STEPPINGSTONES:

A Demonstration of Black Feminist, Literary Work
on the Path to Public Scholarship

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I. The First Step

Meeting *Vénus Noire* (April 2020)

When I reach up to retrieve the book from my professor's mailbox, I have to hold my breath. Before entering the office space, I had hastily put on one of the newly-sewn masks that my mother sent me. The pale yellow and shimmery floral pattern that had once looked so pretty in our linen closet is now uncomfortable as it bunches under my eyes and fogs up my glasses with every exhale. As I close my fingers around the waxy, earth-toned paperback, the mist appears again. The stunning bronze and gold bust[i] stares back at me from behind the cream-colored title, *VÉNUS NOIRE: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth Century France*—and through the vapor on my lenses. Too anxious to move or remove my mask while still indoors, I retrace my steps to the exit that I used to enter. Once outside, I gulp the fresh air, quickly sanitize my hands, and try again.

Her eyes find mine and dig in, daring me to keep looking. I do. The sharp folds of her clothes and the textures of her hair and jewelry contrast the round smoothness of her facial features, her arms and shoulders, the pedestal on which she is mounted. All of her is the same cast-bronze color, save for the yellow gold of her earrings. The cream-colored title tries to claim her in how its pointy serif sprawls across her chest. The book is still so new that the cardstock of the front and back covers is still sharp—not yet frayed or curled up at the tips. The dusty brown that brings out the details of its striking cover art is matte, smooth, and *mine.* My professor had quietly gifted this copy to me days earlier, so that I could read it in time for our Zoom visit with its author. The gift was also her prediction that, based on the work I had done so far and all that I hoped to do, I would find answers. Answers to questions I had been carrying with me long before this book was published. I unhook the mask from my ears and flip through the beginning until I land in the preface. "PLASTER CAST, AN ALLEGORY." My professor was right. This book is exactly what I need.

Meeting *Humus* (November 2020)

A shipping envelope wedges its way through my barely-open bedroom door, its plastic lining rustling just loudly enough for Zoom to remind me that I am, thankfully, muted. I whisper-shout a "thank you!" to whomever is on the other side, grateful that they have noticed the small sticky note with 'TEACHING!' scribbled on it. The French recording that I'm playing for my students has nearly finished. I glance over again and watch the package break through and finally prop itself against the nearest wall. The cloying odor of lavender disinfectant spray wafts over to my standing desk. I know what is inside, but I also know it will be a while before I can actually retrieve, open, and finally read it. I am guiding students through my second French class of the day. Soon, I will have to log on again to attend one of my own seminars and I have only half-finished the reading. *Humus* will have to wait until the end of the work-from-home day.

When I finally find a moment to tear into the yellow packaging, I am met with a familiar waxy, earth-toned design. This time, though, the cardstock and its sharp corners have the hue of a much deeper earth; a dark brown so rich that it is nearly black. Ironically, the cover of this literary artwork does not bear artwork; it bears a definition. HUMUS is written in cream-colored lowercase font, large and commanding. Above it, its English pronunciation, /'(h)yo͞oməs/, is in smaller text. Below it, its definition[ii] ascends in spacing and descends in shades of brown, as though it might eventually disappear into the humified black-brown. Still striking and so new, this smooth, matte copy is *mine.* I flip eagerly through the first few pages. A table of contents; the translator's acknowledgements; the author's touching dedication. A first poem; a rare, *dated* excerpt from deep within the archives. A different, much shorter preface that is not even named as such but is captivating just the same. A second poem. The story begins and I follow, my curiosity piqued. After all, this is *exactly* what I want to do. This is proof that it can be done.

