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## The Heretical History of Robin Coste Lewis's *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*

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Midway through the seventy-nine-page title poem of Robin Coste Lewis's debut collection of poetry, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*, which won the 2015 National Book Award for Poetry, readers encounter a series of couplets describing a slavery-era image. Even if they have never seen it, readers might easily envision this artwork:

Nude Black Woman  
in an Oyster Shell

Drawn by Dolphins  
through the Water

and accompanied by Cupids,  
Neptune, and Others. (73)

The art object to which Lewis alludes is William Grainger's 1794 engraving of Thomas Stothard's allegorical painting, *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*. This painting illustrates Isaac Teale's 1765 poem, "The Sable Venus; An Ode," which appears in the second volume of the third edition of Bryan Edwards's book, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1801). A prime example of iconography as pornography, Stothard's painting reinvents the Venus of Sandro Botticelli in a way that glorifies the middle passage, an effect he achieves by replacing anything recognizable as slavery with the romanticized charm of black femininity. As Lewis told novelist Matthew Sharpe, what struck her about this representation of Venus was the way it is "beautiful and horrible simultaneously" ("I Don't Accept"). As she explained, it is "really compelling if you can wipe from your mind that it's a pro-slavery image" ("I Am an Artist"). In this observation of the work's duality, Lewis begins to identify the intersection of aesthetics with politics that gives a Janus face to museum-housed artworks—*The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies* is beautiful and horrible, a celebration and a delusion. Although it romanticizes the slave trade, it also captures the black Venus's powerful beauty.

Lewis has explained that Stothard's representation of Venus was the inspiration for her poem by the same name, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus," which she describes as "a narrative poem comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present" (35). This essay argues that Lewis's poem challenges historically entrenched figurations of beauty and femininity, such as those generated and perpetuated by *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, by mixing and remixing the language that historians and curators have used to title and describe artworks that stage the black female body in Western art history. I argue that Lewis does not simply reproduce the visual-art objects to which she alludes, but rather develops an aesthetic strategy that allows the titles and descriptions to act upon the sense of history that they help to create. In this way, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" aims to provoke a response to the racial discourse that supplements the popular historical narrative of the West.

"The Voyage of the Sable Venus" comprises eight sections, which Lewis calls "catalogs" to signify the sort of historical periodization commonly used to organize the Western art-historical canon. Following two brief preludes titled "The Ship's Inventory" and "Blessing the Boat," which call to mind the middle passage—a dominant theme throughout Lewis's collection—readers enter the poem's dramaturgical museum by way of a catalog named "Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome." After a taking them through a second catalog titled "Ancient Egypt," Lewis guides readers toward the present in catalogs called "The Womb of Christianity" and "Medieval Colonial." The four remaining catalogs are titled "Emancipation & Independence," "Modern, Civil, Right," "Modern Post," and "The Present/Our Town."

Although Lewis's award-winning collection has been widely reviewed, it has to date received little critical attention from scholars. Describing "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" as a revisionary engagement with the cultural legacies of Ancient Greece and Rome, Tessa Roynon briefly considers Lewis's poetics alongside Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991). She argues that Lewis's poetry asserts a transnational conception of black female identity to recover "a dynamic, indisputable, creative and empowered black female personhood" (139). Focusing less intently on the collection's black feminist significance and more on its structure and continuity, Claire Schwartz explores the connections between the "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" and the other poems included in Lewis's collection. She analyzes the collection along an arc of self-reckoning, emphasizing it as an endeavor of coming to terms with difficult truths, including Lewis's personal history and the role that slavery has played in its making. These readings have provided valuable insights into *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*, but they do not explain Lewis's return to the middle passage or how her poetry reinvents the work's title character, the figure of Venus, and traces her movement through the Western art-historical canon.

In *Archives of the Black Atlantic: Reading between Literature and History* (2013), Wendy W. Walters shows that many writers have turned to poetry to wrest new and radical meaning from historical representations of the middle passage as well as of the narratives such representations fortify. She explains that works like Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" (1945, revised 1962), for instance, raise vital questions about historical representation and identity as well as about their relationship to current regimes of racial knowledge. In conversation with Walters, Carl Plasa has observed that poets writing in Hayden's wake have paid special attention to the visual dimensions of the transatlantic slave trade's archive. According to Plasa, poems in which ekphrasis meets the middle passage confront "a white visual culture [that] represents the black subject, whether enslaved or free, according to particular assumptions" (315). David Dabydeen's *Turner* (1994), M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) provide well-known examples of ekphrastic returns to the troubled waters of the middle passage.<sup>1</sup> As Plasa might argue, such works act as powerful conduits of historical memory, and thus as vehicles for addressing the historical atrocity of the transatlantic slave trade, because they dispute and revise the material remnants of the archive and trouble historical consciousness.<sup>2</sup> This characterization resonates with Lewis's aesthetic of re-curation, which challenges the very notion of historical study by intercepting and rewriting the ekphrastic language that artists, artisans, historians, and curators have used to title and describe museum-housed artworks. In her radical adjustments of this language, Lewis reveals that the words of the museum often predetermine how blackness can be seen.

