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Samantha Pinto

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# Objects of Narrative Desire: An Unnatural History of Fossil Collection and Black Women's Sexuality

*Samantha Pinto*

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, disremembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.

Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession"

In the 2015 book *The Sixth Extinction*, regarding the current eco-historical moment of great extinction due to manmade climate change, Elizabeth Kolbert mentions in passing an astounding confluence for scholars of race and black feminist theory: the rivalry between Thomas Jefferson and George Cuvier, two of the most infamous historical exploiters of black women's sexuality, for a set of fossils—the bones of a giant mammoth—in the mid-1790s (27–28). Jefferson, then vice president of the United States, had already begun his forty-year sexual entanglement with a woman he enslaved, Sally Hemings. He was also an avid amateur naturalist and collector of fossilized bones unearthed in expeditions of settler colonialism across what was to become America. Cuvier, a young French scientist, would extend his scientific interest in and findings on fossils, eventually positing the first theory of extinction on which the work of Darwin himself is based. Cuvier would also be the person responsible for immortaliz-

ing Sarah Baartman, the early nineteenth-century African performer otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus, in his drawings and racial science claims about her anatomy during her life and, following his 1815 public autopsy of her body, after her death.

This seemingly unrelated convergence of the two men who represent the most infamous and intimate links between white supremacy and black women's embodiment reveals the shared material space between the fields of natural history and black feminist theory. Jefferson's and Cuvier's traffic in 'extinct' bones and in black women's bodies was engendered by systems of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, and today both fossilized bones of extinct animals and black women's historical bodies are mobilized to critique these systems in the cultural work of remembrance, knowledge production, and other labors for scientific and historical narratives of progress. This article argues that in analyzing the twinned commodification of fossils and black women's bodies we might both trace the strange connections between their exploitation in the service of the seemingly opposed narratives of white supremacy and liberal progress and imagine the methodological possibilities of reading objectification not as the end point of our critique of scientific racism and the misogynoir of Western political thought, but as the generative space from which we can reimagine an embodied history of black women.

The evidence of the scientific, sexual, and political desires that append to black women's historical bodies animates this piece as a companion object to fossils and as a way to think through the 'fossilization' of race, gender, and sexuality that happens in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as in contemporary discourses around black women's history. Fossils stand as objects that are spectacularly rendered into the deep time of 'prehistory,' a temporal category that, as Dana Luciano reminds us, often serves to obscure and provide an alibi for contemporary practices of racialized and gendered violence and violation ("Tracking Prehistory" 174). This article excavates these unnatural narratives of natural history and black women's objectification through three sites. First, I read the convergence between Jefferson and Cuvier, Baartman and Hemings, and the circulation and display of fossils and black women's bodies through their shared participation in eighteenth-century collection as a performance and a narrative of progress. Second, I turn to an investigation of the scientific and public cultures formed in the wake of this earlier era, including

the institutionalization of racial science in the spaces of the museum and the expedition in the late nineteenth century, to imagine how collection and objectification were re-narrativized in these spaces. Here, I focus on the work of Pauline Hopkins's 1902 novel *Of One Blood* as a map for the post-emancipation work of black women in the public sphere. Hopkins's work navigates the difficult space between the political possibilities of black modernity and the reinscription of sexual objectification and difference that black women's bodies are particularly disciplined through—as material examples of racist science and as the rendered ideal vessels to reproduce the race. Third, I return to the contemporary space of memorialization to rethink the display, possession, and public consumption of fossils and the history of black women's bodies, as both are asked to perform political, historical, and scientific certainty. This article then tracks the pleasures, possibilities, and pitfalls of objectification and collection, as they expose the limits of quests for ethical displays of the past and critical desires for feminist, anti-racist political futures.

This article takes the briefest of starting points—a moment of early capitalist scientific competition between Cuvier and Jefferson—as one that illuminates and undoes the narrative temporalities of natural history, racial formation, gender identity, and sexual expression. To put it in Suzan-Lori Parks's terms above, attention to the “making” of history—through the natural sciences and the use, (non)display, and re-mem-bering of black women's bodies—puts narratives of racial progress in politics and science into crisis. Thus, it creates moments that hew to Saidiya Hartman's call to black feminist “critical fabulation,” an act of remaking history that both creates new narratives of black women's history and retains a sense of the impossibility of creating a representation of this history without reproducing its violence (11). This article imagines black women's historical lives not as obscured, but as highly public, commodified objects in a very visible public sphere that can be put to use in various narrative frames, including the fossils of now-extinct animals. The narrative desires of the eras of expedition and exhibition are occluded in natural history as it has been disciplined in our contemporary moment to frame itself as progressing beyond the racial science that undergirded so much of its modern quest to delineate man from animal—exemplified in the ‘science’ of black inferiority forwarded by Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* and in Cuvier's comparative anatomy work.

Fossils stand as coexisting objects of cultural desire next to the racist specimens that define the history of black women's bodily commodification within late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Western discourses of science and their later formations in the museum and anthropology. While enslaved and laboring black women's bodies were part of the everyday, normalized existence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life in France, Britain, and the United States, natural history treated the trajectories of white, black, and native bodies as radically differentiated—as mysteries that could only be solved through scientific inquiry in the hierarchical temporalities of human development that natural history and the natural sciences offered. These twinned temporalities of assured quotidian hierarchy and scientific mystery bordering on obsession are also part of the discourse of fossils. They were displayed brazenly as inarguable signs of human progress and domination of the natural world, even as the obsession with obtaining them and solving the mystery of their mass presence and extinction revealed deep anxiety around the precarity of human life and scientific certainty.

Both fossils and the history of black women's bodies, then, can be narrated through their formation as public spectacles of domination and wonder. Both were positioned to entice crowds to exhibits through their performance of a proximity to difference and death and through the stories we tell around their presences and absences, the specter of the extinction of (white human) life and the possibilities of the extinction of anti-black racism. As such, they are 'specimens,' scientific and cultural objects of inquiry—and scrutiny—denoting differential processes of objectification and commodification. Discussing the relationship between the creation of geological "drama" around fossils and the contiguous and related process of native "bodies-rendered-specimens" in the late nineteenth century, Kyla Schuller remarks on how "fossils helped settler colonial biopower exceed the temporality of the present and of life and death to seize the time of pre-history" ("The Fossil and the Photograph" 242), or how one object—the fossil—was narrativized by the US state to "cast natives as a people without history and instead *as* history, as extant artifacts" (233). As Amber Musser outlines in her work, much of the labor of the specimen rests on the visual display and consumption of "rare" and "static" objects (18) that pull "attention to the ways that money, science, and desire intersect to confer value on an object" (2). Like Parks and Hemmings above, Musser the-

orizes the “affective labor” (8) that creates narratives of field formation and critical analysis for disciplinary fields—one where the critic is also a ‘specimen,’ but where we also openly acknowledge the way that objects do important work through their circulation (13). This work, for Musser and for this essay, signals us to be both critical of the life of objects across fields—natural history and the history of anti-blackness—but also to imagine harnessing objectification differently, acknowledging rather than erasing, rejecting, or rendering as passive tragedy the affective labor that inheres in black women’s circulation as objects of ‘history.’ It is through this ambivalent relation between fossils and black women’s embodied history that I enter into the narratives of desire and domination played out across nearly two hundred and fifty years of history.