Introduction

The similar first encounters that I had with Robin Mitchell's *Vénus Noire* and Fabienne Kanor's *Humus* are proof of their compatibility; despite obvious differences, these two books complement each other in so many ways. One is arguably more scholarly and the other more creative, but they are both fundamentally academic in the methods and approaches that each author devotes to the women around whom they are centered. Still, as final products, the two books contrast greatly in how each scholar actually carries out and presents her findings. *Vénus Noire* is an analytic work of microhistory that challenges the perpetual misrepresentation of Black female bodies in France—a social tendency that was exemplified in the 19th century literary and visual mistreatment of three Black female figures. Robin Mitchell closely examines the lives of **Charlotte Catherine Benezet Ourika**, the Senegalese woman who inspired Claire de Duras' 1824 novel, *Ourika*; **Sarah Baartmann**, the enslaved South African woman who is more commonly known as the Hottentot Venus; and **Jeanne Duval**, who was best known as the mistress of Charles Baudelaire. Through this work, Mitchell values and validates them in the way that each woman deserved to have been valued during her lifetime. *Humus* is a historical fiction novel that is based on a true 18th century event. It centers the lives of **fourteen African women** who jumped from the French slave ship, *Le Soleil*, in order to escape enslavement. Although half of them did not survive, Kanor's polyphonic novel still imagines each of the fourteen women's lives and thus restores all of their lost and stolen humanities while also highlighting the risky measures that they all took to control the endings of their freedom narratives.

There are several critical and analytical routes that would guide me to the end of this paper. I could detail the process of choosing these two books and combing through their similarities and differences; I could focus on my desire to present the respective Black feminist missions of these

two authors, to the best of my ability. I could try to find the words that might sum up how thrilled I am to have met with Robin Mitchell and to work with Fabienne Kanor—not to mention the joy it brings me to group my work with theirs in this way. To relate all these elements to this [future] panel[iii] discussion's theme of "filling in/closing the gaps," I will do all of that, and more, by way of steppingstones.

A nod to the Glissantian notion of unpredictability, a path made of steppingstones is one that fills in an otherwise untraversable gap, but it does not necessarily do so in a linear way. The acts of building and crossing a steppingstone path absolutely requires a destination, but also planning, balance, flexibility, and the use of strong resources that can support such a precarious journey. Essentially, *Vénus Noire* and *Humus* are two major steppingstones on the path that I have been building, one that will eventually lead to the fulfillment of my work as a Black feminist and public scholar. Miraculously, the effect that this pandemic has had on my first year and a half at this institution has become yet another major step; questions of public knowledge, overall access, and the boundaries of "academic space" have been constantly turning in my mind since March of last year.

I expect that I will reach those questions, and their steps, in due time. As for the smaller steppingstone path that is this introductory glimpse into the workings of *Vénus Noire* and *Humus,* I am still standing on the first step. The second step of this paper will begin with a close reading of each book's preface (provided in Appendices A and B), in which I will highlight a similarity and mutual goal that underlies these texts. It will also include a brief discussion as to why I have chosen to put these two works in conversation with one another, based on the gaps that each published work fills for me, in my own work. Contrarily, the third step of this piece will highlight and examine a crucial difference between the texts. Through the fourth step, a cursory view of the

ways in which Black feminist thought serves as a source of methods for each book, I will reach the fifth step. The last step of this comparative analysis will begin a discussion about public scholarship—particularly the ways in which Mitchell and Kanor engage in it. That is a path that I will continue to build.

More specifically, this work will compare *Vénus Noire* and *Humus* through close reading and critical analysis. I will occasionally put these two texts into conversation with myself and my own work, as both are excellent examples of what I hope to accomplish and to produce. To further support my comparison, I will treat Black feminist thought as a source of various methods—namely the practices of taking Black women seriously and the notion of collective care—that Mitchell and Kanor use to interrogate the lives of each of the women in their books. Black feminist thought will also serve as a general framework through which I will examine the ways in which these texts and their authors' respective demonstrations of public scholarship all close certain gaps and unearth new ones in the interdisciplinary fields of French and Francophone Studies (FFS), Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS). I will incorporate my own experiences throughout, and will finally introduce my work as both a creative writer and an emerging scholar to highlight a third area that I consider to be of utmost importance: public, "non-academic" spaces.

