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Rewritings and interpretations of Sara Baartman as explored in 19th and 20th century texts.

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DECLARATION:

I, Joanne Joseph, hereby declare that this is my own unaided work. It is being submitted as partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts (European Literature) by Course Work and Research Report in the School of Literature and Language Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

_____

Signed this ____ day of _____ _____

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the recurring reproduction of Sara Baartman, her life and significance as set out by writers of different epochs, racial identities, social contexts and intentions, thereby reinforcing the particular ideologies and mindset of their time. This study will show some of the early writings, such as that of the French doctor Georges Cuvier's "Extrait d'observations Faites sur le Cadavre d'une femme connue a Paris et a Londres sous le nom de VENUS HOTTENTOTTE" [Extracts of observations made on the Body of a woman known in Paris and London by the name of VENUS HOTTENTOT] (Cuvier, 1817), Zola Maseko's documentary film "The Life and Times of Sara Baartman" (Maseko, 1998), "Hottentot Venus" by Barbara Chase-Riboud (Chase-Riboud, 2003) and the theatre play "Venus" by Suzan Lori Parks (Parks, 1997), to be works that although differing greatly in approach, are ultimately subjective re-writings of the body and identity of Sara Baartman.

Chapter: 1

INTRODUCTION

The return of Sara Baartman's[1] remains to South Africa and her burial ceremony at the Gamtoos River on 9 August 2002 ended years of correspondence between the French government and the South African state. Baartman was a young Khoi woman from the Cape, who is believed to have been born circa 1791.[2] As a young woman, she would have witnessed the Europeans' systematic oppression of her people and the attempts of Dutch commandos to eradicate the Khoi, as Holland's grip on power strengthened at the Cape. It is also possible that she, like many young women of her time, would have been put to work in the homes of Dutch officials and settlers, who had introduced slavery to the Cape.

[1] In embarking on this study, one is faced with the confusing choice of how to refer to Baartman. It is commonly accepted that she was named Sara by members of her family and was probably referred to (not in a derogatory manner as is commonly thought, but as a sign of affection) as Saartjie meaning "little Sara" by those who were close to her. This nomenclature was probably later adopted by her slave masters. There are academics and historians who refer to her by her baptismal name, Sarah. But in this study, I shall refrain from any variations on the name she is believed to have been given at her birth, which is Sara, except when I refer to the protagonist "Sarah" in Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel "Hottentot Venus".

[2] The details of Baartman's life are sketchy and often precipitate debate among scholars about which of the commonly-accepted notions about her life are based on historical fact and which are mere suppositions and myths that have grown around the image of the icon since her death. Writer Wanda Smit in her article "Return of the Hottentot Venus: Return of the Moon" (Smit,1995) explores a number of these theories and points out that perhaps one of the most reliable sources would be an affidavit given by Baartman in response to an outcry in the British press about her public display at a London freak show. Smit writes:- " Her affidavit throws some light on her history at the Cape of which we otherwise know very little: Her father used to take cattle from the interior to the Cape and was killed on those journeys by 'wild Bushmen', her mother died shortly after her birth, she had a child by a drummer at the Cape with whom she lived for two years whilst she was in the employ of Hendrick Cezar, the child soon died. She was to receive half of the money received for exhibiting herself and Dr Dunlop the other half." (Smit, 1995:02) See also a more embellished version of this account in Zola Maseko's film as quoted in Chapter 3 of this study.

Sara Baartman and Historical Sources

It must be noted that there is a dearth of historically accurate information on the life of Sara Baartman, and this is what for many writers, must hold a great deal of magnetism. The gathering of historical information has allowed writers some leeway to try to "fill in the gaps" in periods and events of Baartman's life that remain a mystery. Much has been gleaned from historians such as Robert Shell and his team of researchers who have assisted in painting a clearer picture about the life of the slave at the Cape during the period of Dutch settlement there. [3] Carmel Schrire takes this a step further and explores the nature of the relationship between the indigenous Khoisan community living at the Cape and the Dutch settlers. In addition to examining the existing archaeological and anthropological evidence at hand, Schrire carefully analyses the burgeoning of a cross-racial fascination between the two groups about each other's social and sexual practices and places Baartman within this context.[4]

Then there is the work of modern-day scientists who, having the benefit of hindsight are able to critically analyse the work of their predecessors and offer explanations and alternatives to these schools of thought. Palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould details his visit to the Paris Museum where he came upon Baartman's remains. He remarks on the undignified end that

[3] Shell [1997] has written an interesting book entitled *Children of Bondage* that details the history of slave orphans in the early 19th century.
[4] See Carmel Schrire [1995], "Native Views of Western Eyes", and *Digging Through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist*

Baartman met on a French dissection table and underlines what treatment of this nature has meant over the centuries for the dignity of Africans as a whole.[5] In a similar vein, South African paleoanthropologist Professor Phillip Tobias has written about the lengthy process undertaken in repatriating Baartman's remains from France to South Africa. It begins with the first time he set eyes on them in 1955 and ends with Baartman's final journey – her return home nearly two centuries after her death.[6] This is not merely a scientific account. It is rather a narrative in which science and humanity converge in a manner that cannot fail to move the reader.

Newspapers of Baartman's time such as *The Examiner* also play their part in fleshing out Baartman's existence as it unfolded in Britain and France. There are various sources to draw from. The controversial court case in which the judiciary tried to ascertain whether Baartman was indeed living a life of slavery or not is set out in "The Case of the Hottentot Venus" recorded by Sir Edward Hyde East.[7] But there are also journalistic accounts of Baartman's day-to-day routine as the leading performer in what was little more than a freak show.[8] Others are letters to the editors about the exhibition of Baartman in which the opinions of the populace are heard and in whose writings are reflected the spectacle of the woman known as the Hottentot Venus. The newspapers reveal something of the debate that was raging at

[5] See Stephen Jay Gould, "The Hottentot Venus", *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (1985: 291-2) [New York]
[6] See Phillip V. Tobias, "Saartjie Baartman: Her Life, Her Remains, and the Negotiations for their Repatriation from France to South Africa", *South African Journal of Science,* no. 98 (March – April 2002) pp. 107 – 110.
[7] A record of this can be found in *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Court of King's Bench,* Volume 13 (London, 1811:195)
[8] See for example the article "The Female Hottentot", *Examiner* (21 October 1810) p. 653

the time about the abolition of slavery, interrogating the morality of displaying a human being as a grotesque curiosity. But this is simultaneously balanced with voices of Europeans so overcome with a fascination for Baartman that they firmly support her continued exhibition.

More recently, contemporary writers such as Rachel Holmes have done in-depth research into the life, the experiences and the death of Sara Baartman. In her book *Hottentot Venus, the Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman* Holmes adopts a narrative approach which describes what must have been Baartman's daily reality on the streets of Europe. Holmes supports aspects of the narrative with frequent references to research that she has done on topics ranging from slavery at the Cape to freak shows in Europe and Baartman's burial at Hankey in South Africa. Holmes's work differs from many others in that she takes the stance that Baartman was indeed complicit in her own exhibition and that by denying Baartman that autonomy, we as modern South Africans rob her of the (intellectual) capacity to make independent choices. This is a controversial and courageous standpoint, given that many South African media have the tendency to depict Baartman as a victim.

Another modern South African historian, Yvette Abrahams has thoroughly researched the significance of Baartman's exhibition in Europe and dispelled the notion that she was merely a gross and abject figure gazed upon by shocked Europeans. Abrahams has made a case for Baartman's having

become an object of eroticism to white culture, the undercurrent of which Abrahams believes can be gleaned from examining travel accounts, ethnographical and anthropological writings of the time.[9] Similarly, Anne Fausto-Sterling compares the reception of various black women in Europe, offering an insight into how science and popular culture converged in the manner in which these women were perceived.[10] Sadiah Qureshi focuses her article "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus'" on dispelling the misconception that race can be treated as a historically timeless concept, especially in the case of Baartman. Qureshi tries to offer a broader definition of black racial stereotyping by examining issues such as race, gender and empire, thereby contextualizing Baartman's role in the wider scheme of nineteenth-century European practices.[11] Zine Magubane in his article "Which Bodies Matter?" also seeks to unseat the ideology that there was a core image of the Black woman in the nineteenth century and postulates that social relations, rather than psychological dispositions, determine how bodies are seen and perceived.[12]

Over the years, many of the aforementioned sources have been analysed to answer a pivotal question around the story of Sara Baartman. Was she taken

[9] See Yvette Abrahams, "Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain", in Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (eds), *Nation, Empire and Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), pp 225-36

[10] See Fausto-Sterling's "Gender, Race and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815-1817", in Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, (eds), *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture (*Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995), pp. 19-47

[11] See Sadiah Qureshi "Displaying Sara Baartman, The 'Hottentot Venus"', *History of Science, 42* (2004) pp. 234-257 or http://www.shpltd.co.uk/qureshi-baartman.pdf

[12] See Zine Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus'"., *Gender and Society 15,* no. 6, Sage Publications, 2001:816-834

to Britain against her will, or did she comply? There are numerous questions around the "agreement" that saw her leave South Africa to take up residence first in England, and later in France. Many say she was duped into signing a contract, by a friend of her ruthless owner William Dunlop and that she was never even privy to the contract that historians say she may have signed.[13] Either way, it is unlikely that Baartman could have foreseen the future that Europe had in store for her – a life of exhibition that saw her displayed as a freak in Europe because of her physical attributes - particularly her sexual organs, which Europeans considered grotesque.[14] Baartman died a penniless prostitute in 1816. French scientists then made a cast of her body, dissected her, pickled her brain and genitalia in formaldehyde and displayed these objects at the Paris *Musée de l'Homme.* These objects had apparently lost their novelty by 1974, because they were then stashed away in a back room at the museum.

Former South African President Nelson Mandela's repeated attempts during his presidency to repatriate Sara Baartman's remains failed because of the French Museum's reluctance to accede to his request. But her remains were

[13] See for example a well-researched article entitled 'Sara's story, she's coming home" that has been published on the internet (www.yourdotcomforafrica.com). It sets out a number of historical possibilities and quotes the comments of witnesses of the time on the issue of Baartman's alleged complicity in her own exhibition, while refraining from adopting any particular version itself.