To show how "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" queries the authority of the archive and its role in the production of historical knowledge, I put Lewis's work in conversation with that of French philosopher and political theorist Jacques Rancière, specifically his notion of heretical history. In doing so, I am not simply

applying Rancière's work to Lewis's poetry, but using his understanding of heresy to explain the effects of Lewis's poem, which uses an experimental aesthetic to prompt new, critical perspectives on the potentialities of the histories that have gone unrecorded and untold. In reading "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" alongside Rancière's notion of heretical history I am not suggesting that Lewis's poetry approaches historical revisionism or that she recovers any data that could be recorded and shared as a conventional history. Indeed, according to another of this essay's interlocutors, Saidiya Hartman, the unarchived stories of Africa and its young, female slave descendants are irrecoverably lost. As an alternative to reviving a historical narrative in any traditional sense, and with Hartman's critique of the archive's limits in mind, I argue that the critical blackness of "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" marks the limits of history and historical recovery by tracing the radical ambiguity of the figure of Venus through the Western art-historical canon.

### History Hides in the Tongue: The Politics of History Writing

Jacques Rancière approaches history and history making in a way that is particularly useful for understanding the suspicion that underlies Lewis's historically minded poetics. In *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (1992), he proposes a radical model for understanding the historical development of politics and aesthetics, one that calls for a historiography that acknowledges the people and groups who have died unheard, unseen, and unnoticed by history, even as their repressed presence haunts both the historical record and our present understanding of it. Rancière's critique of history writing is thus political and egalitarian, as he works to recover a sense of the anonymous people and communities that history tends to overlook, effectively trying to reverse Walter Benjamin's thesis that the story of the victors always overshadows the tales of the vanquished, abject, or downcast.<sup>3</sup>

For Rancière, historians have effectively silenced any record of the dissenting voices that might make radical exclamations in the course of history by privileging long-lasting historical continuities. He characterizes such dissenting exclamations as heresy. As "the excess of speech" in history, heresy broadly refers to the radical potential of the unorthodox thoughts, writings, and actions that he believes historians have overlooked, whether they have done so accidentally or purposely under disciplinary constraints (67). Insofar as the narrative of history with which we are familiar renders this dissent anonymous and unidentifiable, Rancière figures heresy not as "a particular object of the history of mentalities," but rather, he explains, as a form of dissidence between the past and the way it is historicized. According to Rancière's unconventional historiography, the thoughts, writings, and actions that haunt the legitimacy of the conventional, grand narrative of the West, such as those that Lewis's work animates, are distinctly heretical. These voices are neither revisionist nor part of a conventional mode of historical recovery, however, because they attempt to read existing historiography against its erasures. That is, they offer no alternative narrative through which the past might be made rational, but rather call into question its validity.

Fundamentally, Rancière urges the historian to study the content in, underneath, or behind the events that manifest the existence of the past.<sup>4</sup> As he explains, the words, names, images, and objects that comprise the foundations upon which the narrative of history seems to rest are actually effects of the individuals, phenomena, and structures that they inevitably hide. For example, while William Grainger and Thomas Stothard, Isaac Teale, and Bryan Edwards are figures whom we can locate

in the historical record, their careers and artworks, such as *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, “The Sable Venus; An Ode,” and *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, each signify far more than any factual recounting of their lives ever could. Hayden White has clarified that Rancière would urge the heretical historian to consider how “lying beneath or behind or within [a career] are the lives, thoughts, deeds, and *words* of the nameless millions of people who made that career possible, participated in it, were ruined or destroyed in the course of and because of it, and left their *anonymous* mark, their *unidentifiable* trace on the world of that time” (ix). The political potential of the unknown figures that help to determine the order of history also threaten to disrupt it, and their disruptive voices may persist in the words generated by historians, words that might be made audible even if they are irrecoverable in a conventional sense.

By interrogating the relationship of the Western art-historical canon to the language with which the museum titles describe its objects, “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” shares the impulse of a heretical history. Like Rancière, Lewis’s heretical poetics is unconcerned with a study of history understood as “the past” in which certain events have occurred. Alternatively, she examines how the language that historians and curators have given to museum-housed artworks have affected (and continue to affect) the ways we think about Venus and the black female body as well as about the voices that they muffled yet that we might still be able to hear. In this fashion, “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” develops as a meditation on the historian’s relationship to history and its telling. As Rancière might say, Lewis’s work unfolds as an assault on “the procedures of meaning by which a historicity is defined” rather than as a conventional historical narrative, insofar as it asks historical science to confront its own constraints and limitations (102).