### **Cuvier, Jefferson, and Collected/Collective Desire**

Entering the front room of Monticello, one sees relics in the atrium that are akin to what we think of as belonging in a natural history museum today—a mix of technological advances,<sup>1</sup> native indigenous ‘artifacts,’<sup>2</sup> maps of ‘newfound’ territories like continental Africa, and fossils of a mammoth, among other performative displays of the acquisition of objects of natural history. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visitors greeted here would have been white, and the enslaved people who labored to meet the guests and their needs would have been black. The temporality of Jefferson’s display places indigenous cultures, African geography, enslaved bodies, and the fossilized bones of extinct animals in communion with each other as *objets morts*, all curiosities ‘discovered’ by the white supremacist Enlightenment to be put into narrative use. As Janet Chernela argues about fossilized bones, these objects collectively become “icons of extinction” (19):

the dried, stuffed, and bottled remains that evidenced a mysterious past [. . .]. As citizens of a newly found progress, Europeans were fascinated with things passed, or *morts*. The greater the contrast with the present, the more entrancing the object. By looking back at a past populated by beings of grotesque difference, humans could place themselves at the apical meristem—the growing tip—of the future. (19)

This era of early collection would lead to the institutionalized museum era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be discussed in the next section of this paper, but in the era of the private, elite collector that Jefferson embodied, these objects and people-as-objects were acquired in Jefferson's domestic space through violence during a period in which "racial categories [became] increasingly rigid and hierarchical" (Rusert 9).<sup>3</sup> The collected bones and the collective of enslaved peoples, including Jefferson's own children, were positioned as objects of cultural desire in Jefferson's home and as collections that served as a means to secure key personal, national, sexual, and social property of the period.

Here, the collection is a key genre of natural history, undergirding the naturalized narratives of white supremacy over land, races, nature, embodiment, and even history itself. As Susan Stewart, in her landmark 1984 book on the affective life of objects, *On Longing*, argues, "[objects of] the past [lend] authenticity to the collection. The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality" (151). Here, I would push the definition of the natural history collection to say that natural history imagines rather than replaces history *as* classification—and it creates a shared aesthetic, one that coalesced around these disparate objects that were made to speak about the prehistory of humans and of 'civilization' and that, as Stewart argues, makes temporality "a spatial and material phenomenon" rather than jettisoning it altogether (153).

Collection is thus at the heart of natural history, both in terms of its choices in telling the stories of its specimens and in terms of its evidence that it then turns into narratives of scientific certainty. This narrative desire, part of the labor that Stephen Jay Gould calls "creative interpretation" (106), is at the heart of what science does. Gould, a renowned scientist and public intellectual of natural history, anti-racism, and humanism, cautions us about the seduction of progress narratives, both in our telling of the story of history as a scientific racist hierarchy and in our 'correction' of that story through somehow being better than confirmation bias—beyond racism—in our own moment. At issue in scientific thought is always the questions we imagine it can ask, rather than just the objects it collects. This shift from old spectacles to new inquiries, then, is how we might move through the Cuvier/Jefferson fossil connection and use it to imagine

a connection between Hemings and Baartman. The fossils on display, the ‘discoveries’ that are engendering capitalist competition, can also tell a story about the desire to collect, forcefully extract value from land and people through forms we recognize as violence as well as through those that look—and feel—like intimacy, wonder, or a will to recover and preserve. Jefferson’s collection of fossils intersects with his collection of the enslaved, which swells with the visible traces of his mixed-race children, themselves and their mother rendered distant through legal categorization even as those laws expose deep intimacies.

Collections funnel not just authorial but interpretative agency; they are “framed by the selectivity of the collector” in Stewart’s terms (152). By shifting focus from private to public collection, we encounter the replacement of personal authority and taste with a performance of fact, of the absence of (or the need for) curation. Fictions of difference and discovery are posited as nonfiction, as realism. While it may seem paradoxical to use old objects to assert narratives of newness, Jefferson’s great hall reveals how fossils were used to assert the dominance of America and of Enlightenment forms of knowledge. As Claudine Cohen convincingly argues, “[T]he image of the mammoth is closely associated with the heroic period of the building of the American nation” (85). This white patriarchal investment in fossils was political for Jefferson, as

for thirty years he would encourage and personally finance fossil research on the American continent, collect Indian stories and legends, maintain a voluminous correspondence on the subject, help expeditions financially, promote interest in the study of fossils (notably within the Philosophical Society), and contribute to the conservation of remains. (86)

Jefferson’s collections—and the futures he imagined them to build—are unproblematically celebrated and commemorated at Monticello and in Jefferson scholarship. They are interpreted as evidence of the ways in which Jefferson was ahead of his time, a man of science, knowledge, and future progress. These are the exact arguments around which his enduring sexual relationship with Hemings was adamantly denied by historians, only now to be memorialized as problematic at the historic site. Jefferson, in earlier



narratives of refusal of the Hemings proof, is ‘better’ than his peers in term of his base desires and regularized sexual violence against black women through his desire for fossils and knowledge itself. His fossils thus served as evidence for his lack of (sexual) desire for Hemings, despite ample ‘evidence’ to the contrary.

Jefferson’s national ambitions were, of course, intertwined with sexual desire, as demonstrated in naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon’s assertion of America’s climate inferiority and the supposedly smaller size of mammoth remains found in the New World (Cohen 87). He claimed that this size differential indicated that the New World mammoth had “no ardor whatever for his female” (89). If these animals couldn’t robustly adapt to the New World environment, the suggestion went, then the same was true for the men who had migrated continents to set up America. Fossils and the quest for scientific knowledge were explicitly part of settler colonialism conquests that sought to violently acquire land and property and to assert a New World, white masculinity that was virile and hyper-capable of reproduction as part of its assertion of dominance (Schuller, “The Fossil” 231–32). Sally Hemings and her children, through the very law of *partus sequitur ventrem* (a legal doctrine in which the children follow the condition of the mother), cannot stand outside this narrative of Jefferson as a contradiction—they represent his positioning as the white patriarch at the top of a hierarchical chain of being, with science and fossils as but one narrative node in an assault on the natural world Jefferson imagined himself to inhabit and conquer (Gordon-Reed and Onuf xx-xxi). All of this was enacted in the great hall of Monticello, connecting the slaves who labored in the house with the fossils that sit next to native objects as if all belong to the same time of past glory, on display in the exhibition space of the new cultural leader. Jefferson invested heavily in this performance (his hospitality was notorious for helping to put him into heavy debt). Thus, Hemings and their children’s presence conspicuously on display to visitors at Monticello was as much a part of the experience of progress-as-dominance in the great hall as the fossils, documenting both American power and Jefferson’s virility.