I. The Second Step: In Conversation

Regardless of a scholarly text's genre or the author's writing style, a preface is often a window to the work. In both *Vénus Noire* and *Humus*, each scholar's preface gives a small, contextual glimpse of what she will do, and how she will do it, throughout her text. An academic preface is distinct from its introduction, for which a common strategy is to lay out one's plan for a specific argument and the route through which that plan will be carried out via theory or analysis. Robin Mitchell's introduction to *Vénus Noire*, entitled "Black Women in the French Imaginary"

is very different from the enclosed preface (Appendix A); it is more academic and less personal, less intimate. As for *Humus*, both a poem and an archival excerpt from the captain's log of the slave ship (*Le Soleil*) precede its untitled preface (Appendix B). The former being only a stanza in length and the latter, a brief paragraph, these short texts enhance the urgent, commanding nature of the author's message to her readers. Fabienne Kanor may not introduce this novel in the prescribed "academic" way, but her work is not without scholarly introduction.

I place these prefaces alongside one another because, through each window, we as readers can already glimpse the mutual mission that fuels both texts. Although they are very different in style and genre, *Vénus Noire* and *Humus* share the mutual goal of telling the partially told, incorrectly told, and untold stories of Black women—each in their own way. Mitchell's declaration of this mission is powerful and moving because it is deeply personal. It even contrasts the rest of her book in that it is so intimate. She details the anxiety and sudden emotion that she felt when Sarah Baartmann's body cast was slowly revealed to her. She voices her own humanity and the mission to tell Baartmann's stories with the simple, hesitant promise, "I'll try not to screw this up." [1] Similarly, Kanor transforms this mission—her mission—into everyone's mission. After a subtle string of nautical demands, ("upend; abandon; turn back") the narrator of the preface leaves readers with no choice but to "not move," to simply "listen…to this chorus of women." To "hear once more these hearts beating." [2] They then turn their role of narrator over to the chorus of heartbeats, so that their individual fights for freedom might be told by them, in their own voices. I place these two prefaces in conversation with one another because they—and their embedded mission—are halves of the whole of the work that I want to do in my Black feminist, public

[1] Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020), xiv.
[2] Fabienne Kanor, *Humus*, trans. Lynn E. Palermo (University of Virginia Press, 2020), 10.

scholarship. My goal (to also center lost, silenced, or underrepresented voices of Black women by promoting their efforts of self-representation) is an ongoing steppingstone path that began long before I arrived here at this university. However, I acknowledge that to do so at the most personal, human level (as does Mitchell), and in such a way that calls readers to action (as does Kanor) requires both scholarly and creative skill.

II. The Third Step: A Contradistinction

To that point, specifically the idea that this work calls for a balance of scholarly and creative capability, it is important to consider a key difference between *Vénus Noire* and *Humus* that demonstrates that balance. Before naming it, I will first address my use of the term "academic." It is one that I am hesitant to use, as I will soon challenge it by considering the importance of non-academic spaces at the end of this paper. Still, I feel that I must make a distinction in how I have chosen to use (and eventually critique) this term—especially in how it relates to these two books. To clarify, *Vénus Noire* and *Humus* are both academic texts, in that they are both pieces of intellectual work that contribute to the respective fields of their authors. Since the latter book is an imaginative historical fiction novel and is therefore more *creative*, the former could be seen as more *academic* because it is more scholarly by design, and by prose. Still, Mitchell and Kanor detail through their work (as well as in end-of-text notes and references), that they have done the same kind of deep, archival labor that would be needed to complete any similar academic book project. Mitchell "juxtaposes a vast array of sources to contextualize the…environments in which black women circulated, including artwork, legal cases, rulings, legislation, literary works, fashion, pamphlet, advertisements, and newspapers." [3] As for Kanor, she was not even looking for the story of *Le Soleil* when she visited Nantes for her research. While she did have a goal in mind

[3] Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, 14.

for the kind of story she wanted to tell, she began by simply, looking. "I wanted to fight the silence [that surrounds the topic of slavery] and [to fight] the political wishes of France to silence these [enslaved] voices. But I found that story *hidden* among the archives…" [4]

On that note, I transition to the aforementioned major difference between these books as academic projects. As I am beginning to understand, the process of carrying out an academic project is a strategic element that most scholars must consider—but do not necessarily have much control over—when it is time for an article or a book project to be published. The 2020 publication of *Vénus Noire*, a more academic text, demonstrates an outcome of project execution that is different from that of *Humus*, a more creative text that was originally published in French in 2006. More specifically, when project execution is considered with the effect that it has on audience, a wide access gap presents itself. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has widened that gap even further.