[14] Historian Krista Thompson notes that "The tradition of exhibiting people of colour in Western societies has existed since the earliest encounters between Europeans and indigenous populations in the New World and Africa. Indeed, on his return to Spain after his first voyage to The New World in 1492, Columbus brought several Arawaks to Queen Isabella's court, where one of them remained in display for two years. Exhibiting non-white bodies as a popular practice reached its apogee in the nineteenth century in both Europe and in USA when freak shows […] became fairly common." (Thompson, 1998: 02)

finally allowed to leave France in 2002 – a process that even required a change in French law.[15]

The repatriation of Baartman's mortal remains re-kindled the debate around a woman whom history had forgotten – had allowed to move from the centre-piece at Europe's cruelest exhibitions to an invisible remnant in a jar on a museum shelf, and in whom few seemed interested anymore. Yet there were those for whom Sara Baartman held a special significance - in earlier and more modern times. It was not just South Africans who found themselves outraged that one of their countrywomen had been violated in this manner over the centuries. There were also writers who found in Baartman the icon of struggle – that of the black African woman, the symbol of European oppression and victimisation and ultimately, as her body made its way back home – the symbol of victory over the oppressor.

[15] Decorated and world-renowned South African scientist Phillip Tobias details the tedious process of requesting the repatriation of Baartman's remains in his autobiography "Phillip Tobias: Into the Past – A Memoir" (Tobias, 2005) He writes:

In petitioning the French authorities and the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle for the return of Sarah Baartman's remains – or such of them as were available – we (the South African authorities and academics) assured our French colleagues that we had no intention to embark on a campaign for the repatriation of other cultural and skeletal remains from the scores of museums, galleries and universities in most European countries and other places where such objects and remains repose. We were well aware that there are literally thousands of skulls, skeletons and cultural objects, which were removed from South Africa during the colonial era... However we affirmed that we believed that the case of Sarah Baartman was special and, indeed, unique. The remains of Sarah Baartman were of an individual whose identity was known in life, who was baptized, married and the mother of children, and about whose life history many details are known. Finally, in a three-stage procedure, the French parliament approved a Bill to permit the return of Sarah Baartman's remains as requested by the South African government. The remains were handed over by representatives of the French government to the South African Embassy in Paris on 29 April 2002. (Tobias, 2005: 85)

The Texts in This Study

Among a number of others, there are three contemporary literary figures and filmmakers who were seized by a particular fascination with Baartman. It is because of their diverse perspectives, and varied literary and filmic media, that their works have been chosen as primary texts for the purpose of this study.

The medical report that became public in the wake of Baartman's death is an impactful starting point. This first primary text therefore that I have chosen to study is one that has resulted in its author being labelled a racist, depraved scientist. But it nonetheless is a powerful tool to explain the 19th century paradigm that classed Africans as sub-human. The text in question is the medical report penned by Baron Georges Cuvier – a leading scientist of his time who had occasion to observe Baartman while she was alive - and dissect her body once she had died.

Cuvier's *"Extrait d'observations Faites sur le Cadavre d'une femme connue a Paris et a Londres sous le nom de VENUS HOTTENTOTTE" [Extracts of observations made on the Body of a woman known in Paris and London by the name of VENUS HOTTENTOT]* written in 1817, shortly after her death, became a text that removed all indicators of Baartman's humanity. Cuvier, a respected scientist of his time, through his writings, added to the already developing scientific paradigm in Europe that began to draw comparisons

between the Khoisan and the ape, thereby lowering the status of Africans to an inferior species. It must be noted that he did not pass his writings off as indisputable scientific truth. He often referred to his dependence on European explorers to clarify certain facts on his behalf. But it became clear that in the absence of medical facts, he was inclined to rely on hearsay and eventually resort to substantiating his claims with unscientific ideologies that gave birth to cultural misunderstandings about Baartman and in a wider sense, her people. His cold, clinical examination of Baartman's dissected body coupled with cultural myths of the time not only undermined her humanity. This approach also removed his burden of guilt – ultimately the French public that had seen this curiosity on display for so long was looking to him for answers as a man of science. A close reading of the text arguably reveals a tacit pressure for him to produce a medical review that would advance the coming colonial masters' pursuit of knowledge about and existing distaste for their black subjects.[16]

In stark contrast is the work of South African filmmaker, Zola Maseko. He has made a documentary film that clearly falls into the ambit of a restorative text. In *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* that Maseko made in 1998, he attempts to re-instate her as a dignified young Khoisan woman, robbed of a life of self-respect, and who, contrary to being labelled as a physically

[16] In modern times, Said has referred to this way of thinking as the "colonial discourse". (Said, 1978:33). This approach is said to refer to "the inferiority of the colonized, the primitive nature of other races, the barbaric depravity of colonized societies, and therefore the duty of the imperial power to reproduce itself in the colonial society, and to advance the civilization of the colony… Such is the power of colonial discourse that individual colonizing subjects are not often consciously aware of the duplicity of their position , for colonial discourse constructs the colonizing subject as much as the colonized. Statements that contradict the discourse cannot be made either without incurring punishment, or without making the individuals who make those statements appear eccentric and abnormal."

repugnant barbarian in the West, was a feeling human being, who had once been part of a Khoisan community that embraced a centuries-old culture and tradition.

Maseko openly expresses his disgust in the film for what he believes her new masters made Baartman – a disillusioned, fearful woman, who was overcome with regret at the life she had left behind to assume the role of an African oddity in European eyes. Maseko's empathy with his subject is complete and overwhelming, and in many ways was a milestone in South African filmmaking, because it told a version of Baartman's story about which South Africa's viewing public had known little, before the film's debut on national television.

Just as determined to resurrect the dead Baartman is Susan Lori Parks - a bold African American female dramatist who, writing in an idiom of her own, produced her play *Venus* written in 1997. This play often raised the ire of the theatre-going public because of its controversial depiction of Baartman as the tragic heroine.[17] Although Parks does not dilute the cruelty of European society in her play, Baartman is portrayed as a free agent in her own exhibition, and this free agency takes centre stage at several points. The character Venus is ambitious, bold, intelligent and even manipulative. She refuses to be a victim, ultimately leading to severe criticism from some and

[17] Nowhere are the qualities of this type of character more evident than in Greek or Shakespearean tragedy such as Sophocles' *Antigone* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Noble though the hero is, he/she espouses a hubris or fatal flaw that will lead to her demise. In the context of Parks's *Venus* this hubris could be interpreted as Baartman's naivete in believing that the voluntary act of exhibiting herself would transform her from object to subject.

praise from others because Parks declines to make too many obvious social indictments. Parks invests her energy in making the point that to imply that a black woman is not capable of acting on her own, is lowering her to sub-human status.

Yet another perspective is offered by French-based author, Barbara Chase-Riboud. She is well known for her fictional novels that explore the lives of women who belong to the African diaspora, whom history has swallowed up in its vortex of Western heroes and heroines. Chase-Riboud has therefore undertaken a literary journey through the eyes of her character Sarah Baartman, through her suffering at the hands of Europeans, to an ending that Chase-Riboud hopes will liberate Baartman's tormented soul.

Hottentot Venus, published in 2003, focuses strongly on the effect that being displayed as a freakish exhibit has on the young Baartman's life. Chase-Riboud's hard-hitting novel takes the reader on a journey through life on the streets of London and Paris, exposing both the brutality and sickening fascination of the societies that reduced a young, well-adapted woman to a lonely, disillusioned "non-person". Chase-Riboud evokes this strange and moving story in the voices of Baartman and her contemporaries. Baartman's speech continues even as she dies, is dissected and re-displayed in the French Museum. But of pivotal importance to the book, is Chase-Riboud's choice to remove agency from Baartman, painting her as a casualty of colonialism and European society.

Theoretical Framework

There are several questions that come to the fore after a close reading of all these texts. Which is the "real" story of Sara Baartman? How can any of the writers above openly promote their version of her life when the existing historical documentation around it is so vague? What leeway is possible in terms of a writer's licence in re-creating the life of another human being? Whose version are we to accept as the definitive, most believable depiction? Does each of the writers in question take possession of their subject in writing her life? If so, to what extent does this "ownership" stretch? Has turning Baartman into a literary icon required writers to re-invent the woman? And what effect does this have on the reader or the viewer?

This study will draw on a wide variety of commentaries that assist in investigating the hypothesis that I will put forward - that no single truth exists in the recounting of the Sara Baartman story and that the multiple truths of the writers themselves become enmeshed in the writing of their subject. By comparing each writer's chosen genre, approach, the use of historical documentation, the characterisation of Baartman as Black Female and each writer's ultimate conclusion, this study will analyse the literary process of dissecting and reconstructing an individual whose existence is based on fact and show how the body and character of that subject become a pliable sculpture in the hands of each writer.

Hayden White has focused some of his most interesting writing on the translation of biographical fact into narrative. He maintains that the transformation of events in a story is achieved through..

> ..the suppression or subordination of certain events .. and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like… (White as quoted in Nadel, 1984: 08)

Ira Bruce Nadel maintains that these may well be techniques that are usually associated with the emplotment of drama or fiction, but that they are nevertheless still put to work in the act of creating a biographical work. She recalls that "the four basic modes of emplotment suggested by Northrop Frye – Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire – alter biography from a mere record of past events to a meaningful literary form through the use of conventional structures of fiction." (Nadel, 1984: 08).

There are several examples of writers of fiction and well-renowned novelists who also produced biographical works. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote about the life of Charlotte Bronte, Angus Wilson offered an account of Rudyard Kipling's life, Evelyn Waugh wrote a biography on Edmund Campion and Virginia Woolf even detailed her methods of balancing fictive writing with her biography of Roger Fry's life. She wrote:-

> The biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. (Woolf as quoted in Nadel, 1984: 121)

This provides a logical explanation for why readers may be interested in reading a biography or watching a biographical documentary. Where the texts chosen for this study are concerned, Georges Cuvier's "Observations" would be the least palatable for the average reader because they are merely a record of scientific observations cloaked in medical jargon. Yet the other texts offer a different appeal. Each of them, by the process of employing varied, carefully chosen narrative techniques and literary construction, lays before the reader or the viewer the narrative of Baartman's life employing elements of romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. Each organises the often disjointed facts of Baartman's life (that the writer has chosen to include) into what he or she envisions as a coherent comprehensible whole that satisfies the reader and viewer. Louis Mink resolutely points out the disparities between lived experience and stories:-

> Stories are not lived, but told. Life has no beginnings, middles or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive and ideas seminal… We do not dream or remember in narrative, I think, but tell stories which weave together the separate images of recollection. (Mink, 1974: 124)

It is this selective assembly of facts in each text that will be examined during the course of this study. The choice of which facts are presented in the texts and the order of their presentation become pivotal in the interpretation of each one because often they work together to transform the text into a work that flirts with the genre of fiction. Nadel asserts that:-