The coming analyses will show how “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” thus joins the host of projects that Darby English describes as interrogations of “the social relations reflected in, or implied by, standard museum protocols, approaching philosophies and methodologies of collecting—concretized in presentational schemes deciding what and how objects are arrayed, revealed, and encountered—as readable models of social thought” (148). Indeed, the archive that emerges over the course of Lewis’s poem constructs a conceptual museum in the minds of readers, effectively helping them to see how the grand narrative of the West has privileged certain accounts of the past—its events, people, and structures—while misnaming, obscuring, and ignoring others. Principal to Lewis’s heretical poetics, the title of her work suggests, is an analysis of the ways in which the language of the museum reveals/conceals the figure of Venus, how it validates certain ways of thinking about black femininity while discouraging others.

## Writing Heresy: The Limits of the Archive and the Figure of Venus

Putting Lewis in conversation with Rancière raises a complicated question: how can one engage with the vacuousness of a history that has papered over Africa and its diaspora? As Saidiya Hartman has shown, our relationship to the historical archive surrounding slavery is tenuous. Following *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), a book that attempts to describe the afterlife of slavery, Hartman published “Venus in Two Acts,” an essay that reflects on the challenges raised in that project. In “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman illustrates an obstacle faced by those who wish to recover and share the unarchived stories of Africa. Her focus is on a young woman whose enslaved name appeared in the archive only in passing mention:

One cannot ask, “Who is Venus?” because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. (2)

In her attempt to salvage the lost narrative of Venus, an enslaved woman who died aboard the *Recovery* and about whom history has afforded only a few words,<sup>5</sup> Hartman arrived at a dilemma—recovery of her stories seems to require pushing beyond the boundaries of the historical record and to result in a romance exceeding even the fictions of history, Hartman explains; yet the alternative approach of recounting demographic projections and the perverse arithmetic of the slave trade amounts to hollow quantifications that serve only Western rationalism. Unable to recoup anything beyond an imaginative recreation, “a vision of . . . the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic,” Hartman laments that she has reached the archive’s limits in terms of rescuing Venus from obscurity (9).

Rather than using Hartman’s “critical fabulation,” a writing methodology that fills in the gaps of the archive to generate speculative histories, Lewis develops an intricate compositional practice that extrapolates hints of meaning from the traces of blackness that survive history’s whitewashing. To this effect, “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” does not aspire to create a historical counternarrative or to make sense of the vacuousness of the archive, but rather celebrates the radical potential of the unknown and unknowable as a means of interrogating the rationalist impulses of historical study and historical recovery.

To guide her approach to troubling and re-curating the archive, Lewis devised a set of formal rules, which she provides in the Preface to her work: “No title could be broken or changed in any way. While grammar is completely modified—I erased all periods, commas, semicolons—each title was left as published, and was not syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented” (35). In other words, Lewis accumulated titles, descriptions, and catalog entries, and then removed all their formatting devices. Next, she reassembled the titles and descriptions, but selectively added capitalization and punctuation to alter their original meanings. Although, as she explains, no title was syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented, her process did include adding spaces to break the individual titles over multiple lines of poetry. Consider, for instance, the way the following passage, from her “Ancient Egypt” catalog, weaves together and splinters apart the titles and descriptions of numerous museum pieces:

A Cleopatra holding a—?  
 Cornucopia Attendants moving  
  
 from left to right linen,  
 from mummy-wrapping Aphro  
  
 Dite rising from the bath.    I Sis Aphro  
 Dite clasping a garment  
  
 rolled about her hips:  
*The Place of Silence* (56)

As is evident in these lines, the poetics of “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” allows for subtle experimentation with grammar and enjambment, sometimes to provoke a sensibility of fragmentation and to delay the line’s resolution, and other times to create a sense of continuity between the individual titles, descriptions, and catalog entries with which Lewis worked. More than just a historiographic challenge, then,



Lewis's formal rules set the limits within which play and improvisation become aesthetic strategies for restoring history's incoherency and illegibility.

In this above passage, for example, Lewis troubles our preconceived notions of history's inhabitants by adding space to the names Isis and Aphrodite. Isis becomes both "I," the first-person singular nominative-case personal pronoun that seems to name both Lewis and her reader simultaneously, and "Sis," which suggests a familial relationship that collapses the temporal distance between the present and the ancient time of the Egyptian goddess. Similarly, Lewis breaks apart the name Aphrodite—the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and procreation whose Roman equivalent is Venus—to create a sense of Africanity in the homophonic relationship of "Aphro" to afro. We might note, further, how the long dash and question mark in the first line draw attention to the ambiguities the archive attempts to make rational as well as to how Lewis's experimentation culminates in a confusion of the senses, the final line of this selection suggesting that silence might be locatable in space rather than in sound.

Although Lewis alters the language of the museum in this way, her grammatical changes do not result in an invented or romantic historical narrative, against which Hartman explicitly warns. In part, this is because "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" participates in a tradition of found poetry, a tradition in which the poet constructs his/her work out of words, phrases, and passages of preexisting sources, making only minor changes to spacing and punctuation—rather than adding linguistic content—to impart new meaning to a source text.<sup>6</sup> She neither reproduces directly nor rewrites completely any of the language belonging to her archive; instead, she finds historical implication in the reserve of meaning made visible by exhibiting and (re)arranging the preexisting language of the museum, including that which has obscured or erased blackness from the Western art-historical canon.