While Jefferson was acting as an active paleontologist to continue the ‘discovery’ of a ‘natural’ past, he was also constructing a racialized history of science to justify the present day. Both narratives outlast him, lingering among the *objets morts* and objects of life, collected and displayed. But

these objects are also, importantly, desired: a desire that stands in for scientific reason and hypothesis. Jefferson's version of science as a mark of virile progress was part of a hierarchal view of 'life.' Within this order, Jefferson reconciled his desire to 'know' the fixity of racial difference, scientifically, with his desire for Sally Hemings that had to remain publicly uncertain and unconfirmed.<sup>4</sup> Though Hemings was a constant and visible presence at Monticello, even after Jefferson's relationship with her was officially 'unmasked' in an 1802 newspaper column, Jefferson's will does not mention her. This profound and documentable silence in his will creates a void that historians try to fill, framing Hemings and their children as missing pieces of evidence within Jefferson's life narrative. The search for evidence of her life history and presence at Monticello is framed within his, rendering it as just another kind of hunt for fossilized evidence—be it the material DNA of her known children or textual mentions of her in the remembrances of others—including the eventual 'display' of this evidence at Monticello (discussed in the third section of this essay).

The intense desire to collect stories about Jefferson and Hemings is itself mammoth: the desire for more proof and evidence, no matter what the 'evidence' already unearthed reveals, just as the desires to 'know,' document, and collect information about the catastrophic extinction events that eradicated giant animals revealed cultural anxieties about white power and progress. Both hold enduring public interest as narratives of impossible realisms, unnatural narratives that disrupt the order of things that white settler colonialism imagines as the trajectory of science and progress. Enter Georges Cuvier into a reassessed conversation around the relationship between climate science, species extinction, and comparative anatomy's racism. Interest in Cuvier as the first 'legitimate' scientist to posit extinction theory has seen an uptick in recent years—most notably, Martin J.S. Rudwick's book that collects and translates Cuvier's popular work on fossils into a modern scholarly edition. Rudwick characterizes Cuvier's work as not just a founding discourse on theories of natural extinction but as work dovetailing with discourses of contemporary climate science. He positions Cuvier's treatises as collective evidence of his prescience in proving current cultural trends in the culture and history of science:

Geological catastrophes are back in fashion. Fossil bones have rarely been out of fashion, particularly if they belong

to dinosaurs. But only in the past twenty years have earth scientists felt able to explore the possibilities of linking the two, without fear of being dismissed as mavericks or cranks. (ix)

Presenting Cuvier as literally ahead of his cultural and scientific time, Rudwick argues that “Cuvier saw his research as ‘bursting the limits of time,’ by making it possible to construct a reliable and detailed *history* of the earth and its life, back beyond the most recent ‘catastrophe’ and long before the beginnings of human records or even the existence of human beings” (ix).

And yet, even as it celebrates Cuvier’s conceptual breakthrough in the temporality of natural history, Rudwick’s work explicitly disavows the interdisciplinary connections between Cuvier’s geological work and “his work on human sciences” (xi)—his work on Sarah Baartman—through a reliance on a perceived cultural time: “[The book] has no bearing on arguments over his position in relation to such modern concepts as racism and sexism” (xi). While “racism and sexism” are ossified as “modern” in a way that defines them against the lifetime of Cuvier, his own scientific mind is imagined as able to leap across this two-hundred-year span with aplomb, unencumbered by the racist baggage of comparative human anatomy or Cuvier’s relationship to Baartman’s exploitation and death. Such selective siloing and convergence, remarkable in its irony, marks the terrain of this article: an attempt to articulate the connective tissue between the narrativization of dinosaur bones—their deep time significance to narratives of natural history and science and their weight as collected cultural objects that are always “in fashion”—and the formation, representation, and circulation of black women’s bodies in the public sphere. Rudwick, like authors discussing Jefferson’s interest in paleontology, still insists on a narrative separation that can keep natural history ‘natural’ by excising it from the histories of colonialism, enslavement, and anti-blackness that generate the very grounds of its emergence, material excavations, collection, and public display.

As objects, black women’s bodies and fossilized bones were collected for their reproductive value—one material, one epistemological, and both deeply racialized (Schuller, “The Fossil” 242). As Chernela writes,

In 1801 Thomas Jefferson, an avid collector of fossils and a student of extinctions, joined Charles Willson Peale in an expedition to exhume mastodon bones in upstate New York. The achievement was regarded as one of the important events in the history of American science and Peale mounted the gargantuan skeleton in his Philadelphia museum, one of the first natural history museums in the United States. The specimen, displayed along with a murderer's finger and an eighty-pound turnip, was considered the museum's first successful attraction. The sensation was auctioned in 1849 and sold to bidder P.T. Barnum. (20)

Barnum's presence on the capital scene of dinosaur excavation and display, as an animal trainer and curator of non-normative bodies with direct links to racialized science, makes transparent the display drive of museums by foregrounding the act of collection's association with physical, financial, and ethical competition for objects of display. Natural science, then, has always been a process of translation to the public—'selling' racial science as a visible history, a collection of supposed evidence. Jefferson and Cuvier are imagined to be innovative and imaginative in the realm of scientific method, yet are constructed as hopelessly stuck products of their (actually complex) times in relationship to their deep desire to collect and possess the bodies of black women. These collective desires for bones and bodies built the world of scientific racist hierarchy, which was to become institutionalized not just through law but also through culture in the coming era.

### **Natural History Museums, Unnatural Narratology, and Black Fictions of Exploration**

It is to this institutionalized scene of scientific 'adventure'—the process of acquiring knowledge, evidence, and specimens of natural history—that I now turn. This section will shift from the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collection and commodification of fossilized bones and black women's bodies to the post-emancipation age of great expeditions that found the museum as public spaces for science, natural history, and anthropology, following the work of Joshua A. Bell and Erin L. Hasinoff, as well as Lukas Rieppel. The earlier period of Cuvier and Jefferson as trail-

blazing executors of a prehistory of man becomes, in fact, the sensationalist prehistory of anthropology and the systemic public disciplining of modern race beyond the bounds of the chattel slave system. The unnatural narratologies of race and natural history engineered and deployed by Jefferson and Cuvier give way to the patron-funded expedition, “a sensorium moving through extended space,” in James Clifford’s eloquent wording (69). The individual or maverick masculine collector becomes codified into an academic discipline that narrates “science as adventure” (Bell and Hasinoff 33), as a masculinized, imperial, self-fulfilling labor that puts itself in proximity to risk and within the genre of romance. This adventure is assumed to be helmed by a white man from the global north, set to bring back risky, titillating ‘knowledge’ of the Other/the unknown to an audience of less adventurous but not less intrigued white bodies, ready to bear witness to this narrative in the newly ‘civilized’ spaces of museums and public exhibitions.