> Not facts, but the presentation of those facts establish the value of biographical writing. In the composition of biography, fictive form rather than historical content dominates as the events of a life become the elements of a story… This fictive power directs the composition and reading of biography, explaining how biography translates fact into literary event and why biography continually interests readers. Emplotment provides fact with fictive meaning while gratifying our desire to resolve our own sense of fragmentation through the unity or story of the lives of others – and implicitly our own. The fictive power of 'story' provides us with a coherent version of life. (Nadel, 1984:09)

The texts I have chosen (with the exception of Cuvier's) also serve a socio-political purpose. Each work defies Mink's assertion that:-

> ..a narrative may enliven sensibility (if it is fiction) or recount facts (if it is history), but it answers no questions except, "And then what happened?" and affords no understanding beyond such answers. (Mink, 1974: 121)

Instead, they seek to present Baartman's life in a manner that will interrogate her dehumanisation and force the reader or viewer to actively play a part in preventing similar acts of discrimination and oppression in the future. This underlines Ralph Cohen's belief that writers transport events and sentiments from the past into the present in order to exact this:-

> How does a modern critic come to understand a past work since it is clearly from another time and space? One answer.. is to understand the questions a past work asks and the answers it gives. Literary history then becomes a history of the sequence of questions and answers that works provide and the reader reconstructs. Not only do works ask implicit questions, but so too, does the critic. The questions that the modern critic asks are inevitably a result of problems that are important to him; but the historical sequence of questions is what leads the critic to his own enquiries. (Cohen, 1974: 03)

But despite the resulting enquiries the reader or viewer may raise, there is a danger in all texts of this nature, that the facts are arranged so subjectively, that they condition the reader or viewer and impede his ability to critically analyse the text. Thus one can question the writer's intention. Nadel believes..

> The problem for biography is that readers accept facts literally, although their presentation is always figurative – that is, readers misinterpret the artistic ideal of coherence for the historical ideal of objectivity. By contrast, the configuration of the facts for the biographer is always imaginative. (Nadel, 1984: 156)

It does not always occur to the reader that this is the very reason why multiple versions of the same life story exist. This is also why the revelations made in one biography may be omitted from another or simply be re-interpreted by another writer. Moreover, the writer's distance from his long-dead subject presents a further dilemma – how to recompose a complete picture of that person's life, joys, tragedies, quandaries and motivations without ever having had the opportunity to encounter them in person? The life story of Sara Baartman presents exactly this problem. The reader must question whether the writers of the chosen texts are fully aware that:-

> The biographer lives with the queasy knowledge that another person's life must in essence remain unknowable and unrevealed. He creates at best a simile, a resemblance, a composite police sketch based on fleeting observation… The challenge is to stay true to the facts but move the reader by the spectacle of another soul's journey through time (Silverman, 1996:116).

Too often, readers treat their engagement with biographical texts and fictional biographies as a search for truth – what in essence, is a fruitless exercise. Martin Stannard explains why truth is so elusive in biographical writing:-

> Truth is in its nature, multiple and contradictory, part of the flux of history, untrappable in language. The only real road to truth is through doubt and tolerance. (Stannard, 1996: 38)

Catherine Aird further points out that the literary subject is not immune to the biographer's judgement and criticism and this is often influential in his depiction of his subject. This too, can be held true of the chosen texts in this study:-

> What is incontrovertible is that no human being can look upon the countenance of another without forming some conclusion about its owner, albeit subconsciously – usually within seconds and employing instinct rather than reason (Aird, 1996: 46).

Furthermore, the onus is on the biographer to translate an entire body of human experience into a restrictive linguistic form that remains as true to the facts and reality of his subject as possible. This begs the question whether the written word is indeed adequate to convey the depth of human experience and feeling and questions whether in re-telling a life's events, that tricky bridge connecting thought, feeling and word can be crossed without meaning being lost along the way.

> When a biographer becomes conscious of language, conscious of how it alters what he describes from a factual representation to an independent, verbal object, he transforms his craft into an art. His text moves 'toward a condition where…the words appear to become

> the object, so that they cannot be replaced by other words than the ones used to convey the same experience.' But in this process, the biographer also becomes conscious of the sense of contradiction at the heart of language, of the difference between word and meaning and, as a consequence, his awareness of alternate linguistic modes increases. The issue is how well can language incarnate reality; how faithful can a biography be to the complexities of human experience? (Nadel, 1984: 155)

This is the challenge and limitation that every writer of these chosen texts must have encountered in creating them. This analysis hopes to reveal how each one attempts to overcome these strictures in creating a coherent, well-received portrait of Sara Baartman. The manner in which I will approach this study will uncover the central departure point that is to be found in all the primary texts – the writer's pre-conceived intention that germinates from his or her view of the subject. The study will attempt to uncover how that intention moulds the text and the character of Baartman herself. None of these writers pretends to know the absolute truth – but that is not what re-creating Baartman involves. This study will argue that it is instead about establishing and entrenching their version of the truth during the process of re-creation.

Baartman has become many things to many writers. Unbeknown to some, she has not only become a canvas onto which they write their personal beliefs, but a mirror onto which they project their subjectivities, revealing more about themselves than about her. This study will show all writing about Baartman, restorative or not, to have these elements in common – the act of

voyeurism on the reader's part that is resurrected in each reading of a literary work on Baartman, the invasive dissection of her body and mind in re-creating her with the pen, and the ultimate unconscious (often unintentional) merging of aspects of the writer's soul with the soul of Baartman. This study will assert that each time a new work on Baartman emerges from the writer's pen, Sara Baartman, though long dead, will be re-awakened to tell her story from another perspective, ad infinitum.

Chapter 2

Cuvier's Baartman:

A two-way dissection

As a modern reader with arguably more developed sensibilities than those of previous époques, it would be understandable to find oneself offended if not outraged by the writings of the renowned French physician Georges Cuvier around Sara Baartman, as recorded in his "Extraits d'observations Faites sur le Cadavre d'une femme connue a Paris et a Londres sous le nom de VENUS HOTTENTOTTE" ["Extracts of observations made on the Body of a woman known in Paris and London by the name of VENUS HOTTENTOT"].[18]

Cuvier's Context

Although described by some as "A catastrophist. A racist. An egomaniac who used his reputation to intimidate others",[19] it is nonetheless widely acknowledged that Cuvier's practice of medical science was bold, groundbreaking, controversial, yet ultimately credible enough to catapult him to the status of 'celebrity scientist' in much the same way the modern world would credit Stephen Hawking.

[18] Georges Cuvier published his findings following the dissection of the body of Sara Baartman in 1817. Despite the bad press that he has received for that publication in the ensuing centuries, Cuvier has often been described as "a pioneer in the fields of comparative anatomy and paleontology. He was also among the first to study and classify fossils. He was widely known throughout Europe and America for his often accurate reconstructions of extinct species based on their skeletal remains." (See 'Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) www. Dickinson.edu/-nicholsa/Romnat/cuvier.htm)

[19] See reference to Cuvier on www.turnpike.net/-mscott/cuvier.htm that begins with this jarring statement but goes on to detail Cuvier's growing sphere of influence in the scientific world, stemming from pioneering scientific discoveries he had made.

Geology, comparative anatomy and palaeontology were merely budding sciences in Cuvier's time. Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution was yet to be made public. Nor had the second most popular event – Richard Owen's naming of the dinosaurs – taken place. Cuvier was to refute that any such phenomenon as natural selection was possible and he also claimed with conviction that there were no human fossils. These proclamations may have well been completely believable, emanating as they did from an eminent figure such as Cuvier during a period in which the scientific fraternity was groping in the dark for answers. But as 21st century readers, it alerts us to flaws in Cuvier's pattern of thinking – perhaps signaling his stubborn inclination to maintain his stance despite evidence to the contrary that might present itself.

But the progress or retrogression in scientific circles at the time is also a barometer of societal pressure placed on contemporary experts. Johannesburg-based writer Wanda Smit[20] in her article "The Return of the Hottentot Venus– the Return of the Moon" writes of the hype around natural science at the time Baartman arrived in London:-

> She arrived in England during the Pre-Darwinian era when natural history had taken Europe by storm. People were collecting rocks, plants and insects. Museums appeared and exhibited 'curiosities' from all over the world – including 'exotic' finds discovered by Captain Cook on his South American voyages. Scientists were gathering human skulls and skeletons to corroborate

[20] Smit lives and writes in Johannesburg. She has painstakingly translated Cuvier's "Extracts of observations made on the Body of a woman known in Paris and London by the name of VENUS HOTTENTOT". Her primary interests are Literature, Theatre, Archetypal Psychology and Comparative Religion. She has written an unpublished play and a film script based on the life of Sara Baartman.

> their theories of evolution. The more bodily parts they had, so they believed, the sooner they would come up with the definitive theory on the evolution of man. (Smit, 1997: 01)

So it was that a European society thirsty for this knowledge turned to men such as Cuvier to either prove or disprove theories that abounded at the time. Dissection was an element of Cuvier's education at the Academie Caroline in Stuttgart, Germany where he studied comparative anatomy. The development of comparative biological studies may have proven to be the turning point in Cuvier's ideological approach to biology. Where his predecessors had turned their attention to the study of human anatomy in isolation, Cuvier and his contemporaries such as the English physician Edward Tyson underwent a paradigm shift. They surmised that more could be learnt about human biology by comparing human beings with other animals such as primates. In this vein, Cuvier dedicated years to calculating the systematic organisation of the animal kingdom based on large collections of biological specimens that were sent to him from all over the world.