Whereas Hartman had concluded that Venus might be recoverable only in terms of a speculative critical fabulation, Lewis asserts that she may also survive in the very language that appears to erase her, and that she might thus be permitted to speak under the right aesthetic conditions. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman describes such a mode of survival as a false promise, writing that she had been "unsure if it is possible to salvage an existence from a handful of words" and glossing Michel Foucault in her conclusion that "[Venus] 'never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of words' that allowed her to be murdered" (137); however, unlike in Hartman's essay, the Venus of Lewis's poetry is not any black female in particular, whose story of capture and enslavement might be recorded and shared conventionally.<sup>7</sup> As an alternative to the "history of an unrecoverable past" that Hartman describes in "Venus in Two Acts" (12), or even of reading the archive as a record of what histories can be written or spoken, Lewis evokes Venus as a heretical figuration. She is a figural embodiment of the heresy that questions and polices the absence of Africa and its descendants from the mythological narrative of Western history.

We see the presence of Venus as a figuration of heresy especially clearly in a passage from the poem's "Modern Post" catalog:

Silence.  
Poise. Prayer:

*Tinted Venus*  
*African Venus*  
*Dolmi Vestonice*  
*Magdalenian Venus*  
*Ram Mal'ta Venus*

*Venus from Laugerie-Basse*

*Venus of Hohle Fels*

*Venus of Monruz*

*Venus of Willendorf*

*Venus of Berekhat*

*Venus of Lespugue*

*Venus of Hradok*

*Venus of Tan-Tan*

(Thirteen ways of looking at a black girl) (108)

By collecting and listing the titles of these sculptures and figurines, Lewis draws attention to Venus's broad presence in the Western art-historical canon, one that dates at least to the Upper Paleolithic era, as the *Venus of Hohle Fels* is believed to be between 35,000 and 40,000 years old.<sup>8</sup> While celebrating Venus's archival omnipresence, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" also condemns the museum. The parenthetical suggestion that these thirteen figurines amount to "Thirteen ways of looking at a black girl" references Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."<sup>9</sup> Lewis positions this title to indict the archive for having created the stereotypical body of Venus, that which is associated with voluptuous breasts and incised vaginal openings. In her re-curation, Lewis draws these imaginative works about black femininity together, thereby animating the idea of Venus without reproducing these physical markers. By suggesting these works are versions of the same figuration, Lewis creates the conditions from which new historical imaginings might become possible. While such a historiography may feel distinctly antihistorical, Rancière reminds readers that "[t]he question of the poetic form according to which history can be written is . . . strictly tied to that of the mode of historicity according to which its objects are thinkable" (101). It is the incoherency and illegibility of Venus's figuration that makes Lewis's discursive critique possible.

Hartman had decided against writing about Venus out of fear of "what [she] might invent," believing that "it would have been a romance" (8), but Lewis's formal rules demarcate a historical framework in which improvisation—allowing herself to modify grammar and play with enjambment at will—creates the conditions in which Venus's possibilities (rather than her irrecoverably lost historical actualities) might become discernible in an abstract way. We need not only mourn the emptiness of the archive as a sign of history's impossibility; alternatively, Lewis's heretical poetics suggest, we can also read the scars of historical erasure as openings for generative exclamations in history. This is not to say that Lewis prompts Venus to speak through her pained embodiment, as Hartman cautions against, but that Lewis asks readers to consider how the language of the museum might have preserved a notion of Venus. As an alternative to the quantifications of ship inventories or fragments of discourse in medical treatises, which Hartman characterizes as records of Venus's violated body, heretical history contemplates the possibility that Venus persists in the excess of the dismembered language of the artists, artisans, historians, and curators whose work determines the way she can be understood historically.

Despite the historiographical difference between Lewis's and Hartman's works, we might read "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" as a complement to "Venus in Two Acts," as Lewis's success in recuperating a sensibility of Venus comes to depend on the very restraint for which Hartman advocates. Lewis heeds Hartman's warning, never asking, "Who is Venus?" Recognizing that such a question cannot be asked, or that it has no answer, the Venus of Lewis's work is always nonprescriptive,

always at work to escape categorical capture. Indeed, the function of her radical figuration is to exist as an enigma, one that poses questions regarding the very possibility of Western history while refusing to participate in the rationalism to which such a mode of history aspires. For this reason, it is in the subtlety of Lewis's alterations and the artfulness of her presentation, in her poetry's capacity as an assemblage of preexisting scraps to communicate some meaning in excess of the individual titles, descriptions, and catalog entries themselves, that heresy comes to query the history with which we are familiar.