These narrative techniques that simultaneously cast white explorers and science into the future while sensationalizing and fixing nonwhite bodies and spaces in the past contradicted an ever more diverse present. In the United States alone, the Great Migration was bringing more African Americans north to bustling cities, the ongoing genocide of indigenous people on the continent was being marketed as a *fait accompli* that erased the violence of white Manifest Destiny, and the South was voraciously combating Reconstruction and emancipation with Jim Crow laws that desperately attempted to create separate narratives of life within the same geographic locales. As Britt Rusert succinctly puts it, “[T]he history of racial science has been understood primarily as one of unchallenged regimes of violent exploitation and near total subjection” that map onto this social history (5). Into this fray, I wish to move to a black feminist narrative form of expedition, as it is taken up by a black woman writer in this era that sees the rise of mass literacy and the romance novel. Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* remakes the science-as-adventure narrative to include contemporary Afro-American actors and Africanist histories of civilization, merging nonfiction and fantasy into an unnatural narrative in which “natural science served African Americans as a springboard for complex meditations on being, subjectivity, and existence” (Rusert 5). In the novel, Reuel Briggs, a white-passing mixed-race doctor, embarks on an expedition to provide for his new wife who, in gothic romance form, turns out to be his

sister. His ‘discovery’ of an ancient, hidden race of Ethiopians (of whom he is, naturally, the birthright king) presents African civilization as ancient, mythic, and close to unreal, yet also technologically advanced beyond white civilization. But it also links the two cultural histories through the eventual revelation of the history of Reuel and his sister/wife, Dianthe, both born from the rape of an enslaved woman.

I argue that Hopkins engages in “unnatural narratology” here, which, in Brian Richardson’s formulation, consists of narrative strategies that contest, refuse, and eschew the tenets of realism, modes that “flaunt their artificiality and break the ontological boundaries that mimetic works so carefully preserve” (20). He argues that such anti-mimetic work

may dispense with a single, consistent, human-like speaker, using only inconsistent, non-human, or collapsed voices; it may represent insubstantial or inconsistent fictional artifices rather than human figures; it may recount events that seem unworthy of being narrated or that are hopelessly confused or contradictory; it may locate these events in an unrecognizable kind of world; it may project a receiver of the story that is as unusual as its narrator. (22)

Scholars of race and gender—especially those working at the intersection of posthuman, new materialist, and animal studies—will no doubt recognize in Richardson’s list a host of narrative interpretations that hinge not necessarily on authorial ‘flaunting’ of convention but also on dominant reception. Black subjects, narratively rendered outside the normative category of human via white supremacy, are frequently read into this unnaturalness as a matter of interpretive course.

While Richardson focuses on the intentionally authored strategies of subversion of dominant mimetic narrative in satire and postmodernism, we might also think of the creation and reception of black objects in real life within a rubric that Richardson ascribes to fiction alone. Richardson argues that “[t]he fundamental nature of the difference between fiction and nonfiction is most prominent once death appears.” As he elaborates, “In fiction, characters can plead with their authors to spare their lives, temporality can be run backwards so that the dead come back to life, or a figure can die several times in fiction and miraculously be alive again in the next

chapter” (23). While “[i]n life there is only one death, and it is irreversible” (23), fiction does not abide by this natural law. Richardson further draws a distinction between “a serious kind of play” with narrative in fiction and “a sordid lie” when “falsifying historical facts in nonfictional discourse” (23). For Richardson, this impacts how we theorize time itself: “[W]e will need to reconceptualize the entire nature of the representation of temporality if we are to have a complete theory that includes the unnatural and impossible chronologies that exist *only in fiction*” (24, my emphasis). Richardson’s argument about fictive time resonates both with my above argument about private collections of fossils and with Hopkins in her presentation of the lingering unnaturalness of black women’s sexual history in *Of One Blood*.

Rather than contesting commodification, the novel seeks to reanimate the *objet mort* of the black woman’s body (quite literally) to imagine a narrative in which the “sensorium” of the expedition moves with blackness rather than against it; at the same time, it imagines trajectories for black women’s bodies that remain elusive to fixed narratives of racial and natural history. Hopkins’s text stages expedition as masculine scientific adventure, and critics have adeptly noted the way that black women and black women’s bodies have little active role in the text as traditionally defined agents (Luciano, “Passing Shadows” 148). I do not disagree—and yet I would like to think about Hopkins’s casting of black women as inanimate, barely animate, and symbolic objects in a generous critical capacity that might imagine that objects, too, compel and organize narrative. Thing theory has certainly explored this but has not imagined people—actual gendered and racialized bodies—as its model. Feminist theory has explored the possibilities and pleasures of objectification alongside the critique of its anti-feminist processes, and critics such as Jennifer Nash and Fred Moten have explored how objectification and black embodiment can be generative political sites rather than just places of thwarted agency. Combining these approaches, I argue that *Of One Blood* pierces the fiction of white supremacist-constructed realisms; it thus offers an early meta-critique of Richardson’s above narrative categories of “unworthy” and “unrecognizable” as they are determined by an assumed reading/receiving audience. Hopkins scrambles narrative and representational boundaries by both demanding visibility within normative narrative categories and creating alternative versions of narrative—and scientific—‘realism.’

Hopkins stages the confrontation with race, natural history, and difference as a problem of narrative desire across a spectrum of participants in the expedition action. From the perspective of Charlie Vance, the white male explorer, we get this passage:

It was not a simple thing to come all these thousands of miles to look at a pile of old ruins that promised nothing of interest to him after all. This was what he had come for—the desolation of an African desert, and the companionship of human fossils and savage beasts of prey. The loneliness made him shiver. It was a desolation that doubled desolateness, because his healthy American organization missed the march of progress attested by the sounds of hammers on unfinished buildings that told of a busy future and cozy modern homeliness. Here there was no future. No railroads, no churches, no saloons, no schoolhouses to echo the voices of merry children, no promise of life that produces within the range of his vision. Nothing but the monotony of past cultures read and forgotten save by a few learned savants. (93)

The “companionship of human fossils”—the narratives of adventurous ‘discovery’—sit in material tension with “the march of progress,” the violent, aggressive pursuit of white supremacist narratives across peoples and land. Facing his version of Africa as a place with “no future” for white supremacy and capitalist development, Vance’s narrative of self-determining masculine adventure withers, and yet it is also upheld in the temporality of natural history that imagines some places, people, and animals as inevitably and inalterably “past” in order to posit a future of inevitable whiteness and development “within the range of his vision.” The value of an Africanist past lies only in its relation to this limited range of white possibility and white “life.”

