

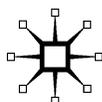
Representation and Black Womanhood

*Representation and Black
Womanhood*

The Legacy of Sarah Baartman

Edited by
Natasha Gordon-Chipembere

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REPRESENTATION AND BLACK WOMANHOOD

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For the reasons my soul smiles,
Aminata, Jabulani, and Masauko

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is the act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words; that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.

bell hooks

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Preface

“Breaking the Internet, a Swedish Cake and the legacy of Sarah Baartman”

It is a profound honor to write this Preface as *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* goes into paperback. It has almost been five years since the book was first published in September 2011 and in many ways the relevance of our subject, Sarah Baartman and her legacy, has been amplified. The essays within have become relevant as racism, sexism, and a myriad of other human rights violations have taken the forefront on the world’s stage. The violence enacted upon bodies of color and on the poor has become the fodder for the altars social media. With the commodification of the “derriere” as a hyper-saleable object of desire and the gaze (i.e., Beyoncé, Nikki Minaj, Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea), little attention has been paid to the historical implication of such acts. It is ironic to see the ways in which public performances of this nature are hastily associated with “the Hottentot Venus” without any clear inferences on how and why such a label would be attached. Most people, if they know anything about Sarah Baartman’s story, claim her as a victim of circumstance; accountable for her own demise. Rarely are the narratives of personhood, agency, slavery and privacy attributed to this South African woman who’s lived experiences most do not fathom. And so, this collection continues to insist on seeing and learning about Sarah Baartman in her rightful context.

In November 2014, *Paper Magazine* launched a “break the Internet” campaign on social media with the publication of nude and semi-nude images of former porn star and TV reality show personality, Kim Kardashian. Though the internet never crashed, social media went into a tizzy as the images were released. All focus was on Kardashian’s oiled derriere, either naked or with a champagne glass perched precariously on it. French photographer,

Jean-Paule Goude, recycled the shot from an original he took 32 years prior for a book entitled, *Jungle Fever* (Xavier Moreau Press, 1982). The first photograph was of a naked (nameless) black woman, standing in front of a blue wall, popping open a bottle of champagne into a glass propped on her rear end. Since historical memory is maintained for the length of a “tweet,” *Paper Magazine’s* cover seemed new and revolutionary. The “re-priming” of all gazes towards Kardashian’s posterior dregs up the historically incessant sexual exploitation and mis-representation of black women over hundreds of years. What may be a “hot off the press” social event that adds incredible capital to Kardashian’s bank account and sustain her social persona, there too lies the fact that she would not be this rich or famous had there not been a long, entrenched, conditioned desire to focus on and literally “consume” black women’s genitals; particularly the rear end. With a simple look into any 19th century archive, we realize that we have heard this same old song before and Kim Kardashian is sorely out of tune; yet she has capitalized in the dehumanization of black and brown women over the centuries. A five minute Google search takes you to the original *Jungle Fever* image and one begins to understand that invoking (yet again) the naked black body undergirds *Paper’s* intent as well as Goude’s hyper-fascination with all things black. Another quick search with similar key words will take you to another public demonstration of the “Hottentot Venus” two years prior in Sweden.

On Sunday, April 15, 2012 the Swedish Arts Organization celebrated World Arts Day at the Moderna Museet alongside the Moderna’s 75th Birthday. Various Swedish artists were selected to create cakes for the exhibition. The Minister of Culture, Lena Adelsohn Lilijeroth was invited to give the welcome and cut the cakes. Makonde Linde, an Afro-Swede, whose provocative art focuses on the human form in “blackface” as it engaged with racism, said his cake/installation was an attempt to disrupt the silences around Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Linde believed he was bringing into public discourse a taboo subject seldom spoken about in Sweden. In creating a cake with a black torso, a blood red interior, and a neck encased in gold bands, he symbolically asked his audience to feel the discomfort of an actual circumcision. Linde’s own head was an appendage (in blackface) to the cake, which howled in pain as portions were repeatedly cut.