### **The Words that Narrate the Absent Body: Modifying the Museum**

To clarify how Lewis's poetics trouble and reconfigure whitewashed historical and archival narratives, in this section I look more closely at several passages that heretically exhibit how the language of the archive determines certain patterns of thought concerning the past and its inhabitants. Lewis opens the first catalog of "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" by rewriting the description of a museum piece, "statuette of a woman reduced to the shape of a flat paddle." By adding enjambment and capitalization to the phrase, Lewis produces a dramatic shift in the relationship of the words to one another. The art object in question becomes "Statuette of a Woman Reduced / to the Shape of a Flat Paddle" (43). In her heretical adjustment, Lewis shifts the adjective (reduced) so it functions not as a description of the statuette, but serves, instead, to describe the female figure at its center. It is no longer the ornament that the language identifies as reduced, but the black woman whom the exhibit displays as an object. Whereas, by positioning the adjective to modify the art object, the source text's language affords the feminine body of the statuette little-to-no recognition, the poet offers the feminine figure a part of speech and testifies to the role that black female bodies have played in the production of such ornaments.

By breaking the museum's descriptive title into two separate lines, then, the poetics of "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" isolates the seemingly erased black femininity and puts it on exhibition: "Statuette of a Woman Reduced." Such a linguistic modification exploits the ambiguity of the archive to prompt pause and a reconsideration of the relationship of history's language to the representation of the past it offers, and moreover, reads Venus's apparent absence in such a way as to conjure her presence. Of course, as Hartman states, the figure in whose image the statuette has been carved is irrecoverably lost as a historical referent; yet because Lewis's poetics focus on the historiographical procedures and linguistic patterns that have worked to erase Venus from the archive, her critical black femininity seems to retain a haunting presence in the sensibility of heretical critique that "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" is at work to produce. Lewis's heretical critique comments simultaneously on the archival absence and figural presence of blackness in the museum—that is, in addition to drawing attention to the history of systematic erasure that Hartman has assured readers Venus has suffered, Lewis's re-curation also positions the language of the museum to make visible black femininity's invisibility within the Western art-historical canon.

We also see how Lewis situates the language of the museum to confront its own historicity in the clear way she highlights the description's passive construction in the phrase "a woman reduced." By doing so, Lewis insinuates that the common-sense historical narrative of the West is not concerned with identifying those who have reduced and erased Venus, that they are absolved of responsibility for the violence of historical erasure. "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" thus shows how



the words of museums themselves have played a role in reducing Venus beyond a salvageable place in the historical record. Altering the relationship of the source text's language to the art object that it titles or describes, Lewis draws the racist patriarchal ambitions of Western thought out of the seemingly objective words of the museum. Under Lewis's poetics, the language that serves to substantiate certain ways of thinking about black bodies and black femininity thus reveals itself as an instrument of Western rationalism. At variance with itself, having made visible the very blackness that it had previously worked to render invisible, the language of the museum here shifts into heresy, speaking against itself in particular and the failures of its historiography in general. As this analysis shows, heretical critique finds expression not in the titles and descriptions that historians and curators ascribe to art objects featuring black femininity but, as Rancière writes, in the way Lewis's presentation narrates the "power that causes them to be written, that is expressed in them" (45). The exposure of the museum's racist patriarchal politics is distinctly heretical, as it calls into question the legitimacy of the historical narrative with which many Americans are familiar, and in this way upholds Lewis's suspicions of history's claims to truth.

In the beginning of her second catalog, Lewis creates a similar dissonance between historical science and the discursive realities of its disciplinary practices. In this case, she focuses on the body politics of an exhibit description. Again, with enjambment, punctuation, and capitalization, Lewis adjusts the language of the museum to prompt a broader, more open-ended perspective, one that is skeptical of history's claims to have represented the past apolitically:

A standing figure of a Laughing Person

wearing a short tunic with large broad nose, thick  
lips, and both male and female attributes: his right

arm broken off at the elbow, the left  
arm missing completely. (55)

The ways Lewis changes this exhibit description draw attention to the joy of the model, whose title—Laughing Person—she capitalizes, at once reinforcing a sense of personhood while maintaining the figure's anonymity and, by extension, its metonymic function within the symbolic realm of the poem. By isolating the unidentifiable figure and his posture to a single line, she prompts an acknowledgment of the strength and freedom that upright position signals. Further, as with the previous example, line separation plays an important role. The space the poet creates between the Laughing Person's facial attributes and broken extremities resonates with the sense of distance between personhood—which Lewis finds in the face and celebrates as beautiful—and the violence of history's nominal erasure (not to mention the severed limbs).

More significant, however, is the colon that Lewis adds to the third line of the selection. Functioning as an intervention in the politics of gender and the body as well as in their relation to the figure of Venus, Lewis's dissenting colon and subsequent "his right" endorse the androgynous body of the other and assert its right to be. No longer does the language of the description serve merely to direct a viewer's gaze to the irregular or damaged body; now, "his right" is a gesture that ratifies personhood. We might read this blunt confirmation as a heretical stand against the arithmetical multiplications and general linguistic rationalism that Hortense Spillers has argued dehumanized, ungended, and defaced enslaved people during the movement out of Africa and into the Western world (72), as Lewis's poetics repositions the language of history to affirm the legitimacy of the nonnormative subjectivities it had once summarily dismissed: "both male and female attributes."