Hopkins is openly reflective about this moment of the rise of expeditions and museums, as well as natural history and the role of race in knowledge acquisition and discovery; these relationships are the thrust of the entire novel. Briggs, passing as white, tells the professor of the expedition,

“Your theories may be true, professor, but if so, your discoveries will establish the primal existence of the Negro as



the most ancient source of all that you value in modern life, even antedating Egypt. How can the Anglo-Saxon world bear the establishment of such a theory?" There was a hidden note of sarcasm in his voice which the others did not notice. (87)

The management of whiteness is exposed as the business of science as well as its greatest narrative threat as the professor gives a confident reply about the separation of science and anti-blackness: "You and I, Briggs, know that the theories of prejudice are swept away by the great tide of facts" (87). The professor then goes on to puzzle about the "origin of the whites" (88) as the real mystery of science. Vance's reply to this exchange is to imagine "race" as "the negro question" alone and to define its "unsolvability" as a reason not to doubt its scientific foundations but to refuse further inquiry: "Don't touch upon the origin of the Negro; you will find yourself in a labyrinth, Professor. That question has provoked more discussion than any other concerning the different races of man on the globe. Speculation has exhausted itself, yet the mystery appears to remain unsolved" (88).

Vance repeats this dismissal, not of black men directly but of "the ubiquitous race question" (153) in his meeting with Ai, a leader of the ancient but still viable group of Ethiopian descendants marked with a lotus birthmark, of which Reuel is named king. Positing this "question" of race—here, the systemic anti-blackness of the West—as the present miraculously showing up in the past culture, the white Vance muses, "[I]s it possible that the ubiquitous race question has gotten ahead of the expedition!" (153) and then smiles "in inward mirth at what he called the fossilized piece of antiquity" (that is, Ai), while asking questions about America's systemic racism (154). Ai and the 'facts' of Africanist civilization remain fossils, then, for whiteness; they are defined as something resolutely extinct, extinguished, and available only as evidence to be placed in a narrative 'beyond' race, that is, a narrative of white supremacy that is also defined as natural history and science. Even as the spectacle of race animates the drive for 'discovery,' when Africa is 'discovered' to have urban centers that far predate the "march of progress" of Western development, Vance characterizes them as *objet morts*: "like beautiful bodies they have the appearance of life, but within the worm of decay and death eats ceaselessly" (77).

These living-dead cultures of non-whiteness are projected “to be better than anything Barnum has ever given us even at a dollar extra reserved seat” (77). Again, Hopkins pushes the connection between this era’s culminating fascination with animal and human embodied difference and its investment in the display of the past as evidence of the superiority of the white present, both in terms of museum exhibits and entertainment venues like Barnum’s.

Of course, part of what is interesting in Hopkins’s text is the way she manifests narratives of both difference and sameness in relationship to racial futures—black and white people are both “of one blood,” but also “Reuel realized vividly that the race who dwelt here must be different from those of the rest of the world” upon first encountering Africa through Egypt (76). Reuel is also marked as the descendant of this bloodline even as he is discovered to be the progeny of a slave master and his enslaved medical torture victim, Mira.<sup>5</sup> As his half-sister/bride, Dianthe articulates to their white brother at one point, “Who would believe [. . .] that at this stage of the world’s progress one’s identity could be so easily lost and one still be living. It is like a page from an exciting novel” (54). Dianthe—mysterious performer, bride, lover, sister, and dead-come-back-to-life—is indeed something from this imagined “exciting novel,” framed as catalyst, muse, prisoner, victim, and patient: roles of dramatic yet socially appropriate white middle-class feminine propriety. A living body disconnected from her racial, social, and familial history, Dianthe wanders through the novel as a cipher and a pawn. As I previously mentioned, the limits of her characterization and emplotment have received deserved and smart critical attention. However, in light of Hopkins’s open engagement with the cultures of expedition and their narrativization of race, I’d like to consider more fully the role that black women’s bodies play throughout the text as objects. Rather than critique their representation for lacking the agency of men—agency that is a masculine emplotment of politics, value, and personhood—my reading below imagines objectification beyond the passive conferring of worth or lack thereof.

Dianthe enters the narrative as a spectral vision of Reuel’s and, materially, as a Fisk Jubilee Singer, though she could pass as white. When she enters the hospital ward without a name (and in a death-like slumber), Reuel and Aubrey Livingston, revealed to be her brothers only after Dianthe has married them both, allow her to be seen as a white patient. Reuel

reanimates her body through magnetism, earning estimable fame and renown for his scientific trick. The chapter that follows begins with: “The world scarcely estimates the service rendered by those who have unlocked the gates of sensation by the revelations of science; and yet it is to the clear perception of things which we obtain by the study of nature’s laws that we are enabled to appreciate her varied gifts” (37). The hierarchy is clear: one can appreciate material phenomena—beauty, the body, and the physical sensations of life—primarily through the narrative frame that science provides. Through medical science, Dianthe’s body, once perceived as dead, can now be perceived as living, though it is the same body, rendered new through new modes of perception and narrative.

Her body challenges racialized categories as well: “strangely enough, none of the men that had admired the colored artist who had enthralled their senses by her wonderful singing a few weeks before, recognized her in the hospital waif consecrated to the service of science. Her incognito was complete” (39). Dianthe herself is not a knowing agent of said racial incognito nor of science, nor of her otherworldly trances that transmit knowledge to others as key emplotments of the novel. After one such trance, witnessed by Aubrey and Reuel, “her voice ceased; she snaked upon the cot in a recumbent position. Her face was pale; she appeared to sleep. Fifteen minutes passed in death-like stillness, then she extended her arms, stretched, yawned, rubbed her eyes—awoke” (40). Her body is witnessed and a witness to legacies of racial-sexual violence—what it “knows” and encodes is Aubrey’s “fully aroused and appreciative” (40) feeling about her as an observed object that he, as a white man, can choose to possess or not, with or without her consent, just like his father who experimented with medical and hypnotic techniques on his enslaved populations as well as raped Reuel and Dianthe’s mother.

Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* thus challenges theories of both natural and unnatural narratology, particularly in framing Dianthe’s body as both dead and alive. Assuming a rationalist definition of nonfiction and material realism—that death is irreversible—Richardson does not only privilege a very short historical vision of nonfiction/truth (dismissing centuries of understanding life and death in alternative temporalities of meaning and reception through most religious practices, for instance); he also takes for granted an absolute split between the supposed nonfiction, rationalist understanding of bodies, and the knowledge carried in and through black

women's bodies that emphasize and live a mutability of death(s). We can think of these through the social reanimation of extinct animals as 'characters' of the narrative of natural history in the display of their skeletal remains and re-rendered bodies and also through the cycles of violence repeated upon the contested bodies and bones of black women, infamously including Baartman herself, whose repatriated bones were and are a subject of great controversy to be discussed in the next section.

Like her reflections on the narratives of the "race question" then, Hopkins self-consciously reflects on the positions of, limits imposed on, and knowledge produced about black women and black women's embodiment. Dianthe's body becomes the unearthed 'fossil' that tells the story of miscegenation and violence in the past and (in her reanimation and display) the present, subjecting her to the same violent possessions, often through spectral visitation by other black female relations. This history of racial-sexual being/becoming and Dianthe as its medium and a racialized-sexualized object are rendered central narratives of African American identity in both fact and feeling. The desire to possess and contain Dianthe drives the story and undergirds it even as we seem to be getting a story about expedition and racial discovery.

The limited frame from which men can animate the objects of black women's bodies is then the subject of the novel in this reading, rather than that history's unwitting repetition. When Reuel encounters Candace, the queen of Telassar, he casts her as a dark-skinned Dianthe in a lengthy blazon that fixes her as "an animate statue" of womanly beauty and virtue, explicitly and "ideally perfect" in her embodiment of black womanhood (137), like her "virgin guard" who "might have posed for a statue of Venus" (136). Her embodied presence, unlike knowledge acquisition and scientific explanation, confirms the facticity of his situation:

Then he had but a faint-hearted belief in the wonderful tale told to him, but here, under Queen Candace's magic influence, all doubts disappeared, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be sitting here among these descendants of the ancient Ethiopians, acknowledged as their King, planning a union with a lovely woman, that should give to the world a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose

destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people.

Verily, if the wonders he had already seen and heard could be possible in the nineteenth century of progress and enlightenment, nothing was impossible. (139)

Reuel brought Dianthe back to life from the dead, yet experiences an inability to find work after Aubrey plots to have his secret racial identity leaked to the Boston medical community. He finds in the material presence of black women's embodiment the affective force of scientific belief in ascertaining what seems beyond the possible and the known world, including its explanatory potential.

Reuel is, of course, locked in his own narrative trajectories of women's roles in social formation and in his own role as a man who "teaches his people all that he has learned in years of contact with modern culture" when he returns to live as the King of Telassar (193). Likewise, we have privileged those telling the public stories of fossils as a racialized history of science and the 'natural world.' In Hopkins's world, black women's bodies, as those objects formed through racial and sexual terror that stretch not just into the past but endlessly and inevitably into the future, are the significant 'specimens' who hold valuable (and embodied) knowledge that they do not and cannot always choose to share. If Reuel's romantic visions of an Africa separated from whiteness risk the "penetrating" (193) and demystifying forces of white supremacy, Dianthe lives and dies, and lives and dies again, laying bare the fiction of mystery surrounding the "race question" and the quest of science to narrate radical difference even as the history of black women's bodies and sexualities in modernity is not, in fact, difficult to discern. Instead, Dianthe's body—as object of and object through which to gain racial and scientific knowledge—performs the difficult labor of narrating the ongoing scene of violence and desire that we might rather relegate to either uncertainty or to exceptional catastrophe.

### **Marking Scientific Racism, Memorializing Black Women's Bodies**

If the display of fossils stands as a remainder of the wild, of a time prior to 'civilization' or 'history' that we enshrine in museums as monuments to our supposed civility (Luciano, "Tracking Prehistory" 177), more recent

public acknowledgement and memorialization of enslavement and colonialism in museum spaces threatens to create a similar false progress binary, albeit from different historical bones. As Schuller documents in her own previously mentioned work on fossils and indigenous studies, most fossil displays are direct in their visualization of death, recreating skeletons of extinct animals and leaving space for visitors to imagine their flesh (including their hue) (“The Fossil” 238). These fossil exhibits conjure forth death, and indeed market it, by staging the unthinkable—mass extinction—as the genius and triumph of scientific discovery. The notion that we can create a ‘true’ and accurate story out of mere bones is then itself an act of unnatural narratology that sets the stage for memorializing black history today.

The role of extinction and the specter of death are treated very differently in historical displays of enslaved and exploited peoples as they have emerged from south of the US Mason-Dixon line to Cape Town, South Africa. These sites share the same narrative challenge: how to narrate mass death and violence akin to animal extinction—the genocides of the chattel slave trade and settler colonialism. They, too, invoke shifts in temporality, working backwards toward imagined flesh and the harms inflicted upon it. Both types of displays perform a theater of knowledge, and of knowing, which they hope to impart to their given audience as certainty. They act to assure the progress of history and the stability of a less violent, more certain present, even as they create spectacles of the enormous, uncertain capacities and temporalities of nature, of human and ecological life as we know it, and of humanity’s ethical, moral, and materialist variability.

This section will consider the tensions of memorializing black women’s embodied history in the contemporary public sphere, exploring how the strategies of grand display and spectacle that append to fossils emerge and are challenged by the material and immaterial evidence that constitutes black women’s sexuality in the diaspora. Like Hopkins’s novel, written at the height of anthropological and archaeological fervor for the bones of extinct animals and cultures-being-made-extinct, these memorialization practices challenge our theories of narrative. They cannot fully elide the settler-colonial violence of their extraction or the ways that their proximity to discourses of scientific discovery mimic articulations of proof, evidence, and certainty.

In our contemporary moment, much as dinosaurs have dominated nat-

ural history museum collections, there has been a boom in African American historical tourism—transforming plantations from sites of *Gone with the Wind* southern culture of ‘servants’ into difficult memorials to enslaved peoples and their labor, lives, and deaths. The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC has set records for attendance, with lines stretching across the Mall even with reserved ticket times. Similar museums are underway in Charleston, South Carolina, mirroring those in Africa by developing public history museums from enslaved historical sites. Sites in Ghana, for instance, allow you to enter the slaving holds and prisons on the coast, creating a thriving business that has drawn many African American tourists for over two decades. Jefferson’s home, Monticello, has also recently undergone a transformation on its hilltop, now ‘showcasing’ the history of enslaved peoples on the estate (including the ‘restored’ room of Sally Hemings that opened to the public in late 2018) and, at least in certain offered tours, no longer suggesting that enslavement at Monticello was any less violent or harsh than it was at other locales.