As a challenge to the cultural misrepresentations of Black women that had already taken over France by the time Ourika, Sarah Baartmann, and Jeanne Duval were also there, Robin Mitchell was strategic in how she executed the project that would eventually become *Vénus Noire.* In her introduction, she cites Edward Said's notion of Orientalism and his insistence on the importance of cultural production as a catalyst for the common stereotypes and misguided fantasies about the East—ideas that often began through the work of "writers, among whom are poets, novelists, etc."[5] Mitchell applies this idea to the cultural productions that (mis)represented Black women in 18th and 19th century France. "Said's insights highlight the idea that the white French writers, painters, lawyers, and so on who produced the dominant texts also played a primary role in crafting

[4] Fabienne Kanor, Phone Interview with Fabienne Kanor, Telephone, December 14, 2020.
[5] Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, 13.

messages about black women and about Frenchness." [6] A project that originally began as a doctoral dissertation about Sarah Baartmann, Robin Mitchell's scholarly execution of *Vénus Noire* is a direct, modern challenge of the exaggerated and imagined works that misrepresented Black women during France's crucial transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It was the beginning of a social shift from colonization as the norm to a new, uncharted future that would prove to be full of Black independence. Through her commitment to combing the archives for traces of three Black lives that had not been treated as worthy of proper remembrance or archival, as well as finding and refuting as many misrepresentations of these women as she could, Mitchell demanded that these Black women be taken seriously and independently of all other misguided representations. Taking the meticulous path of the academic book project, as opposed to a more creative alternative, was a choice that further enhanced that demand.

As I am still learning about publishing and the expectations that are set and enforced for graduate, junior, and tenured scholars alike, I can only wonder as to the effect that taking the academic route for such an important book project has on potential audiences. That is, if *Vénus Noire* was primarily meant for the mostly white community of seasoned scholars and/or French historians who need to be set straight as to how they perpetuate the literary and visual misrepresentation of 19th century Black women in France, then one can assume that this book could easily reach that target audience. After all, they are the group that is the most likely to have easy access to it. On the other hand, if the book was meant for BIPOC colleagues and students like me who do interdisciplinary work with history, FFS, and WGSS, then one cannot make the same assumption. To do so is to also assume that everyone in the latter group has regular access to newly published material in the already privileged space that is academia, and that is *hugely* unjust,

[6] Ibid., 13.

especially in this current state of global and financial crisis. *Vénus Noire* was published in January of this year, months before a devastating virus reached the United States. It is currently listed at $34.95 on Amazon, amidst an ongoing season during which many graduate students and junior faculty are often not the only ones being supported by their own stipends or salaries. University and local libraries were among the first to shut down back in March 2020, when the first lock-downs were ordered. Today, in February 2021, many are shutting down again. The digital version of this book is nearly as expensive as its physical counterpart. It is probably not available for free without a university affiliation. Remember, the copy of *Vénus Noire* that is sitting beside my cracked, four-year old laptop, was a *gift*.[iv]

III. The Fourth Step: Centering Black Feminist and Intellectual Thought

Because of its relevance to the conversation of public scholarship that I will begin at the end of this article, I will save the rest of my discussion of project execution and audience, as they relate to *Humus*, for that later step on this path. Here, I will discuss the presence of Black feminist and intellectual thought in both texts, as a critical framework and a source of specific methods that both Robin Mitchell and Fabienne Kanor use to treat the Black women in each of their works. Both books are clear examples of Black intellectual thought and are also fundamentally feminist to the core. Both women also proclaim themselves to be feminist scholars, and demonstrate this truth often and in many ways throughout their books. Consequently, there is so much that I could analyze in each of these texts that I will highlight just one method, each—for now. This is a discussion that I hope to continue with both of these Black feminist scholars, personally.