But one pivotal facet that accompanied several of these specimens was the first-hand account of the explorers who had discovered them. In addition, where actual specimens were not available, European explorers would merely return to their continent with written accounts of what they had witnessed. In many instances, scientists such as Cuvier would utilise these accounts as the basis for hypotheses that resulted in subsequent medical reports. Cuvier often alluded to his dependence on European explorers to clarify certain facts

on his behalf. Indeed Cuvier himself had passed up an unique opportunity "to become a naturalist on Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1789-1801, preferring to remain at the Museum to continue his research in comparative anatomy" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1994: 2001) – an opportunity at a firsthand experience that might have had a radical effect on his theories and practice. Instead, his scientific experience became clouded by second-hand information and ideologies of superiority circulating in post-Enlightenment European society[21] – dangerously oppressive ideologies that became the forerunners of polygenism[22] and biological racism[23]. Cuvier even quotes the account of one particular Dutch official posted at the Cape:-

> According to the observations of a Dutch General called Jansens who during his office as Governor of the Cape

[21] In the book *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998), European Enlightenment is described as a period in which "European power expanded, this sense of the superiority of the present over the past became translated into a sense of superiority over those pre-modern societies and cultures that were 'locked' in the past – primitive and uncivilized peoples whose subjugation and 'introduction' into modernity became the right and obligation of European powers. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998: 145). The authors further suggest that ..'Modernity became synonymous with 'civilized' behaviour, and one more justification for the 'civilizing mission' of European imperialism. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998: 146)

[22] According to the Wikipedia Encylopaedia (2006) this is a "theory of human origins positing that the human races are of different lineages. This is opposite to the idea of monogenism, which posits a single origin of humanity..[…] Polygenism came into mainstream scientific and religious thought due to the work of Samuel George Morton. […] .slave owners attempted to justify their treatment of slaves using claimed empirical science [..] They argued that each race was a different species and that Black Africans were mentally inferior to Caucasians." Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out that following the racially motivated slaughter of millions of Jews, Slavs, Poles and gypsies by the Nazis UNESCO in 1951 released a *Statement of the Nature of Race and Racial Difference.* It asserted that "mental characteristics should never be included in such classifications and that environment is far more important than inherited genetic factors in shaping behaviour." (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998: 204)

[23] Researcher Robyn Conder Broyles attributes the rise of biological racism to Linnaeus, "the pioneer of biological taxonomy. He designated the human races as biological categories: European whites belonged to the category *Homo sapiens europaeus* while African blacks belonged to *Homo Sapiens afer*. Linnaeus himself added ranking to his classification; he wrote that the former is 'ruled by customs' the latter 'ruled by caprice'. Yet as Broyles correctly asserts, both groups belonged to the single species "Homo Sapiens". Later on though, as anthropology became more established in the 18th and 19th centuries, scientists introduced quantitative measures for human skulls. Links were made between animal and "primitive" Black African biological traits and contrasted with "superior" white biological traits. This went a long way in legitimising slavery and perpetuating the idea that Africans were inferior to Europeans. (Broyles, 1998: 01)

> undertook a journey which is described in detail in "The Travels of Mr Liechtenstein" a race of almost completely savage beings does indeed exist in certain parts of the Cape colony. The Dutch called them the Bosjemans or Bushmen because of the straw huts they build in the scrub. Different to both the Kaffirs and the Hottentots, the Bushmen are descendents of a race from the interior of Africa who, at first, lived north of the Orange River, but then spread further south, attracted by the Dutch Boers' cattle which they could plunder […] They do not constitute a body of people, neither do they have any form of government or any notion of private property, but only group themselves into family units in order to answer the call of procreation. Living in such a disorganised manner means they do not till the soil or rear livestock of any sort. Instead, they subsist on what animals they hunt or cattle they steal. They live in caves and cover their bodies with skins of the animals they have slaughtered. Their only industry consists of preparing poison for their arrows and of making nets with which to catch fish. Thus they live in squalor, often dying of hunger and the hardship they endure because of their barbaric way of life as reflected by their scrawny bodies. (Cuvier, 1817: 261)

This underlines the suspicion that Cuvier was hardly immune to the racial conjecture of imperialism doing the rounds in his society, and that by all accounts European explorers brought back home, the people of Europe were indeed superior to other inhabitants of the globe.

Furthermore, renowned American scientists L.C Dunn and T. H Dobzhansky in their book *Race, Heredity and Society* emphasise the flesh-and-blood weakness of scientists like Cuvier, who often fall prey to convenient societal ideologies and allow these to mar their attempts at searching for objective truth:-

> …indeed, attempts have been made to examine scientifically the questions about human differences. Unfortunately, many of these attempts have failed because scientists, like all other men, often succumb to the temptation to prove some particular view or to reinforce some preconceived ideas about human affairs. (Dunn and Dobzhansky, 1946: 14)

I would argue that in the case of a "specimen" such as Baartman, so great was Cuvier's desire to prove the hypothesis that linked "primitive peoples" like the indigenous inhabitants of the African continent with primates, that he would allow socially pre-conceived notions to blind him to the fact of who Baartman really was.

Cuvier's "Extracts"

Cuvier's "Extracts" are set out as a medical report offering a detailed account of Baartman's anatomy. In this report, Cuvier never names Baartman, although he begins by summarising a number of observations he made about her when she was still alive. He notes that her personality was sprightly, that she had a good memory and that she could speak tolerably good Dutch, a little English and had even learnt some French during her stay in Paris. He recalls too her ability to play a stringed instrument with a fair amount of skill and her display of dancing that originated in her country of birth. In strikingly contradictory fashion to the rest of his report emanating from his examination of her cadaver, Cuvier first states that he found Baartman's shoulders and back graceful, her arms slender, her hands charming and her feet pretty. But as the corpse of Baartman lies before him, Cuvier's account

assumes a tone of disgust. He takes a number of measurements to determine whether certain parts of Baartman's anatomy are in proportion to others. According to his notes, this exercise proves that some aspects of her physique are clearly disproportionate, particularly Baartman's face and head, her buttocks and her genitalia. Ultimately, he categorises her as "femme de race Boschimanne" (women of the Bushman race). This is particularly significant given the fact that the San were believed by the Europeans to be the most inferior of human beings and were often likened to orangutans.[24]

Cuvier's Analysis

This is all recorded as scientific fact. Yet the "Extracts" straddle a number of varying disciplines varying from anthropology, to anatomy, to social anthropology and literary fiction. Intertwined with physical descriptions of Baartman's body are social comments that serve to endorse the opinions of explorers or entrench stereotypes circulating in the society of Cuvier's time. Each observation is thus not only mentioned as a hard scientific fact. It is also employed as a means of proving an argument or feeding into a particular mindset – in this case, one that was dedicated to proving the inferiority of the non-European. The "Extracts" are peppered with anecdotal elements that seep freely among what he records as scientific fact so as to often make one indistinguishable from the other:-

[24] See for example Qureshi (2004) where she details the story of a group of Dutch settlers on a hunting expedition who shot a San man and ate his flesh, believing they were eating large game rather than a human.

> For eighteen months she appeared in our capital where everyone could see with their own eyes her excessively protruberant buttocks and her brutish body. Her movements had something brusque and cheeky about them and reminded one of the ape. She had a way of pouting her lips in the exact fashion we have observed in orangutans. Her personality was lively (gay) her memory good and she recognised a person she had only clapped eyes on once before after several weeks. She spoke Dutch which she had learnt in the Cape reasonably well, knew a bit of English and was even beginning to use a few French words. She danced in the manner of her people and played a small instrument we call the Jewish harp with a good ear. She had a liking for necklaces, beaded belts and all sorts of trinkets, but nothing was more to her taste than brandy. Her death can be attributed to her intake of this spirit in which she overindulged during her fatal illness. She was 4 foot 6 inches tall which was, according to observations made of her compatriots, quite a tall stature. But perhaps this was due to the abundance of food she enjoyed in the Cape. (Cuvier, 1817: 263)

Yet there are two aspects of Cuvier's report that expose even stronger links between the pre-colonial ideology that permeates Cuvier's medical assessment and the cold facts that lie on the mortuary slab before him. They are most clearly demonstrated in his descriptions firstly of Baartman's face and secondly, of Baartman's genitalia. Cuvier writes:-

> The most jarring feature of our Bushman female was her appearance: Her face resembled that of the Negro with its heavy jaw, crooked incisors, thick lips, small, somewhat receding chin: In part it had Mongolian characteristics with its high cheekbones, flat nose and forehead, eyebrow shape and narrow slit-eyes. Her hair was black and woolly, like that of the Negroes; her eyes horizontal rather than slanted, like those of the Mongols, her wide-set eyebrows ran in straight lines from her nose, slanting upwards towards her temples. Her eyes were black and quite lively; her hideously inflated lips were of a black hue, her skin colour swarthy. Her ears resembled those of the ape: They were small, with

> underdeveloped lobes and weakly formed outer rims. (Cuvier, 1817: 264)

At this point it is worth exploring the significance of Baartman's facial characteristics as set out in Cuvier's report. In the book *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* can be found a revealing article by Cape Town University academic Carmel Schrire. Her article is one of a collection in this useful collation that details the stereotyping of the Bushmen and how this has been achieved through dubious, often factually incorrect research that has most often been driven by archetypal beliefs. Schrire asserts that in the Age of Enlightenment and beyond, skulls and faces would play a significant role in determining a living being's status in the hierarchical food chain. She puts forward that the question that arose, to which the West desperately sought an answer, was :-

> …whether all humans belonged to the same race, or whether, as the polygenists would have it, some might belong to a more lowly order than others… People continued to collect specimens in the firm belief that they would finally hit upon the proof that certain people were inherently closer to the apes than others. (Schrire, 1996: 343)

Schrire goes on to explain why she believes European scientists focused so specifically on the face and head as part of their research:-

> Scientists concentrated on the shape and size of the skull, and classified living, as well as extinct 'races' accordingly. Since the skull reflected the shape and size of the brain within, it was but a short step to assume that certain folk with bigger, longer or rounder skulls, were smarter, than those with smaller ones. (Schrire, 1996: 343)

Cuvier tends to prove that argument close to the end of his examination:-

> What is clear at the moment and needs to be repeated as the opposite is still being propagated in the most recent writings, is that neither the Gallas, nor the Bushmen, nor any Negro race or their forbears gave birth to the famous people who founded civilisation in ancient Egypt and from whom the whole world inherited the principles of law, of science and perhaps even of religion [...]Today where we classify races by their skulls and we have many mummified bodies of ancient Egypt, it is easy to determine from their skin colour, that they belong to the same race of which we belong, that their skulls and brains were as large.. that they were not governed by that cruel law that condemns races with small, compact skulls to eternal inferiority. (Cuvier, 1817: 273)

Yet there is no greater indictment made on scientists like Cuvier by present-day academics, than modern criticisms and rejection of the 19th century European fascination and wonderment about the genitalia of indigenous Africans, as evinced in Cuvier's numerous references to Baartman's sexual characteristics:-

> ..the Bush woman's grotesque behind which..is a natural and common occurrence in the entire nation. These protruberances show a striking resemblance to those found in the female mandrill […] and have been known to take on monstrous proportions at certain stages of their lives [...] This initial examination revealed nothing of her most extraordinary feature. She kept her Hottentot apron well hidden between her inner thighs or, perhaps, tucked away in an even more inaccessible place. Only after her death did we observe that she did indeed possess the fabled apron… The object of our investigation was, first and foremost, the extraordinary appendice which nature had, so to speak, made peculiar to her race. We did indeed find it and whilst we recognised it by Peron's accurate description thereof, we could not support the theory of this indefatigable naturalist. For, in reality, the Hottentot's apron was not the separate organ he believed it to be. More accurate was the description of his predecessors who claimed it as