The history of enslaved bodies—the remnants and objects of their lives and labor—are being woven into new narrative forms as consumable histories of unspeakable violence and loss at historical sites, museums, and even at universities reckoning with their historic ties to slavery. Said narratives claim to bring the materiality of enslaved life close, as well as to give it accuracy and the respectful accumulation of historical knowledge that it deserves. In correcting historical invisibility, they also create new constructs of distance and mythologies of black life under enslavement and settler colonialism, usually through narratives of tragedy, violence, and subjection, with (necessarily) uncertain claims to creating more just futures.

Publicly, the display of Baartman’s bones in France through the 1970s is declared a disgusting display of racism banished to an earlier era even as her skeleton is fought over to be repatriated and memorialized in South Africa. Gould presciently diagnosed discourses of science and their investments in progress as teleological problems of the very questions we ask of fossils, data, and evidence (106)—and we do something similar in imagining anti-black racism within science as a thing of the past. Baartman’s bones were on display in France until the 1970s, not banished to the practices of the distant past. The fight over the repatriation of Baartman’s

bones extended to the early twenty-first century, in large part because of their status as *objets morts*; because of their uncertain status as objects of colonialism, her bones could augur a slippery slope of art returns and mass culpability. The macabre image of her bones, her organs in jars, and the cast made of her body, in particular, embody narratives of racism's abject past. On the return and burial of her bones in South Africa, President Thabo Mbeki issued a speech—marking the grave as both a 'homecoming' and a tourist memorial dedicated to the violence of colonialism, apartheid, and anti-blackness.

Her bones, then, are taken out of the history of comparative anatomy and natural science—previous versions of the narrative of natural history—and placed into a history of racism, which is or can be made into history vis-à-vis the object of her bones and the re-narration of their 'natural' or 'unnatural' home. Mbeki cautions against the possibility of "bury[ing] her remains and bury[ing] the truth" as a remedy for racist practices, even as visibility remains the hallmark methodology for the work of her remains. In fact, he explicitly suggests that commemorating Baartman is an impossibility (even as he imagines natal land as her 'home'), instead digging into her objectification by situating her as the key object in telling the story of white scientific racism as a narrative construction. "Sarah Baartman was taken to Europe to tell this lie in the most dramatic way possible," he says of the obsessive narrative capacity of white supremacy and its use of Baartman as an object of confirmation bias. Narrative is, in fact, the grounds on which he reconstructs Baartman's objecthood and repurposes it; her story "is a story of our reduction to the status of objects that could be owned, used and disposed of by others, who claimed for themselves a manifest destiny to run the empire of the globe." Baartman's bones are an object of critical blackness, one could say, part of the making of an unnatural narrative that is turned toward the critical unpacking of the twinned myths of whiteness and misogyny that are animating the future of a post-apartheid South African nationalism at that 2002 moment. Here, too, the aesthetic minimalism of her gravesite—a rock atop a mountain adorned with a plaque—cannot remain immune to the spectacle of reception; it was defaced, and a green iron fence now separates it from the viewing public, the tourists it was meant to attract with its still unbuilt accompanying museum site in view. There is no new object here, only a new collection, curation, and display.



Burying her bones in South Africa, marking the event of anti-blackness and its structures as something that can be put in the past through her memorialization, offers up Baartman as a fossil of racism and misogyny, a specimen of the knowledge of racist scientific and cultural practices, and a tool for knowledge acquisition, this time about settler colonialism, structural racism, and sexism. As Kolbert notes about the narration of fossils in various historical moments, they become the building blocks for shifting stories about the Earth, geological time, historical time, and the story of humanity. If, in 1810, Baartman in the flesh was presented as a kind of living object—a site of knowledge acquisition around supposed radical, racialized difference that codified systems of colonialism and chattel slavery—her bones in the twenty-first century are deployed as fossils, unearthed and then re-entombed sedimentary layers of black women's sexual and embodied histories. If they were once put on display as a sign of natural history and science, then hidden from view to disavow the racist past, they are now made visible again to display that very scientific process *as* racist violence. The fact that extinction—racial extinction, genocide, the interrelated excavation of extinct animals, and the regular clip of animal extinctions due to manmade climate change—is a part of our present temporality marks the difficulty of reading these acts of memorialization as fundamentally different narratives than the ones they contest. But in the invocation of narrative construction, confirmation bias, and the desire to collect—things, money, bodies, power—Mbeki exposes the ongoing temporality of black women's bodies as one that necessarily reorders the structure of natural and cultural histories as they are inherited and as they endure today, an association marked by Baartman's name on a nonprofit resource center for abused women and girls in Cape Town. Display might instead move toward the visibility of desire itself—transparently naming this ineradicable component of our narratological constructions of history not by being certain that we now have it right, but by including uncertainty in how we tell these stories.

The struggle over the story of Hemings and Jefferson is a case in point. As Monticello struggles to incorporate what I call the appetite for information about Hemings—to evince her presence at Monticello as forcefully as she has for so many years been erased from the story of the Mountain-top—one must struggle with the narrative desires that corrective narratives also engage in. The Hemings family tour that has been added to the paid

rotation, and the mandatory statement that “the foundation believes” that Jefferson was the father of Hemings’s children, post-DNA evidence, joins the current reconstruction of what the foundation is calling Sally Hemings’s room, which had been made into a bathroom at Monticello.<sup>6</sup> The combination of scientific evidence to prove Hemings’s embodied value and the articulation of that historical and scientific fact of Hemings’s life as ‘belief’ meets in the construction of a speculative room which could or could not have been Hemings’s ‘place’ in the house. This room-that-may-not-be-her-room is meant to commemorate her presence as a moral example and marketable ‘good’ in our contemporary moment of reckoning with enslavement. This trade in anti-racism as a practice of remembering and memorialization, and a renewed narrative commitment to countering anti-blackness in the public sphere as the convergence of a desire to ‘do right’ by history, also asserts historical progress through white enlightenment about the ‘fossils’ of racist, abject practices.

The creation of a ‘fossilized’ site to commemorate Hemings from what was so recently a site of black abjection and erasure—a bedroom turned public bathroom—is then a complicated business, no less commodified or objectified than various other racial tourism makeovers that seek a new consumer base by performing ‘new’ narrative desires around black women, their bodies and sexualities. In response to these complications, for instance, curators decided to project rather than print Hemings’s son’s extant words about her relationship with Jefferson in the room itself, making her ‘story’ ephemeral yet present; it includes the word ‘rape’ in quotes and hence as a recognized subject of debate and critical/curatorial desire in the exhibition on Hemings (Stockman). The choice here to memorialize and perform uncertainty is not the same as the center’s still unedited video that posits that “many historians now believe” that Hemings’s children were also Jefferson’s—a hedging of bets to retain appeal to denialist consumers.<sup>7</sup> The uncertainty of the new Hemings display is that one acknowledges the risks and vulnerabilities of objecthood—for history and for science—as they are constructed through black women’s bodies. These objects insist that we represent narrative desire otherwise, refusing to capitulate to the logic of certainty and proof and instead, I argue, leaning into the surprisingly aligned discourses of science as “creative interpretation” (Gould 106) and black feminist history as “critical fabulation” (Hartman 11).