As mentioned in the previous section, Robin Mitchell demonstrates the Black feminist method of taking Black women seriously. A notion that is constantly referenced in Brittney Cooper's *Beyond Respectability,* this practice is not new; Black intellectual thought has always

been dependent on it. In *Vénus Noire*, Mitchell provides ample evidence that supports the demand that three Black women be properly represented and *respected* in the present by showing the ways in which they were not given such consideration at the time in which they lived. "These real historical women existed independently of their representations…But the people who had power saw these women merely as objects, and that is how they survive today."[7] Moreover, in the same way that Brittney Cooper takes the time to name and to humanize the Black intellectual race women that she studies in *Beyond Respectability*, Mitchell also names, humanizes and identifies Sarah Baartmann, Charlotte Catherine Benezet Ourika, and Jeanne Duval.[8] She takes care to use their full names, to show their faces in ways that refute the misrepresentation of their bodies, and to study them as humans and not as objects. In doing so, Mitchell does her best to correct the mistreatment of these and other Black women in that she is continuing the fight against scholarship that too often and too quickly dehumanizes Black female bodies. "This book fills a gap in women's histories in France, particularly by illuminating how even a small number of black women could so affect and restructure French society." [9]

Similarly, a Black feminist practice that Fabienne Kanor has embedded into *Humus* is that of collective care as it relates to empowerment. Because this is an imagined text, it is easy to pinpoint the moments at which Kanor injects the practice of carefully treating the real humanities and mostly imagined personalities of each of the women in her story, into how they treat and interact with one another. In several of the individual chapters, such as that of The Little One, we see the deep, lasting effect of community care and the comfort that it brings these women in such a dark time. In her brief descriptions of the comfort that singing and regularly meeting with other

[7] Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, 16.
[8] Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Illustrated edition (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).
[9] Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, 17.

women brings, the safe space, made possible through care, is clear. This point reflects the observation about safe spaces that Patricia Hill Collins details in her book, *Black Feminist Thought.* "[Black women's safe spaces] constitute one mechanism among many designed to foster Black women's empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects." [10] While the social justice project in this fictional story is the tragic mission to jump ship, the way in which Kanor's characters allude to the greater issue of social justice for Black women also refers to her own personal mission—and the gaps that she closes by using Black feminist thought as a method source in her work:

> The most important thing for me is to put light on them, the voiceless. For me to be the channel is the most important thing. This is justice. It's not about promoting my work; it's about reversing the order.[11]

IV. On the Path to Public Scholarship

Robin Mitchell's Public Scholarship

> This is the coolest thing I have ever proclaimed: my first book, Vénus Noire: Black Women, Colonial Fantasies, and the Production of Race & Gender in France, 1804-1848, will be published by @ugapress THIS YEAR. Holy smokes! Yay, 2018! #twitterstorians[12]

A self-proclaimed "19thC French Historian. Fat Feminist. [and] Author," [v] Dr. Robin Mitchell is a public scholar.[13] She does so by being an active Twitter user who often shares about whatever she is feeling and wearing—a habit which likely makes it easier for her to also tweet about whatever she is teaching, writing, or researching. Mitchell has amassed quite an audience of (currently) 8.6K followers and is known for many a viral tweet. One of her most popular tweets is from 9 August 2019, in which she details a hilarious yet innovative pedagogical choice,[vi] the

[10] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), 110.
[11] Kanor, Phone Interview with Fabienne Kanor.
[12] Dr. Robin Mitchell, "This Is the Coolest Thing I Have Ever Proclaimed: … Yay, 2018! #twitterstorians," Tweet, *@ParisNoire* (blog), January 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/ParisNoire/status/947671605689196544.
[13] Dr. Robin Mitchell, Twitter Bio. https://twitter.com/ParisNoire.

