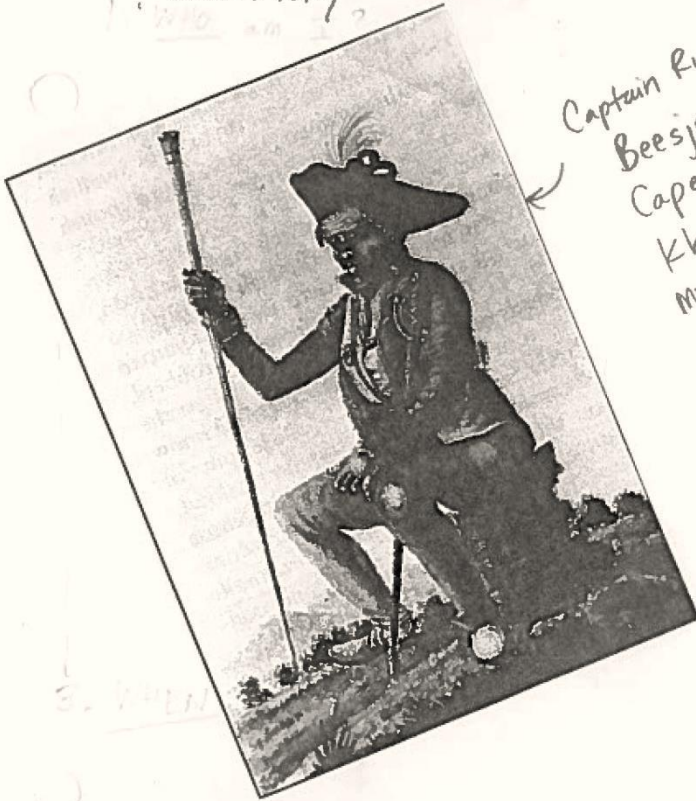


Appendix B: Character Research
The Venus' Chorus

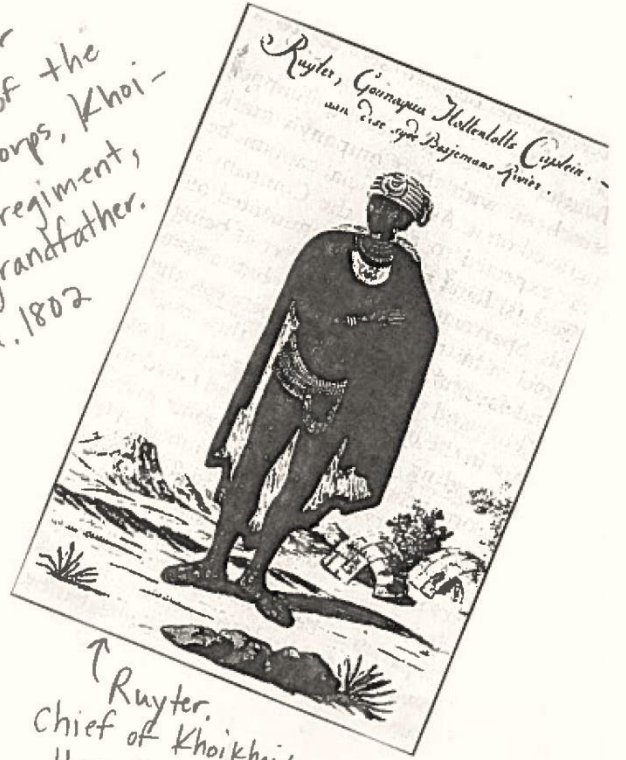


Appendix B: Character Research
The Man

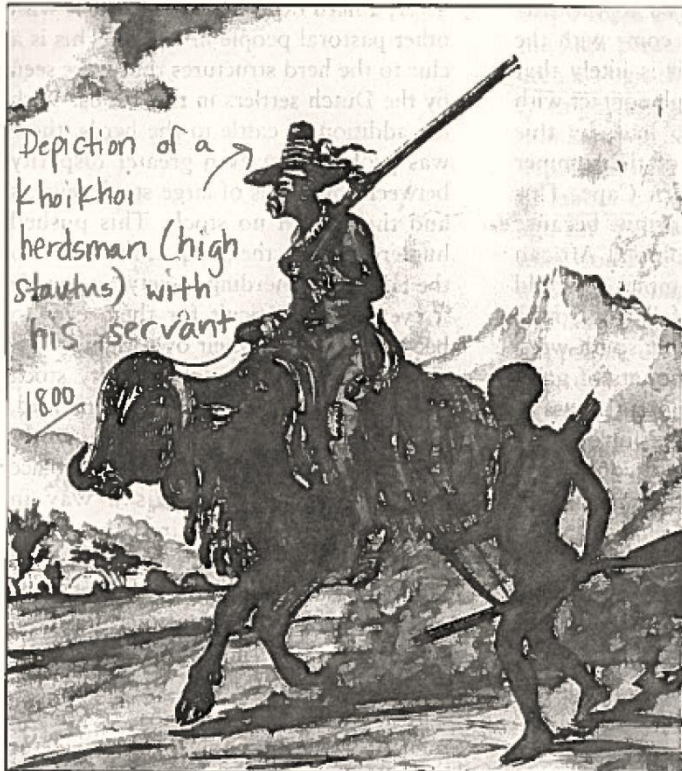
CHARACTER ANALYSIS - THE MAN
& BACKSTORY



Captain Ruiter
Beesje of the
Cape Corps, Khoi -
my grandfather,
ca. 1802



Ruyter,
Chief of Khoikhoi/
Hoengiqua, my great-
great grandfather. ca. 1788



Depiction of a
Khoikhoi
herdsman (high
status) with
his servant

1800



Drawing
of a Khoi -
Khoi
soldier in
uniform,
ca. 1802

COLLECTED FROM "THE CAPE HERDERS"

Appendix B: Character Research
Costume Renderings