> an overdevelopment of the nymphae. It is a great honour for me to present to the Academy, the preserved genitals of the Hottentot Venus so as to eliminate all doubt regarding the nature of her apron.
>
> The flat outer labia formed an oval 4 inches long. Between the two was a semi-circular protruberance (mound) approximately 18 lines thick, which forked at the outer rim (extremity) and lengthened into two fleshy, wrinkled petals, each 2 ½ inches long and about 1 inch wide, both with rounded tips. At the base, these flaps ran from the top to the bottom of the outer labia where they joined to form a fleshy crater which ended at the narrow end of the labia majorae. (Cuvier, 1817: 265)

What could possibly warrant this level of fixation with Baartman's genitals? I would suggest that Cuvier's examination of Baartman's body ultimately reveals more about the doctor than his subject. Although sanctioned by science, the reader is inclined to believe that like the voyeurs who watched Baartman as a circus freak at Picadilly and in Paris, Cuvier assumes the same base lasciviousness in dissecting Baartman's corpse. Her genitals that he studies with unusual fascination become Cuvier's eroticised gateway to a knowledge of the dead woman's sexuality. He takes her apart with his scalpel in much the same way that sordid crowds persuaded Baartman to strip down for their viewing pleasure. Did Cuvier hope that Baartman's genitals would give up their secrets and prove European writings of the time? It is these perverse 'secrets' that South African President Thabo Mbeki quoted at Baartman's interment on home soil in 2002:-

> The bored, yet excitable European imagination soon enthusiastically entertained and proliferated stories of African women carried off by sexually excited male apes as mates and the alleged promiscuity of the African

> women who, it was claimed, invited either man or ape. (Foutz as quoted by Mbeki, 2002: 05)[25]

It is little wonder that tales of this raw, unbridled sexuality as demonstrated in the passage above, fuelled the sexually deviant thoughts of European men in the 1800's. After all, it was repugnant to the European society that any woman should experience sexual desire, let alone intense sexual pleasure. Such behaviour was attributed to prostitutes alone.[26] Explorers such as Captain Cook displayed the same interest in the genitals of African women.[27] Why indeed should it have been any different with Georges Cuvier? Schrire recounts the story of a photograph once displayed in the South African Museum in Cape Town. Filed under "Bushman: genitalia" it depicted a woman, partly clad in Western dress, her foot resting on a chair. The photograph, which Schrire believes was taken by a male Westerner, offers a close-up of the woman's genitals – what she candidly refers to as "..a white man squatting with a camera between a Khoikhoi woman's legs." Schrire doubts the photographer is wholly driven by scientific engagement, much as the reader is tempted to call into question Cuvier's pre-occupation with

[25] This is part of a speech that the South African President made when Sara Baartman's remains were returned to South Africa by the French government. In this passage he quotes research by American theologian Scott David Foutz.

[26]Sander Gilman does however make reference to the link made in European society between those with a large sexual appetite and black people. He postulates that "..by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of Black females (and males) became an icon for deviant sexuality, and that nineteenth-century physicians and sociologists linked the iconography of the two seemingly unrelated images - the icon of the Hottentot female and the icon of the prostitute. (Gilman, 1985: 225)

[27] Schrire writes: "Cook's classical allusions continued when he stopped *en route* home, to water at Cape Town in March of 1771. Writing in his log, he noted that he would use this occasion to explore 'the great question' among natural historians, whether the women of this country have or have not that fleshy flap or apron which has been called the "*Sinus pudoris"*. (Cook as quoted in Schrire, 1996: 347) This Latin name that translates either to "veil of shame" or "veil of modesty" is strongly indicative of the awkwardness and embarrassment associated with this part of the female body, such that it should be hidden from public view in order for a woman, especially the black African woman, to maintain her modesty.

Baartman's genitals because of its profuse recurrence in the dissection report:-

> What we might be seeing here, is a mixture of legitimate anthropology and covert pornography. The combination is not perhaps as dissonant as it sounds. For power is more than wealth, more than goods and profits. In the end, it is physical control, control of breeding stock, of genes and the definition of who is whom in a competitive world. Implicit in these strange close-ups in the South African Museum files, is a mixture of power, domination and sexuality that has marked the colonial venture from its sixteenth-century roots to the present day. (Schrire, 1996: 353)

In the case of Cuvier, how much more inebriating that power must be, when one's subject is unable to return the voyeur's gaze or make herself heard because she is a mere corpse. There is a leap to be made in the arena of natural science, that Cuvier never successfully makes. He is severely hampered by the antiquated paradigm of others that he holds too close and adopts as his own starting point in his research.

Sara Baartman's body gradually becomes a mirror that, as it unmists, begins to reflect Cuvier's own rigidity, his shortcomings as a scientist and a man, through what appears to be his morbid curiosity with this exotic foreign woman's sexuality. In his deconstruction of Baartman, the human being, as a mere specimen of interest to the scientific community and inquisitive laypeople, Cuvier undergoes a cruel dissection of his own by the reader.[28] All that remains in the centuries that follow is not the memory of the renowned

[28] John Halperin quotes Samuel Butler as stating that "Every man's work , whether it be literature or music, or pictures or architecture or anything else ..[..] is always a portrait of himself , and the more he tries to conceal himself the more clearly will his character appear in spite of him." (Halperin, 1996: 162)

scientist, lauded for his discoveries through the use of Baartman's body as a vehicle for his own immortality, but a distaste for the manner in which he stripped Baartman of all humanity, objectifying her and turning her into the mindless creature whose inferior nature would be recorded in medical history books. It was a process that led to Baartman's transformation from a feeling human being, to a body without a soul, a specimen without a personal history, other than its geographical provenance.

In the cold, clinical method of re-writing the body of Sara Baartman, Cuvier also inadvertently wrote himself into the annals that history has preserved for great minds whose dogged prejudice robbed them of their greatest opportunities to advance the scientific and human causes. Reproductions such as his, have paved the way for filmmakers like Zola Maseko to take history in hand and offer a different perspective, and perhaps a measure of redemption for Sara Baartman.

Chapter 3

Zola Maseko's Sara Baartman:

Connecting with the Human Being

Zola Maseko's documentary *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*[29] opens with a camera pan around the body cast of Sara Baartman that stands dimly lit in the corridor of the Musee de l'Homme in Paris, France. Set against the soundtrack of indigenous music, the voice over begins:-

> "She's been both a servant and a great attraction. She's been both a Venus and an exotic freak. A cartoon and a song, a vaudeville and a book. She's been a woman and she's been an ape. How could the same person play so many different parts?" (Maseko, 1998)

This is the question that Zola Maseko seeks to answer in his film. This 53-minute long documentary produced by Harriet Gavshon and Philip Brooks, makes use of historical drawings, cartoons, legal documents and interviews with cultural historians and anthropologists. It aims to set Baartman's story within a social, political, scientific and philosophical context and thereby offer a clearer picture of the events that led up to the transformation of this young woman into an icon of savage sexuality and racial inferiority. The film was the recipient of two awards. It won the category of Best African Documentary at the 1999 FESPACO African Film Festival in Burkina Faso and the Best Documentary award at the 1999 Milan African Film Festival in Italy.

Thus it is with anticipation that the viewer awaits an answer to Maseko's question on how one woman ended up in so many roles. It hangs heavily

[29] "The Life and Times of Sara Baartman" first made by Icarus films in 1998, was directed by Zola Maseko. This documentary was filmed before Baartman's remains were returned to South Africa by the French government. Maseko was to re-edit the film in 2002, to include footage of the return of Baartman's remains. It is the 2002 version that has been utilised as a primary text for the purposes of this study.

over the introduction adding to the viewer's sense of expectation. But by the end of the documentary, Maseko has not answered this question. Instead he has added to the list of Procrustean beds over which Sara Baartman has been stretched, through the centuries. It is a trap into which biographer Kenneth Silverman warns, it is easy to fall. Silverman who has documented the lives of Mather, Poe and Houdini, details the burden of 'truth' that hangs over the biographer, despite the temptation to embellish the facts:-

> For all his freedom in using fictional devices, the biographer writes under rigid constraint, like someone composing a villanelle or fugue. He may never violate his evidence. It is all he has. The biography is not really a narrative of the life but of the available documents. Because the subject only survives in and through his and his contemporaries' letters, diaries, writings, photographs, you must find all of them you can. (Silverman, 1996: 113)

As per Maseko's assertion that Baartman was a servant, a great attraction, a Venus, an exotic freak, a cartoon, a song, a vaudeville, a book, a woman and an ape, so she assumes an additional facet in the making of Maseko's documentary. She becomes the young, weak, defenceless, powerless, unthinking woman – the gullible victim of a ruse, incapable of the thought processes necessary to act in her own interest.

Maseko has doubtless made an emotive film. There is no doubt that overall, it is credible and well-researched. His use of newspaper cuttings and graphic depictions of the time add a weighty element that contributes towards making Maseko's point of view so much more palatable. The music which has

been composed especially for this film, is simple, yet haunting. The directing and filming, aside from a few aesthetic lapses during the interviews, is effective and the approach is uncomplicated. Above all, Maseko's film is "watchable". It contains a gripping narrative that combines the facts in a manner that both educates and entertains. There are sensational elements that tell of her sexual exploitation and visuals that feed the human thirst for voyeurism – aspects to be expanded on later in this study.

Maseko has opted for the milieux of the locations where Baartman would have appeared as visual overlay instead of staging re-enactments of her experiences. Where you would usually have a "voice of God"-type narration[30] that, because of its omniscience, is often known to lull the viewer into a response of complete, unquestioning acceptance of the material, Maseko himself executes the voice over in *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman.* This in itself is very interesting. His voice is not exceptional and often lacks the expression one would expect in narration of this nature. But it has an honesty and sincerity about it that appears to yield a more powerful result than a "voice of God" narration. It establishes a trust with the viewer, creating the impression that the individual telling the story is as much a layperson as the spectator himself and that they are embarking on a journey of discovery together that will lead to a definitive answer on exactly who Sara Baartman was.