"shit happens clause."[14] That tweet seems to have been recently out-done, though; on 27 May 2020, Dr. Robin Mitchell very joyfully announced that she had earned tenure and promotion at California State University Channel Islands.[15] Mitchell's faithfulness to the promotion of *Vénus Noire*, to which she often refers by using the hashtag #VénusNoire, is an excellent example of public scholarship that fuses the audience for which a book or article project may have been intended, with the giant audience that is the Internet. While I am currently still grappling with the personal and professional limits of my own social media platforms (a public Instagram account and a currently private [request-to-follow only] Twitter account), using social media as a way to combine academic with non-academic audiences is what I hope to do.

Fabienne Kanor's Public Scholarship

> Book and film are a pretext; a way for us to talk about things that we usually find hard to talk about. It [staged readings] was not about me promoting my work, it was a way to open the conversation. Especially in 2005, people did not really want to talk about slavery. It's more about a platform that we are able to use to help us talk about this history.[16]

In 2005, a year before the polyphonic novel *Humus* was published in its original French, Fabienne Kanor hosted her first-ever staged reading of excerpts of the book in Guadeloupe, at the Médiathèque du Lamantin. There were 3 people on the small stage: the musician (who was playing the harmonica) and two Caribbean actresses. The women they portrayed from the story were The Amazon and The Mute One. As it was being held in a bookstore, this reading was completely public and admission was free.

Fabienne Kanor is a very different kind of public scholar. Regardless of whether or not she has the role of an academic who is affiliated with some institution, she has always had the most

[14] Dr. Robin Mitchell, "I Have … Personal Business. #twitterstorians," Tweet, *@parisnoire* (blog), August 9, 2019, https://twitter.com/parisnoire/status/1159694295823085574.
[15] Dr. Robin Mitchell, "Hey! … Getting Me Here.," Tweet, *@ParisNoire* (blog), May 27, 2020, https://twitter.com/ParisNoire/status/1265464174429081603.
[16] Kanor, Phone Interview with Fabienne Kanor.

non-academic, public spaces in mind since she first began writing and filming all the works that she has done. These staged readings are an excellent example of that fact; they counter the issue of academic book project and its effect on audience so well that it would be easy to forget that *Humus* is also an academic project that had to go through a French academic publisher. To that point, *Humus* demonstrates that creative book projects have the potential to close even more of the wide gaps in academia that have remained open for far too long. It has already been translated into three separate languages before the latest English one, thereby reaching even more audiences, academic and otherwise.

Based on the conversations and interactions that I have had with Fabienne Kanor, I know that it has taken much effort, talent, and patience for her to have reached this point of public scholarship so successfully. I also know that I will be expected to carry out and publish projects like *Vénus Noire* before I can even consider more creative ones like *Humus*. As I have said throughout this paper, this is only the beginning of this conversation, and I am still learning. For now, I will take comfort in knowing that projects such as *Humus* exist, and in the great hope that I have to fuse my scholarly and creative skills in a similar way.

My Public Scholarship

I am new to this. There are theoretical gaps in this work alone of which I am not aware, ones that I hope to find and to fill with sturdier structures that I have yet to unlock. I am so eager to go and to do but I often find myself greatly unsure of exactly where I am going and how I am doing. I connect so deeply with the image of building the steppingstone path because I have been trailblazing these non-linear, unorthodox routes for so, so long. Two years ago, I finally relented to my conscience and begrudgingly entertained the idea of graduate school—not because studying French was what I particularly *wanted* to do, but because I knew that French and Francophone

Studies could help me study myself. It was the opportunity to fully intertwine two worlds—not just my understandings of French and English, but the creative thought that has long fueled my formal speech and my academic writings. It was the chance to finally dig into the mysterious Haitian roots that make me Black and possibly of African descent but not always American. When combined with WGSS, specifically Black feminism—which, together, offered the chance to finally dissect this fragile performance of postcolonial womanhood and to simultaneously explore the structural, generational strength of being Black and female—I quickly found myself at the edge of the vast and untraversable gap that is academia. To both cross it and make it crossable for those in "non-academic" spaces who might follow, I have committed to public, interactive scholarship. That is the mission of my young blog, Bad Blackadémique.