As with the first example, then, Lewis's critique of the language describing the Laughing Person turns the words of history against the Western rationalism they otherwise reinforce, providing an opportunity to speculate on the limits of Western thought more generally. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has argued, Western art objects allow the perceptive critic to understand how Africa provided Europe with an opportunity for "the projection of fantasies from their collective unconscious" (16-17). The found-poetry aesthetic of "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" suggests that the museum language titling and describing such art objects functions no differently. Just by including the note "both male and female attributes," Lewis's alteration seems to indicate, the historians and curators who titled, preserved, and displayed the Laughing Person have revealed an anxiety over the limitations of categories like male and female, masculine and feminine, and perhaps even heterosexual and homosexual, or black and white. Lewis's carefully placed colon exposes both this anxiety and, arguably, the fantasy of exceeding the categories to which the West has bound itself.

As a final example of Lewis's heretical historiography, consider the way in which "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" aims to prompt meditation over the linguistic politics of two catalog entries from the "Medieval Colonial" catalog, the first reading "negro man strapped to a ladder being lashed," which she changes to "Negro Man strapped to a ladder, Being: / Lashed" (72). As an accompaniment to this reconstruction, several lines later but on the same page, Lewis breaks, capitalizes, and punctuates a separate descriptive title to form a series of lines that unfold in a similar manner:

At Left Negro Man at right, Being.

Held by the collar, two dogs wear  
collars, one labeled "Cass,"  
the other: "Expounder." (72)

At first glance the descriptive source titles seem objectively and accurately to report the visual content of the art objects (or so we can imagine, as "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" withholds the visuals to which the language corresponds), but Lewis's poetics refocuses attention on the way the language surrounds each black body, highlighting the tension between the language's performance of objectivity and the broken humanity that it catalogs. She shows how the seemingly evenhanded language representing each scene is actually interested in dehumanizing its subjects. As was the case before, the language of each entry is complicit in a historical discourse that predetermines how the black body can be seen, in this case by substantiating slavery as an economic practice. Lewis thus emphasizes that the Western art-historical canon's grammar of description, which feigns objectivity, ultimately reinscribes difference in terms of race, and by extension humanity, by laying out a power hierarchy between humans, animals, and property—these humans are merely slaves, Lewis prompts the language of the catalog entry to admit in a whisper, but the dogs have names.

To show how these catalog entries condition a disconnected and dispassionate engagement with difference and pain, Lewis reshapes their language in a number of ways. As with previous examples, she capitalizes "Negro Man" in each entry, which helps to emphasize the way the economics of slavery revoke not only the names but also the subjectivity of black bodies. Additionally, Lewis creates a line break that partitions the violences of the art objects to separate, second lines of text, then both capitalizes and punctuates "Being." In placing "Being" apposite to "Negro Man" in each example, Lewis makes a claim for the metaphysical significance of otherness while illustrating the senselessness of the assaults the other incurs. Specifically, this break highlights the passive constructions, "being lashed" and "being held," particularly how the language of the entry quietly excuses the

assailants from the act of violence. Whereas the source texts condition a disinterested mode of engagement with the punishment of slaves, the language of Lewis's re-curation attends to the humanity of the figures at the image's center, again giving presence to Venus as the critical voice to history's rationalist ambitions.

Lewis's poetic alterations show how the language historicizing art objects of the *Woman Reduced*, the *Laughing Person*, and the two slave men function as political machinery that systematically dehumanizes black subjects while predetermining their representational possibilities in the historical record. The titles and descriptions in each case identify the black body as not *appropriately* whole, gendered, or human in a way that calls to mind Spillers's descriptions of the African slave and her descendants, for whom no such subject-positions existed. Out of such fugitive modes of being, to which normative subjectivities adhere while lacking symbolic integrity, Venus emerges as a figuration of critical blackness, a figural embodiment of the heresy that questions and polices the language of history and its specious representation of the past. With this radical figuration in mind, we might read the laughter of the aforementioned statuette as a critique of the language that tries to obfuscate blackness in the Western art-historical canon. As Rancière might suggest, the laugh of Venus emerges because Lewis, as a heretical historian, has cultivated for her audience a mode of engagement with the past in which "[t]he only one who speaks is the one who *would speak*. And not, certainly not, the one who *spoke*" (45). Once inaudible, the laugh of Venus here challenges the historicity that has produced the whitewashed narrative of Western development. "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" questions this narrative by destabilizing the legitimacy of history's words and, in this way, illuminates history's allegiance to the rationalist project it chronicles. As a critical accompaniment to the grand narrative of Western art history, Lewis's poetry asks not only about the propagandistic ambitions of the histories that such language constructs, but also about the heretical histories that become perceptible when it is broken.