[30] Drama and film professor, John van Zyl defines this as:- "the invisible narrator who comments on the pictures, but remains invisible. There is a great danger in this, since the hidden voice can very easily be thought to be completely authoritative and all-knowing. The on-camera presenter is giving his/her opinion, while the invisible narrator is apparently 'telling it like it is'." (Van Zyl, 1987: 33)

It is just one of many devices that Maseko employs in his film. But he also lines up an array of experts to support his opinion. The eminent South African scientist, Professor Phillip Tobias and well-known researcher Yvette Abrahams join the line-up, with learned overseas historians largely adding their voices to Maseko's premise. These authoritative voices help to give the film its aura of authenticity. Maseko's piece is vastly different in nature to the other texts employed in this study. The playwright Suzan Lori Parks and historical novelist Barbara Chase Riboud are allowed a fair amount of poetic licence that makes their forays into fiction far more forgivable. Scientist Georges Cuvier exists in an age of limited anatomical knowledge and is guided largely by a cultural hypothesis in examining Baartman. Maseko on the other hand, has the benefit of hindsight in his search for "factual truth." But does it remain exactly that, or is the film progressively seized by Maseko's own subjectivities and pre-conceived notions? I would argue that it is, for in order for a documentary to succeed as powerful film or television, it must be driven by the film maker's convictions on his subject. A documentary film that takes no stance is no more than a news bulletin (that seeks to superficially inform viewers of the facts) or a current affairs programme that reaches no definitive conclusion but merely acts as a forum for debate. Thus the documentary film maker must have in mind a clear

intention and see it through to the conclusion of his film.[31] Renowned South African drama and film academic John van Zyl points out that:-

> The documentary director wants to show his or her version of an incident, so he will arrange the footage in a certain way to make a point. A newsreel of a drought will simply show the bare earth and the starving people. A documentary on drought will try to argue a point of view… The director might choose a shot of fat people in a city eating a hearty meal and juxtapose it with a shot of a starving peasant in the country. (Van Zyl, 1987:32)

Maseko's voice over is scant and in most places, only serves to link the interviews that actually carry the film. Maseko's experts largely spew forth the same opinions. Their knowledge of the historical context is profound and unquestionable. But when at a loss for answers they appear to apply their general historical knowledge to Baartman's context as if it were indisputable fact with water-tight evidence to support it. On the issue of how Baartman's passage to England was negotiated, Abrahams asserts that:-

> *If* [my italics] she was a slave in Cape Town, she had very little choice about her life. Once she was a slave she had very little choice about where to live, how to live, what to do. *It is quite possible that if it is true* [my italics] that Hendrik Cesar says that he came across her on the farm with his brother, that his brother simply gave her to him as one person would give a slave to another and say "take her. You find her bum interesting. Take her and do with her what you will." (Abrahams as quoted in Maseko, 1998)

[31] South African poet and novelist Tatamkhulu Afrika details his own search for truth in the writing of his autobiography "Mr Chameleon". In this account, Afrika struggles with the quandary of how to tell a gripping story that will neither disappoint the reader nor betray the facts of the events as they had unfolded. He writes: "I aspire to be a teller of tales.. and the thought of telling the mundane truth was entirely too tedious to be entertained… An honest autobiography must reveal all, but none do, and the result is a flawed – indeed fraudulent – unburdening in which both reader and truth are flagrantly betrayed." (Afrika, 2005: 21)

The issue of free will is central to the Sara Baartman story. It certainly appears to be important enough to Maseko for him to repeatedly draw attention to this theme. Yet Maseko is not convincing enough to eradicate all doubt from the viewer's mind that Baartman, oblivious to the wretched fate awaiting her, may have left as a free agent to seek the promise of a better life in Europe. After careful analysis of their interviews, the experts who at first appear to reinforce Maseko's point of view, begin to create holes in his argument. Some even begin to contradict others. French historian, Francois-Xavier Fauvelle at first states that it is difficult to believe that Sara Baartman left of her own free will. Then he says:

> … it is also difficult to say that she left under duress, in chains. I think truth is more complex and that it reflects the colonial reality of the Cape in the early 19th century. What probably happened is that her two impresarios took advantage of her gullible nature and made her sign a contract promising her fame and wealth and saying she could return to Cape Town afterwards. Why did it work so well? Probably because the economic conditions of the Khoi Khoi in the Cape in the 19th century were so terrible that certain individuals like Sara Baartman saw this trip to Europe as a form of economic emancipation, as a way out of their economically servile condition. (Fauvelle as quoted in Maseko, 1998.)

The viewer's eyes are then opened to this new perspective. It is heightened by the interviews that follow. British historian Steve Martin unveils an aspect of British society in Baartman's time that may even have incentivised her to accrue wealth and improve her status once she arrived in London:-

> When Saartjie turned up in this country, their black population was still living in London and the seaports in various states. On the one hand you could say that the majority of the black people here were of the status which is known as slave-servants – that midpoint of

> servitude… On the other hand you can look at the writings of a noted socialite like Mrs Hester Piotsie who noted eight years before Saartjie turned up in London that there were black ladies in all their finery in the pit at the opera, attending the opera house. At the same time she also noted black children playing in the squares with their nurses. So although there was a concessionary number of black people who managed to move through society with relative ease, the majority of the community were in some sort of servitude or some sort of beggary. (Martin as quoted in Maseko, 1998)

Is it possible that the naïve young Sara witnessed these possibilities in London and chose to pursue her soul-damaging career as an object of the viewing public's morbid curiosity or was she pressured into keeping to the terms of the contract she had signed? What is certain, is that her treatment was undoubtedly harsh. Maseko has included in his film heart-rending accounts of Baartman's public humiliation. He details some of the content from a *Times Newspaper* article of that period that reads:

> The exhibition took place on a stage raised about 3 feet from the floor with the cage or enclosed place at the end of it. The Hottentot was produced like a wild beast and ordered to move backwards and forwards and come out and go into her cage more like a bear on a chain than a human being. When she refused for a moment to come out of her cage, the keeper let down the curtain, went behind and was seen to hold up his hand to her in a menacing posture. She then came forward at his call and was perfectly obedient. (*Times Newspaper* article as quoted in Maseko, 1998.)

Maseko goes on to quote another example of letters to the editor published in *The Examiner, The Morning Chronicle* and *The Morning Post* newspapers between 10 October and 29 October 1810. They all express shock at Baartman's exhibition. The ire of the writers is presumably heightened by

what many perceived to be a slap in the face for the slavery abolitionist movement whose cause had prevailed during this period.[32]

> She was extremely ill and the man insisted on her dancing. The poor creature pointed to her throat and to her knees as if she felt pain in both, pleading in tears that he should not force her compliance. He declared that she was sulky, produced a long piece of bamboo and shook it at her. (Letter from *The Examiner* newspaper, as quoted in Maseko, 1998.)

Yet there is no account as touching as the one he reveals of a French journalist attending a Parisian dinner, where Baartman makes a guest appearance. Maseko's attribution here is poor, but it is nonetheless a compelling story within a story:-

> Someone announces that a marvel is to come. The doors opened and you could see the Hottentot Venus appearing. At her sight, all our ladies huddle and hide behind a curtain. This poor Venus notices and grows sad. Her head leans on her chest, tears fall from her eyes… She is like any other woman a little stubborn. Sometimes she sulks for nothing. She gets angry for nothing. Her mood changes, though, when you compliment her… I was moved. (Unnamed writer as quoted in Maseko, 1998.)

The same individual, captivated by the heart-wrenching countenance of this figure claims to offer Baartman a coach ride home and listens to her story which he or she then reproduces as follows:-

[32] Slavery had been abolished in England in 1810. Edward Marek reminds us that "there were protests in London for the way Baartman was being treated. The exhibitions took place at a time when the anti-slavery debate was raging in England and Baartman's plight attracted the attention of a young Jamaican, Robert Wedderburn [..] who founded the African Association to campaign against racism in England, and wrote of the horrors of slavery. […] Under pressure from the group, the attorney general asked the government to put an end to the circus, saying Baartman was not a free participant. A London court, however, found that Baartman had entered into a contract with Dunlop, although historian Percival Kirby, who has discovered records of the woman's life in exile, believes she never saw the document." (Marek, 2002: 04)

> My name is Sara – very unhappy Sara who did not deserve her fate. My father was the head of the hunters and my mother was the one who organized our festivities. Everybody wanted to marry me, Soka was the one, among others, who touched my heart with his words. Our union was decided. The day was chosen. The tribe was gathered. The fires were lit on the mountains. It was these fires that betrayed us. A terrible battle broke out. I was separated from my companions. Alas, I will not ever see again this sacred land. Poor Sara. Your husband, your father, your family. Everyone is lost. (Passage as quoted in Maseko, 1998)

This passage is undoubtedly the point in the film where the viewer's identification with Baartman is strongest.[33] It veers away from the passive where we learn of the deeds perpetrated *against* Baartman. Here, the viewer is offered an insight into the human being. She is said to react with sadness to the womens' revulsion at the sight of her. She moves through a range of emotions from insolence to anger, then to nostalgia as she relates her story to the journalist. This is a surprising extract in that Baartman finds a voice to tell her own story. It is illuminating because of its numerous revelations. This woman appears to be in full possession of her faculties and states that this was not the destiny she deserved. She describes her tribe as an organised, structured body with similar observances and rituals to Western cultures. She describes how she was wooed by many suitors, presumably because of her beauty. Finally, her reference to the Dutch weekend commandos that wiped out large portions of her tribe reveals a disillusioned, dislocated woman who

[33] Here Maseko skillfully "humanizes" Baartman. David Holbrook in *Sex and Dehumanization* writes: "The attraction..a dehumanized 'object' has for us is that she does not burden us with responsibility and does not involve us in the problems of respecting (her) personal value." (Holbrooke, 1972: 54) Maseko uses this account to make Baartman's problem the viewer's own, inducing a heightened sense of identification with Baartman.

longs for the past, although it was less than idyllic. It is even more disappointing therefore, that Maseko makes no real attempt to reference this account properly. One is left wondering whether it may contain certain fictional elements or whether this is merely an example of an entirely fictionalised account Maseko came upon during the course of his research.

Still, it is useful in revealing Maseko's relationship with his subject.[34] As a black man who has known firsthand the horror of racism, oppression and denigration at the hands of the apartheid government, Maseko's level of involvement with his subject is understandable. He too knew what it was like to be seen as "the other." Maseko's first interview with Phillip Tobias on the status of the Khoi Khoi people in Cape Town during the 19th century deconstructs this paradigm:-

> There was the feeling that you could do what you liked with these people because they weren't quite human. They were sub-human. They were near-human. But they weren't us…The Khoi Khoi or Hottentot peoples of Southern Africa were particularly interesting to Europeans because they had an almost morbid fascination in the genital and special features of the Khoi Khoi people, especially the females. And there had for long been rumours in Europe that there were some very special and interesting and unusual features about Khoi Khoi ladies' genital anatomy… These early naturalists wanted to find out for themselves, were they, as rumour held .. something very different and very special.. The mindset was: are these people really human? There was even a feeling that they didn't belong to our human species which all the rest of the world belonged to, but

[34] In an interview with film critic Alex Dodd on his film Maseko succinctly expresses his understanding of Baartman's experience:- "Can you imagine? You've become a rented spectacle. You're owned by a guy who sells you to an animal trainer who then hires you out to scientists. And you return home to stay with his animals. There's probably a trained bear there, a giraffe who does tricks. You are part of the stable. Someone has a dinner party and they want you. They give him 20 bucks to bring you over." (Maseko as quoted by A. Dodd in ZA@PLAY, 1998:01)

> they were something apart. (Tobias as quoted in Maseko, 1998).