Paired with a public Instagram page of the same name, Bad Blackadémique is a personal and [mostly] anonymous blog that both allows me to fuse my creativity into the scholarly sphere of graduate school and to also de-mystify the concept of being Black in academia. While neither my name nor face appear on either the site or its social media account, my identity is not a secret. Not only has the site served as a much-needed creative outlet that allows respite from the endless reading, writing and teaching of this first year and a half, it also serves as a way for me to share my overall experiences, frustrations, triumphs, and thought processes of being a Black, female, and also Francophone emerging scholar in both FFS and WGSS. The current global pandemic has shown me just how crucial it is to create and to circulate public and accessible intellectual projects that absolutely anyone can use. Just as it is possible to be both academic and creative in the same graduate student paper, I will forge an equally academic and creative path in curating this grad student blog. Through the example of scholars like Robin Mitchell and Fabienne Kanor, I will also learn without anguish, teach and educate without fear, and create without limits. Publicly.

APPENDIX A : "Plaster Cast, An Allegory" (*Vénus Noire*)

When I first arrived in Paris in 2004 to begin my research, I faced the bureaucracy of France naked in a cultural sense. French bureaucratic protocol has its special flavors: letters establishing credentials permission for archival access, identity photos in hand, and of course, a prayer that the archivists will understand your sad French accent and lack of familiarity with the appropriate etiquette. I knew all of this when I showed up at the Musée de L'Homme (sans appointment, sans letters, sans photos). "Could I see her?" I asked in my most proper French. "Sarah Baartmann. May I see her?" The front desk staff looked at me quizzically, as if I were an alien. Scared to death, I remained standing and quiet. Probably convinced that security would need to be engaged, they phoned upstairs to ask if someone could "do something" with me. I was then met by Philippe Mennecier, a senior curator. He ws the only one available, for I had arrived at lunchtime (another major faux pas).

M. Mennecier, an extremely tall man with kind eyes behind glasses, asked what he could do for me. "Ah, [Madame] Baartmann," he said softly, without a hint of condescension. "Oui," I countered. He paused for a moment, smiled, and said, "Bon. Allons-y." And with that, we went to his office, where I explained in fractured French that I had studied Baartmann for my master's thesis and was now working on her for my doctoral dissertation. I knew that her body had been repatriated to South Africa but was eager to see if anything remained from her time in the museum. He told me that many items were still there [at Paris' Musée de L'Homme], including her body cast. Did I wish to see it?

It might be difficult for the nonhistorian to understand seeing in the flesh what you have studied for a long time (in my case, more than a decade) in pictures or books. Did I wish to see it? Yes. I don't know if I answered out loud or if I said anything else. The body cast had not been displayed for a very long time, and access to it was restricted—appropriately. I had assumed that the cast had been repatriated along with most of the museum's other Baartmann-related holdings in 2001, but the South African government had not wanted everything. The cast was brought out in an immense crate. As I waited and watched the screws holding the cover in place being removed with a power drill, my sense of anticipation began to rise. I started pacing. I am a historian, I told myself; this reaction is unprofessional. As the unpacking continued, the feelings worsened. I was having trouble breathing. I began peering at the skeletons lined up along one wall, wondering wo these people were. My hands were shaking. The last screw was removed. I held my breath. They pulled. Nothing happened. "Merde," the technician complained. Ah, they had missed one screw.