## The Language of History as a System of Rationalism

"The Voyage of the Sable Venus" also exposes the museum's conscious decision to erase some racial violences of Western history and, as consequence, the individuals and communities such instances of racialization have affected. While Lewis's formal rules prevented her from syntactically annotating, editing, or fragmenting any of the titles or descriptions with which she worked, she explains that she did edit the museum's language to reclaim historically appropriate racial markers:

I realized that museums and libraries (in what I imagine must have been either a hard-won gesture of goodwill, or in order not to appear irrelevant) had removed many nineteenth-century historically specific markers—such as *slave*, *colored*, and *Negro*—from their titles or archives, and replaced these words instead with the sanitized, but perhaps equally vapid, *African-American*. In order to replace this historical erasure of slavery (however well intended), I re-erased the postmodern *African-American*, then changed those titles back. That is, I re-corrected the corrected horror in order to allow that original horror to stand. (35)

Lewis elaborates that she had decided to recover the language that the historians and curators of the museum had chosen to erase, enabling her "to explore and record not only the history of human thought, but also how normative and complicit artists, curators, and art institutions have been in participating in—if not creating—this history" (35). Her linguistic alteration, which she describes as a

process of re-correction, is a departure from the found-poetry rules she had established for herself, but remains in line with her overall project. Perhaps the most straightforward act of heresy in “The Voyage of the Sable Venus,” these re-corrections show how certain language conceals/reveals divergent perspectives on the past along with the experiences of all the people who were involved in its usage. Of course, those whom such usage has affected include the countless people whose lives it ruined, but also included are those who participated in its perpetuation by writing and saying it, counting even the artists, artisans, historians, curators, and collectors who participated in the naming, collecting, displaying, and preserving of the art objects under the pretense of objectivity, inasmuch as reproduction is an act of participation.

Lewis’s re-corrections infuse the entirety of “The Voyage of the Sable Venus,” including the more contemporary catalogs. Consider, for example, the opening lines of her sixth catalog, “Modern, Civil, Right,” which features language that is not modern, civil, or right:

Anonymous speaking at memorial for Four Negro Girls  
killed in church bombing in Birming. Ham.

President Kennedy addressing the crowd: A Red *Boo*!  
A Negro *Boo*! Young Girls being held

in a prison cell at the Leesburg  
Stockade. Wounded, civil.

Rights demonstrators in the hospital  
and on the street-burned-out-bus:

Bronzeville Inn Cabins for Coloreds. Here lies  
Jim Crow drink Coca-Cola white.

*Customers*  
*Only!* (94)

In this series of couplets, Lewis collages a number of descriptions of images from the civil rights era. Among others, these include pictures of a memorial for the victims of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963, President Kennedy delivering a speech, the Stolen Girls of Leesburg, Georgia, hospitalized Civil Rights protestors, and a symbolic funeral for Jim Crow. Toward the end of the passage, Lewis also includes an advertisement for Coca-Cola and a whites-only sign, or perhaps the language of a Coca-Cola advertisement that promises an ice-cold drink but only to white customers.

While these historical referents may be identifiable, Lewis’s poetic play mixes the language describing such events, effectively leaving the seemingly straightforward visual works—and the historical narrative they help to create—radically unfamiliar. Her re-curation puts pressure on the way the civil rights movement is exhibited, as it draws attention to specific markers, including “Negro” and “Coloreds,” besides which we find a direct critique of the archive itself: “here lies.” By rendering the original art objects difficult for readers to envision, and by adding emphasis to the racial discourse that underlies the exhibit, Lewis highlights the rupture between the image and the language that historians and curators have given to it. Here again, as was true with the linguistic re-curations discussed in previous sections, Lewis’s choice to reclaim this language is an intervention into the writing of history, one that affects readers’ understanding of the historical, political, and cultural climate in which Western art objects have been created, collected, displayed, and preserved, suggesting how such institutional acts contribute to the writing of a history that papers over certain individuals and communities while privileging accounts of others.

A similar re-correction appears in Lewis’s final catalog, “The Present/Our Town,” which comprises just six lines:

Still:

Life

(of Flowers)

with Figures—

including

a Negro servant. (110)

These broken lines, which come from a descriptive title that one might sooner associate with the time of the Renaissance than with the present, end with the phrase “a Negro servant,” suggesting that the racial markers of the past persist into our contemporary moment. At the same time, Lewis’s subtle colon in the first line of the passage indicates that a sort of (life) force endures in spite of the racial discourse of the archive. We might characterize Lewis’s sense of “Life” as critical blackness, or heresy, which queries the museum’s claims to objectivity and history’s claims to truth.