Critical though Maseko is of the Europeans who took advantage of Baartman, he may not be aware that by opening up her existence up to examination yet again and revising its grotesque details, he too is engaging in an exercise that recalls her ghost and lays bare her soul. His intention on the whole appears to be noble. Yet he must also make a conscious choice between producing a completely factual set of events that recount Baartman's story in monotonous fashion or he must make a film that entices the viewer and keeps him riveted by chipping away at the layers around Baartman until he reaches what he believes to be her core. Janet Malcolm does not view the subject as having any power in a biographical relationship of this nature. In much the same way as a documentary film maker and viewer would interact, Malcolm implies that the reader and biographer have the tendency to collude:-

> …in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: [they are] tiptoeing down the corridor together, to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole. These are perhaps, unpleasant realities which biographers should face about themselves… Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world. (Malcolm as quoted by Martin Stannard, 1996: 36)

A harshly critical view perhaps. But one that certainly deconstructs documentary filmmaking in much the way Maseko has deconstructed his subject. This is the nature of the trade. No film of this nature could ever

succeed were the filmmaker not to go through the process of placing his protagonist in front of the viewer and stripping away each layer until he believes he has revealed the essence of that human being. For the filmmaker, it is a means to an end. This is why Zola Maseko methodically lays Sara Baartman bare, attempting to restore her dignity. In that process of exposing the woman, he exposes the audience to her level of suffering, brings the viewer to a heightened state of empathy and identification with Baartman and so succeeds in creating an emotive, moving film that appeals to our humanity. As Anne Rice biographer Katherine Ramsland asserts:-

> Facts are malleable and the way they are interpreted will evolve with changing contexts; any aspect of a subject's life can be exaggerated out of proportion, minimized, ignored or suppressed, depending on the biographer's overt or covert agenda. As long as biographers keep in mind that their work provides a *perspective* and not a definitive, omniscient statement, the task becomes manageable, and subjective intuition is allowed to play its part. (Ramsland, 1996: 94)

This makes the film *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* all the more powerful, not as a work that unveils the "real" Baartman, but as a tool of persuasion for Maseko's perspective – that of Sara Baartman in the documentary – the pitiful, the oppressed, the downtrodden, naïve young woman whose fate lay in everyone else's hands but her own. This approach is in striking contrast to the play *Venus* by Suzan Lori Parks, that jars the sensibilities in lieu of tugging at the heart strings.

Chapter: 4

Suzan Lori Parks:

Resurrecting a powerful Venus

Suzan Lori Parks's controversial play *Venus* is loathed by some critics and praised by others[35]. It boldly tells the story of a young black woman with an enormous posterior who agrees to give up her menial labour in South Africa to tour the world and find her fortune. Once in England she draws the crowds, not only because of her anatomy that the English find so unusual. Venus is in the habit of exhibiting herself in a brash and cheeky fashion. But although she tries to rise above the subjugation of being a freak for all to mock and stare at, she is procured by a white doctor who falls in love with her. She soon becomes his mistress. But, in danger of losing his social status and standing in the community should anyone discover the affair, the doctor elects to kill her and dissect her. Thus, Venus is literally dismembered by the man she loves.

The playwright's technical approach is unusual, at times even frustrating for the reader because it is so idiosyncratic, though it might work well for the spectator. Sentences are short and terse. The characters speak if not quite a dialect, in a form of urban American slang that sometimes rhymes, almost like a rap song. Naturalism is abandoned for a style that combines elements of Greek theatre with those of absurdism, comedy, poetry and pathos. Parks clearly seems to have in mind the same goal of many other black playwrights

[35] See for example the conflicting views of critic Shawn Marie Garret entitled "The Possession of Suzan Lori Parks" (Garret, 2005)that hails the play as groundbreaking theatre and the opposing view of critic Jean Young in "The re-objectification and re-commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan Lori Park's 'Venus'. (Young, 1997)

– that of righting the wrongs of the past. But her approach is entirely unique. No reader should expect the often indulgent luxury of empathising too deeply with the character Venus, with the result that he is suddenly seized by the urge to turn back the clock and rewrite history. In a style that often parallels Brechtian epic theatre, its "historification" and "alienation" effects[36], Parks takes the audience on a wholly unsentimental journey that is as harrowing as it is ironic. *Venus* is an abrasive, fast-paced, voyeuristic excursus through the highlights of the life of Sara Baartman in which Parks refrains from placing the blame entirely on colonial figures and the mentality of European society of the past. Her present-day audience is equally shamed by the action and dialogue, transforming the stage into a continuum that easily accommodates both past and present. This could be what Tony Kushner calls "difficult drama":-

> […] the kind that approaches rather than evades important issues, and that seems to be embedded in the "fault line" between pathos and absurdity, the tragic and the comic, the serious and the ridiculous, the heartbreaking and the risible." (Kushner, 1997: 62)

[36] According to Brecht, historification is the removal of historical material from today's patterns of thinking, the attempt to emphasise the "pastness" of the event and make the spectator feel as people would have felt and acted in the past. Alienation, or what Brecht terms the *verfremdungseffect*, is the intention of making things strange for an audience. It is a technique used deliberately to call the audience's attention to the make-belief nature of the theatrical piece, rather than to try to convince the spectator of the play's reality. See Brocket, O.G *The Theatre, an Introduction* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Fort Worth, 1979: 386-7) See also an edited transcript of a symposium held at Hunter College in the USA on 30 April 2002, that featured several panelists including critics and scholars. It was at this symposium that Garrett recalled the Brechtian qualities of the play *Venus*. He stated, " the Brechtian structure and language, its songs, mark a mutation of Parks's dramatic form, and Baartman's bones seem to require that. Parks does draw on the same inter-textual strategies; that is, she pulls from historical sources and mixes them with dramatic dialogue […] Baartman's ordeal is described in *Venus* in all its violent and perverse peculiarities, through a fragmented structure and multiple iconic distancing devices.
(www.hotreview.org/articles/remarksparks1.html)

Venus may well induce in the audience an overwhelming sense of discomfort and even embarrassment, but this is precisely the desired effect to get the audience to realise that this is not life but a disquieting comment on reality. The language that infuses the play with a reckless life of its own is raw, often crude. The characters speak in an uninhibited fashion that reflects the gradual moral degradation of the character, and the time.

When they first cast their eyes on Venus the other characters' response is base:-

> **The Chorus and the Man, later the Baron Docteur**
> Good God. Golly. Lookie-Lokie-Look-at-her. Ooh-la-la. What-a-find. Hubba-hubba-hubba. [37]

Then there is Parks's daring use of humour and satire[38] in the context of what should be a "serious" subject, much as is found in Brecht's play *Mother Courage*.

> **A Chorus[39] Member**

[37] All quotations from the play are from *Venus* (Parks, S.L, 1997 New York: Theatre Communications Group, and are transcribed in the format they are given in the printed text.

[38] Daniel Larner in his article *Teaching Justice: The Idea of Justice in the Structure of Drama* touches on the changing use of comedic devices in live theatre especially in *Venus.* He writes, "Now it is commonplace for comedies to show us not just the humor of everyday foibles, but also the horror of them. In an age when love can kill, comedy may be made from lives led on the knife-edge. One way to keep one's balance is to laugh." (www.tarlton.law.utexas.edu/lpop/etext/lsf/larner23a.htm

[39] Parks uses the Chorus in a manner reminiscent of Ancient Greek Theatre, commenting on the action and sometimes driving it as well as reacting to the protagonist. As E.F Watling points out in his Introduction to the Theban Plays by Sophocles, "the Chorus may be as large or small as convenience indicates […] Large or small, it is essential that their words should be intelligible; the choral odes should be spoken in unison – or distributed among the speakers. (Watling, 1974: 21)

The gals got bottoms like hot air balloons.
Bottoms and bottoms and bottoms pilin up like
Like 2 mountains. Magnificent and endless.
An ass to write home about.
Well worth the admission price.
A spectacle a debacle a priceless prize, thuh filthy slut.
Coco candy colored and dressed in *au naturel*
She likes when people peek and poke. (7)

The playwright sabotages all audience expectations. Where the spectator seeks to identify with Venus, Parks introduces aspects of Venus's persona that prevent this. She is a vastly "human" character from the past, whom Parks resurrects with such vitality and candour that a modern-day audience cannot fail to be moved or disgusted, but at the very least challenged, by the stark realism of the iconic protagonist and the people with whom she comes into contact.

What appears to offend several critics is Parks's portrayal of Baartman's own role in her ultimate destruction. Though duped by the promise of a country where "the streets are paved with gold" Venus is easy prey for "The Brother"[40] because of her own desire for wealth, control and according to Parks - power.

The Brother
Come to England. Dance a little.
The Girl
Dance?

[40] Parks goes no further than naming certain characters in this way. This prevents the development of what she considers secondary characters and avoids audience identification with them. Thus, the character of "The Girl" develops into Venus because she is the protagonist, as Parks would insist, with a role in determining her own destiny. Parks implies here that although "The Brother" plays a role in laying the cornerstone for Venus's future, he is hardly important enough to be named and allowed to develop as a character to whom the audience responds emotionally.