The technician left me alone with M. Mennecier and the crate. M. Mennecier removed the cover, and I burst into tears. Horrified by my own reaction, I begged M. Mennecier's pardon. "Non, pas du tout. C'est normal." He then asked in English if I would like a moment alone with her. I nodded, and he departed. I sat in the chair next to her and wept. I do not know for how long. Then I placed my hand in her tiny plaster hand and promised her, "I'll try not to screw this up." I left the room. After that, Philippe, as he let me call him, and I had many "dates" with Mme. Baartmann. I remain grateful to him for the kindness and subsequent friendship he showed a clueless graduate student that day. Meeting Sarah Baartmann remains a difficult and profound memory for me. I tell it here because history matters. The lives of long-dead people we write about still matter, and the way we tell these stories undeniably matters. To pretend that I am not implicated in the stories contained in this book would be a lie. In fact, one of the reasons Baartmann

first caught my attention is because of the uncanny similarities between her body and mine. Discovering the women I write about in this book was a progressive revelation. They changed everything for me. What I thought I knew about France I did not know.

This responsibility does not mean I cannot tell the stories about these women and their lives—I can. As a historian, I can read the documents and interpret the silences. As an African American woman involved in cultural work about black women's bodies, the personal is political. Moreover, as I convey here, the women discussed in this book were not saints; they were human beings who often endured terrible suffering and degradation. And they sometimes reacted to their treatment with extreme anger and violence. I hope that each of these women had periods of laughter and joy as well.[17]

APPENDIX B : Untitled Preface (*Humus*)

It all started there. With this incident reported by the captain of a slave ship in 1774, and found in the archives of the city of Nantes. It all started there. From a desire to swap. Trade away technical discourse for the spoken word. The cant of the seaman for the scream of the captives. It all started with a question. How to tell, how to retell this story told by men? Without fuss or artifice. Otherwise. Upend the reader's expectations.

Abandon all hope, you who think a story of slavery will be a novel of adventure. An epic tale, a heroic, tragic story filled with rape, pillaging, brawls and death. Running in all directions. And we're never bored because something is always going on. Inevitably.

Grandiose Exotic. Unimaginable. Unheard of, crammed with details, numbers, twists and turns. Action. Vivid description to move you, make you see it, as if I'd been there. I wasn't there, that's all I can say for sure. But any of one of us could have been there, so universal are the ordeals. Familiar and familial, by our very existence.

Turn back, you who dream of setting off on this path. You will be taken captive. Chained to the words against your will. Locked up in this story that repeats itself like a chant, prefers new chapters to endings, the surest stammers to sharp conclusions.

This story is not a story, but a poem. This story is not a story but an attempt at a shift in a space where there are no longer witnesses to speak , where the human being, plunged into the darkness of a bottomless blue-black sea, must confront the crudest trials that exist: aporia and the death of the spoken word.

Like these shadowy figures put in chains long ago, the reader is condemned not to move from this moment on. Just listen with no other distraction to this chorus of women. At the risk of losing your bearings, hear once more these hearts beating. [18]

[17] Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, xxiii–xv.
[18] Kanor, *Humus*, 10.

NOTES

[i] Cover art on *Vénus Noire* is a beautiful shot of Charles-Henri-Joseph Cordier's *Vénus Africaine* (1852). The book's cover design is the work of Kaelin Chappell Broaddus.

[ii] Definition embedded in the cover design of *Humus:* [HUMUS] "is different from decomposing soil organic matter. The latter looks rough and has visible remains of the original plant or animal matter. Fully humified humus, on the contrary, has a uniformly dark, spongy, and jelly-like appearance, and is amorphous; it may gradually decompose over several years or persist for millennia." The novel's cover design is the work of Lindsay Starr.

[iii] This final paper was written both with the goal of being presented at this conference, **Disruptions and Eruptions 2021**, and as an assignment to be submitted.

[iv] Thank you endlessly, Dr. Jennifer Boittin!

[v] Dr. Robin Mitchell's full Twitter bio: "TWITTER BIOGRAPHY: 19thC French Historian. Fat Feminist. Author #VénusNoire about black women in Paris. Tenured. Block fast. Rep'd by Chris Rogers at DCLAgency. She/Her."

[vi] Full Tweet: "I have a 'shit happens' clause in my syllabi. You invoke the clause on one assignment and get a 3-day extension. No explanation required. It cuts down on the need to lie or divulge personal business. #twitterstorians"

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