Science and history thrive on these two competitive axes of temporality—the performance of new and better knowledge to bring certainty and truth and the continual challenge to ‘discover’ new and upending evidence. As Kolbert also notes in her book, the adjudication of scientific realism—the approved narratives of truth that constitute natural history—happens through a singular scientific body that must vote to alter official understanding of the natural history of the Earth. Recently, scientists have successfully petitioned to have the period after 1492 recalibrated to be considered ‘the Anthropocene’—an acknowledgement of the overwhelming quantity and quality of the replicated scientific proof of contemporary climate change and its human causality (92–95). This same body is the one that shifted the cause and date of dinosaur extinction to the meteor crash that hit in what is present-day Mexico. Science is a powerful system of explanation both because it performs truth and because it is always testing its own hypotheses—it is true and trusted precisely, then, because its methodologies insist on the ability to prove previous truths wrong when and if it is collectively decided that enough evidence exists to counteract it. The re-erasing of the Anthropocene takes difficult scientific account for the effects of colonialism in the relationship between the trade in peoples, the market for collecting commodities and resources, and, for this article, the historically simultaneous fetishization of the remains of extinct animals and the (de)valuation of black women’s bodies and sexual histories. Both of these acts required performances of certainty in a larger field of deep debate, uncertainty, and “plasticity” (Schuller, *Biopolitics* 23–24). In seeking to transform memorialized spaces toward more just depictions of the violence and genocide of chattel slavery, the official narrative of black women’s bodies and embodiment has to mark a system of chattel slavery and colonialism while not relegating that violence and terror only to a material past. In the body of the enslaved or in the displayed bones of Baartman; in the transformed ‘room’ of Hemings, open to the public’s appetite for access to her story; in the body of the extinct creature—here lie the mythic monsters of the past, the stuff of children’s anthropomorphized imaginations, the material objects of tourism, the commerce in natural history, and the commodification of science crystalized in material form.

If we believe that racial science and racism, like extinction, have an “uneven velocity and intensity” (Sodikoff 7), then we must read the ‘evidence’ of those temporalities in the stories we tell about racism’s birth, du-

ration, and continuance. Hemings, Baartman, and Hopkins problematize the stories of specimens that marginalize the material experiences and narrative afterlives of black women's bodies in science and natural history. A focus on black women's embodiment can also challenge the belief that if we tell the stories of anti-blackness right, if we pitch them at the highest level of intensity, they will count as fact. Science has been struggling in its efforts to "mak[e] meaning out of vanishment" (Sodikoff 13) over two hundred years since a theory of extinction came into accepted scientific circles via the work of a comparative anatomist who staked his career on the terms of racial-sexual difference. Similarly, history is still struggling to get out of the narratives of white supremacy that make up our known world and our imagined resistance to its dominant racial formations. If "scientific theories of race are, fundamentally, about the reproduction of race" (Rusert 183), a discussion of black women's bodies in relationship to fossils may diagnose and disarm through its insistence on the terms of desire, affect, and feeling in and through scientific inquiry and method.

In these historical moments, separated over three centuries, the 'specimens' of black women and extinct animals become the constructed and literal fossils that inform the acts of making race and natural history. Alternate and ongoing temporalities of black women's embodiment, like Hopkins's, offer a narrative rupture that lives on, passes on (as marked in the infamous last lines of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "This is not a story to pass on" (324)), and sings on—on display, repurposed, buried, unearthed, made natural and unnatural, present and past. Like the fossilized bones that mark extinctions, the stories we tell about black women's bodies can evince eruptive temporalities that challenge both our narrative of fixed scientific knowledge and evidence as well as our critical desires to produce teleologies of race that support more 'just' outcomes.

Unnatural narrative frames form the intersection of contests over fossilized bones, the growth of the museum industrial complex, the fetishization of Enlightenment science, the obsessive biological and cultural fascination with proving racial and sexual difference, and the violent and complicated experience of black women's sexuality during modernity. They can also suggest alternate methodologies for 'writing it down' that work with rather than against objectification, though not against the materiality of black women's historical experience. We might then refuse the concatenating work of evidence, narrative completion, and the perfor-

mance of certainty even as we embrace the objects and their eruptive transcriptions of historical truths. These objects are not ‘post-fact,’ then, but we might be willing to risk misinterpretation—in fact, to know it will inevitably happen—for the labor of creative interpretation that these bodies and fossils make visible. We might look on the vulnerable objects of scientific and historical narrative desire with awe and curiosity about all that we cannot fathom about the stark, sudden violence of extinction even as we tell new stories with the evidence at hand. This requires an acceptance of the impossibility of telling a story that fully and finally captures the slow-death temporalities of not just violent death but also the ongoing life produced by and through black women’s bodies. We can insist on the fact of those bodies, lives, and deaths as significant and material without our counternarratives being reduced to a constant parade of needing more proof or better objects to convince without a doubt. Doubt is the terrain of black women’s history of sexuality in modernity, and it is the property of fossils as one of the most desired and displayed objects of scientific ‘progress.’ It is in the creative reinterpretation of their proximate stories that we might begin to locate new critical desires for this catastrophic moment.

## Notes

1. Jefferson’s clock, for instance, is foregrounded by docents even with its design flaw regarding the height of the building.
2. The native artifacts are of course evidence of an ongoing genocide even as they are displayed as relics in the making, as also argued by Schuller (“The Fossil”) among others.
3. See Stanley Hedeon on Jefferson’s and others’ scramble for the bones of extinct animals. For more information, also see Tom Rea and Samuel J. Redman.
4. See Jefferson’s infamous passage on supposed observable immutable behavioral and constitutional differences between races in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (147–51) or his letter with his ‘formula’ for the genealogical ‘dilution’ of black blood that could pass one ‘into’ whiteness (which not coincidentally was precisely the racial ratio of his children with Hemings) (“Thomas Jefferson”).
5. This story parallels that of physician J. Sims, the ‘father’ of modern gynecology, who performed experimental surgeries on enslaved women that also served as his nurses

and assistants (see Deirdre Cooper Owens). The specter of medical racism extended beyond death as well, as Daina Ramey Berry documents in her groundbreaking work on the theft and sale of enslaved bodies for medical schools, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*.

6. As stated by a docent during my visit on June 14, 2017.
7. Last watched on June 14, 2017.

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