The Minister of Culture, in a now infamous photo, is captured taking the first cut, symbolically removing the clitoris, as Linde's head wails, to a nervously laughing (and tweeting, facebooking, photographing) Swedish audience. In the final coup de grace, Lilijeroth feeds a portion of the cake, 'the genitals of the symbolic black woman', to the screaming head of Linde, as laughter and applause filled the room. The immediate national and global response contained a number of demands, namely the resignation of the Minister of Culture and an apology from the artist. Both the Minister and Linde defended the installation on the grounds of artistic license. The most troubling aspect of Linde's cake and Lilijeroth's "performance" is the certainty and ease with which both of them, and their global audience (including the media which fueled much of the furor), accessed the black female body as the ready (and reliable) site upon which this violence could be enacted. Called the "Hottentot Venus" cake, it was highly problematic for its assumptive appropriation of Sarah Baartman as a trope for all things Black, female and victimized, especially when the discussion was focused on female genital cutting (FGC). Sarah Baartman was not a circumcised woman though during her autopsy, her genitals and brains were removed by George Cuvier. This conflation of Baartman-esque symbology with FGC/African womanhood/violence and exhibition is another example of the larger implications of how Black womanhood has negatively been inscribed in collective historical and contemporary memory.

Representation and Black Womanhood: the Legacy of Sarah Baartman reaches into 19th century archives in both literal and figurative ways to think about the life of Sarah Baartman, the Khoisan woman taken in 1810-1815 to both London and Paris for an exhibition which focused on her body. From an "artistic event" with a Swedish cake to Goude's naked black muse in *Jungle Fever*, I query why the "Hottentot Venus" *performed* by Sarah Baartman is seemingly one of the most-ready tropes for violent articulations when the landscape is the represented black female body? I look to Baartman's brief historiography to establish the foundation for my answer, while thinking about those who are complacent in the re-invention of these stereotypical and violent renderings, even with the best intentions. Culminating with her dissection in 1815 by Napoleon's surgeon, George Cuvier, Baartman's genitals were "unveiled" to the world, where I suggest, the master European

text about the black female body was created. It was with this fabrication that an external gaze is sanctioned; judging black and brown women's humanity based upon the nature of their genitals. Alongside this comes the entrenchment of a language of degradation and sexualization and suggests permissiveness to access black women's bodies without recourse. What if we were to look, as Yvette Abrahams, Desiree Lewis, Gabeba Baderoon and Sphiwe Gloria Ndlovu suggests, at Sarah Baartman through a lens of love and even desire, rather than one of voyeuristic consumption, trauma and pain? What if, like Z'etoile Imma, Hershini Bhana Young, Sheila Smith Mckoy, Karlien van der Schyff and Ilaria Oddenino insists, we apply an "ethic of caring" to the ways we encounter Baartman's life and legacy? As a collective of writers, we resist the colonial archives which render Baartman responsible for her own slavery, exhibition, death and dissection. In butting against these archival narratives, the hope is to present a wider frame for the possibilities of how black and brown women can become active agents in their own representations through understanding the legacy of Sarah Baartman's life.

NATASHA GORDON-CHIPEMBERE
May 2015
Costa Rica

Acknowledgments

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May Sarah Baartman rest in blissful peace.

Prelude

“I’ve come to take you home”

(Tribute to Sarah Bartmann written in Holland, June 1998)

Diana Ferrus

I have come to take you home, home!
Remember the veld,
the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees?
The air is cool there and the sun does not burn.
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,
the proteas stand in yellow and white
and the water in the stream chuckles sing-songs
as it hobbles along over little stones.

I have come to wrench you away,
away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster
who lives in the dark with his clutches of imperialism
who dissects your body bit by bit,
who likens your soul to that of Satan
and declares himself the ultimate God!

I have come to soothe your heavy heart,
I offer my bosom to your weary soul.
I will cover your face with the palms of my hands,
I will run my lips over the lines in your neck,
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you
and I will sing for you,
for I have come to bring you peace.

I have come to take you home
where the ancient mountains shout your name.
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill.
Your blankets are covered in buchu and mint.
The proteas stand in yellow and white—

I have come to take you home
where I will sing for you,
for you have brought me peace,
for you have brought us peace.