Lewis has explained that she intends her work to prompt questions regarding history as a structure of power that continues to position gender, race, and sexual orientation as means of othering: “The work I ultimately decide to publish is work I hope will engage certain public or social conversations,” she has emphasized, “[o]r work that I hope will begin those conversations” (“Black Joy”). The transgressive irresolution of “The Voyage of the Sable Venus,” or the way that it celebrates history’s illegibility without providing an alternative to fill the nonrational void such a critique leaves behind, is a productive means of disrupting our comfort and familiarity, as it challenges our expectations and conceptual complacency. Lewis has similarly characterized her artistic impulse along these lines:

I really feel that a lot of the problems we have as readers—and in our lives—is that we don’t want to be uncomfortable. But I *want* to trigger you. It’s my job. I will not leave you there. But I want to upset you wholly. I also want to love you wholly. I also want to tell you a joke. It depends on the project. But the idea that we should not upset the reader—that we should have you feeling safe and give you a floor—that’s not interesting to me, and it certainly isn’t art. (“Black Joy”)

By refusing to provide a linear narrative, and by rejecting the legitimacy of the grand narrative of the West without offering a substitute through which the past can be made rational, “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” hopes to trigger and challenge its readers. The defamiliarizing reading experience Lewis creates depends upon the difficulties of interpretation and the unlimited possibilities of radical ambiguity rather than the comforts of ordered resolution and static familiarity; however, its transgressive challenges and disorientations function as boundless and unending pathways to new ways of thinking about the past, even if only in the abstract.

Instead of recovering Venus’s story in any conventional sense, Lewis’s work positions the idea of Venus in a way that demonstrates how history teaches—and how we might unlearn—racist, patriarchal, heteronormative epistemologies. Reading Lewis’s figuration of Venus as a strategy for producing a heretical-truth modality suggests that the emptiness of the archive is not necessarily a limitation, but may also be a chance for dissent. In that spirit, the liberties Lewis takes with the language



of museum-housed art objects are not betrayals of the past to which they correspond, but rather opportunities to acknowledge the politics always at work in the narrativization of history. To borrow Hartman's language, Lewis asks her audience "to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive" by "imagin[ing] what could have been" ("Venus in Two Acts" 7); or, as Rancière might say, she prompts readers to engage with the unseen aspects of the historical record, those that the historian has overlooked in favor of privileging other stories, even if that engagement is abstract and intangible. "The Voyage of the Sable Venus" thus stands as a fundamental displacement of the grand narrative of Western history and its perceived authority, as it comments on the limitations of history writing and criticizes the violent rationalism that conventional narratives of the past have committed against black women as well as against descendants of the African diaspora more generally.

## Notes

1. Dabydeen's work responds to J. M. W. Turner's painting, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On* (1840), and the short untitled poem Turner wrote to accompany it, whereas Philip's comments on the historical events that inspired Turner's painting, signifying on and rewriting the legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783), which determined that the deliberate killing of slaves was legal and that insurers were required to pay for slaves' deaths. In this spirit, Rankine reproduces Turner's painting alongside a close-up section focused on the chained feet of a slave.

2. The transatlantic slave trade also features in other poets' work, such as Derek Walcott's poetry, especially his *Omeros* (1990), and in Clarence Major's "The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage" (1994). It is also the subject of a number of novels, including Charles R. Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and features in visual-art projects, such as Tom Feelings's *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo* (1995). Finally, it is also a key concept in critical work, such as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

3. Benjamin writes: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. . . . There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another" (256).

4. Rancière explains: "It is . . . very much a question of the truth, insofar as the truth signifies more than the exactitude of the facts and figures, the reliability of the sources, and the rigor of the inductions, insofar as the truth concerns the ontological modality to which a discourse is devoted" (*Names of History* 49).

5. Hartman finds historical records of Venus in only a few documents regarding the court case that followed her murder. Her first mention appears in a short exchange during the trial; see *The Whole Proceedings and Trial of Captain John Kimber, for the Murder of a Negro Girl* (1792), 14-15; Venus's second, longer, mention reads only, "[t]here was another girl on board the Recovery . . . whom they named Venus, and she too had the pox" (*Trial of Captain John Kimber* 19).

6. Philip's *Zong!* practices a similar found-poetry aesthetic. In her work, Philip signifies on and rewrites the legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Her repurposing of this decision's language challenges the legitimacy of legal discourse by creating a counternarrative that results in a nondiscursive construction—an absence of language that encourages the reading subject to resist historical/legal narratives and their power regarding racial knowledge. While her approach resembles that which Lewis exercises in "The Voyage of the Sable Venus," her historical critique focuses more narrowly on how legal decisions control the classification of bodies as property than on defamiliarizing history as a field of rationality.

7. Saidiya Hartman produces such a speculative history of a specific woman, Esther Brown, with her method of critical fabulation in "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117.3 (2018): 465-90.

8. The *Venus of Tan-Tan* and the *Venus of Berekhat Ram* are believed to be the oldest Venus figurines, dating to the Middle Acheulean period, between 300,000 and 500,000 years ago. Some critics have contended, however, that these human-like objects were not deliberately carved, but are the results of natural weathering and erosion.

9. Morgan Parker wrote a poem titled "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Girl" in September 2015 for her residency night at Ace Hotel in New York. This poem similarly references Stevens's "Thirteen

Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” but because Morgan and Lewis’s works were published in the same year, there is no significant evidence that they are alluding to one another.

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