The Brother
Folks watch. Folks clap. Folks pay you gold.
The Girl
Gold.
The Brother
We'll split it 50-50.
The Girl
50-50?
The Brother
Half for me half for you.
May I present to you: "The African Dancing Princess"
The Girl
A Princess. Me?..
A princess overnight…
The Brother
2 yrs of work yd come back rich!
The Girl
Id come back rich!
The Brother
Yd make a mint!
The Girl
A mint! A "mint."
How much is that?
The Man
You wouldn't have to work no more.
The Girl
I would have a house.
I would hire help.
I would be rich. Very rich.
Big bags of money! (15)

Parks takes liberties with the character of Venus which perhaps may not be historically true but which could have been the case. Her's is a reconstruction of Baartman as a mirror image that has no substance but can be interpreted and understood by those who see it. Although oppressed by the European society, like a tragic heroine,[41] Venus dreams of building her own power

[41] Larner is one of those critics who understands Venus to be a tragic heroine. He writes, "the heroine is headed for downfall, unseeing, and what she does not know will hurt her. Then the vision she sees will sharpen the pain, when it becomes clear that the larger shape of things is what has warped her own experience." (www.tarlton.law.utexas.edu/lpop/etext/lsf/larner23a.htm)

structures within the societal constraints. Her reason for embarking on the journey to London is set out in the court scene:-

Chorus
Don't push us, girl!
We could lock you up for
life!
Answer this:
Are you're here of yr own free
will or are you under some
restraint?
The Venus
Im here to make a
mint … after all Ive gone through
so far to go home penniless would be
disgraceful. (62)

Parks's Venus is allowed the liberty of having orchestrated her relationship with the Baron Docteur to a certain extent to achieve her ends; she allows her to experience naïve dreams and fantasies like any other young woman who knows intimately the life of hardship and servitude:-

The Venus
He will leave that wife for good and we'll get married
(we better or I'll make a scene) oh, we'll get married.
And we will lie in bed and make love all day long.
Hahahaha.
We'll set tongues wagging for the rest of the century.
The Docteur will introduce me to Napoleon himself: Oh,
Yes yr Royal Highness the Negro question does keep me
Awake at night oh yes it does.
Servant girl! Do this and that!
When Im Mistress I'll be a tough cookie,
I'll rule the house with an iron fist and have the most
fabulous parties.
Society will seek me out" Wheres Venus? Right here!
Hhhhh. I need a new wig.
Every afternoon I'll take a 3 hour bath. In hot rosewater.
After my bath theyll pat me down.
Theyll rub my body with the most expensive oils

> Perfume my big buttocks and sprinkle them with gold dust**!...**
> Come here quick, slave and attend me!
> Fetch my sweets! Fix my hair!
> Do this do that do this do that! (135)

Thus, the play places a living, breathing, intelligent, immutable, unromanticised Venus before the audience, yet one who nonetheless has a limited knowledge of the world and is therefore easily corrupted by the promise of success and wealth and taken in by The Brother's powers of seduction. Ultimately, none of what Venus dreams about reaches fruition because given the European society to which she is transported, her hopes are unrealistic. Yet the above passage does not elicit the feeling of sympathy for an oppressed, down-trodden Venus. Although the audience has the benefit of knowing the outcome, Parks veers away from pre-empting that, by moulding Venus into an ambitious young woman living in the moment, seeking out opportunity and hankering after a dream that will see her as one who is served, revered and respected, rather than one who must serve. Shawn-Marie Garret sees this as:-

> ..a stubborn refusal on the part of the playwright to romanticize the experience of oppression. The characters struggle and suffer, but are always viewed through the lens of a pervasive, sometimes absurdist, sometimes tragic sense of irony. They rarely "do the right thing." They are not heroes or saints, facing racism with the calm dignity of martyrs […] Human folly –whether black or white—is never smoothed over in Park's plays with the balm of sentimentality. The experience of oppression is not ennobling. (Garrett: 2000:06)

This is all strongly tied in to Parks's notion of history and re-creating events that have left a blight on human history. She is obsessed with resurrecting the past in an effort to exorcise the demons of the (black) oppressed. The character of Venus is initially so jarring because she breaches the boundaries of time and space by thrusting herself forward out of a darkened past of shame into the spotlight of the present and at no point in this process is she ashamed of the role Parks has assigned her. Her mistakes are made with conviction.[42] Her folly espouses an element of obstinacy, as is underlined in Venus's insistence that the Baron Docteur will one day divorce his wife and marry her, introducing her to high society and allowing her to take over the reins as the Mistress of his household. Parks gives Venus a speaking voice through which she recounts her story in the most brutal, hard-hitting manner possible. The court case in Scene 20A shows Venus to have answered the questions around her public exhibition with responses that are most unexpected by the other characters. They are jarred by her reply that she chooses to display herself to the public, in a manner that coheres with Khoisan norms:-

> **The Negro Resurrectionist**
> When speaking free from all alarm
> The whole she does deride
> and says she thinks there is no great harm

[42] Art and literature critic Daniel Mendelsohn recalls the essence of a tragic heroine as demonstrated by poet, Sylvia Plath. It is interesting that he chooses a real-life character to drive home his point. He puts forward that "At least one of our latter-day tragic heroines seemed to understand this dilemma all too well. A week before she placed her head in an oven and turned on the gas, Sylvia Plath wrote a final poem that exposes, almost with Sophoclean terseness, the hard and archaic cultural logic that has always made self-destruction the price of being a tragic heroine. 'The woman is perfected,' Plath wrote in "Edge": Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment,/The illusion of a Greek necessity/Flows in the scrolls of her toga,/Her bare/Feet seem to be saying:/We have come so far, it is over.' (www.nytimes.com/specials/magazine4/articles/drama.html)

in showing her backside. (63)

There are moments in the play when Venus is permitted to speak the very lines of her oppressors, wrenching the audience out of a comfort zone where they are forced to reconsider the impact of these words as spoken by the protagonist. These passages are self-conscious reflections, that seem to have been created to afford Baartman a second chance to re-enact her own life story and in an "exorcistic" manner, to free herself from the shackles in which history has bound her. It is an example of Parks's commitment to the characters in her plays:- If I said that 'I write for the audience, I would be lying. I write for the figures in the plays." (As quoted in Garrett, 2000: 04)

It is exactly for this reason that the writing has a profound effect on the audience that can no longer see itself as separate from the history re-created on the stage. The audience should be able to see that precisely because things have changed, it is possible to make desirable social reforms in the present to ensure that such exploitation of others human weaknesses never occur again in the present. As Garrett asserts:-

> Parks's audiences, whatever their backgrounds, travel through her theatre's repetitions and revisions to arrive at an understanding that they, too, must count themselves among history's dupes. Parks challenges audiences to test with her the theory that seeing more deeply into our shared history is partly a matter of looking closer and longer. She takes her audiences through double- (and triple)-takes, asks them to observe what changes and what remains the same over the span of historical and performance time […] For Parks, what's come before is still and always with us—all of us. It's in

> our collective memories, in our gestures, in our genes, in our rituals and habits, and most of all, for Parks, in our *words*. (Garrett: 2000: 06)

This approach however has caused great offence to certain critics who take umbrage with Parks's point of view. American academic Jean Young claims that:-

> Park's play *Venus* feeds the audience a steady stream of domination and eroticized humiliation, as the semi-nude Venus is kicked in her greatly exaggerated padded buttocks amid the laughter of the Chorus of Human Wonders. She is sexually accosted by The Brother, and later by the Mother Showman, yet seems unaware of her victimization. (Young: 1997:12)

Earlier in the same article, Young asserts that Parks's stage representation of Venus's complicity:-

> .. diminishes the tragedy of her life as a nineteenth-century Black woman stripped of her humanity at the hands of a hostile, racist society that held her and those like her in contempt. In other words, Parks's Venus reifies the perverse imperialist mindset, and her mythic historical reconstruction subverts the voice of Saartjie Baartman. (Young, 1997: 02)

Or does it? In order to answer this, one needs to first establish Parks's intention. She is quoted in Young's article as having responded as follows in an interview:-

> I could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim. But she's multi-faceted. She's vain, beautiful,

> intelligent and yes, complicit. I write about the world of my experience, and it's more complicated than "that white man down the street is giving me a hard time." That's just one aspect of our reality. As Black people, we're encouraged to be narrow and simply address the race issue. We deserve so much more. (Parks as quoted in Young, 1997:03)

This comment combined with Park's other statements on history, writing for the figures in her plays and the responsibility she feels to "those who came before" (Parks as quoted in Garrett, 2000:07) reveals what I believe to be her desire for a departure from the binary oppositions black/white, right/wrong and straightforward, historically accurate narrative. Parks does not choose to tell the story of Venus merely to evoke sympathy for her. Parks recreates a context that is conducive for Venus to step off the page and fill the stage as a three-dimensional human being – with an equal mix of strengths and weaknesses, naivety and cunning, dreams and practical survival skills – who tells her story in a manner that is intended to touch and offend. It should affront the spectator but at the same time take him on a disturbing ride that offers a real taste of the level of humiliation that Sara Baartman endured. Garrett's perspective is that:-

> The power and performance of theatre for Parks, and its distinctiveness from other literary forms, lies in its unseemly obsession with unearthing hushed-up secrets, performing what's been buried or hidden away, revealing the carnal, physical body, and getting its hands (yes) dirty—in front of an audience, as part of a ritualized, shared event. (Garrett, 2000: 09)

Parks brings *her* Baartman back with one intention – at each performance, Venus will live again; she will suffer and be humiliated again. But this time round, a modern-day audience will suffer with her. Her story will be told in a manner that will spare no-one – neither the character nor the audience. As she must have wished for it to end, so too will the modern spectator. Yet, viewed as a séance in which Baartman's demons will come to the fore and be exorcised, each performance will empower Venus, will perhaps succeed in replacing pity for Baartman with a newfound sense that she could indeed have been a reasoning, ambitious human being and a tragic heroine who merely made the wrong choices, but was fired with a spirit that drove her to demand more from life than being a maidservant in South Africa as would probably have been her fate until she died. Rachel Holmes articulates an idea that appears to converge with Parks's thinking and imaging of Baartman. She writes:-

> It is part of womens' historical burden to be made representative, and this is the danger of memorialising Saartjie as a passive victim. As she realized throughout her life, being placed on a pedestal as an object of degradation, veneration or both is potentially fatal – and opposable. Sanctification never set a woman's spirit free. The dangers of not looking for the acts of resistance in Saartjie's life, however small they may seem now, are greater than those of sentimentalising her story. As long as Saartjie is seen as inescapably constrained by her race and gender, history will still have its foot on her neck. (Holmes, 2007: 188)

Parks sees herself as fighting the Black Consciousness struggle with a pen – and this is precisely what she may have succeeded in doing in her play *Venus*. Her unorthodox tools may at first appear to work against the cause of Black Consciousness. But what is most powerful in her method is the subtlety

that smoulders below the surface and attacks the unconscious before it filters through to the conscious mind. The same irony for which Parks is criticised, portrays most poignantly the story of Sara Baartman in one of the most disquieting passages on the woman's life:-

> **The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders**
> Legend has it that The Girl was sent away from home.
> Those who sent her said she couldn't return for a thousand yrs.
> Even though she was strong of heart even she doubted she
> Would live that long.
> After 500 years they allowed her to ask a question.
> She wanted to know what her crime had been.
> Simple: You wanted to go away once.
> 9 hundred 99 of the years were finally up
> just one more year to go.
> She had in all that time circled the globe twice on foot
> and had a lover or 2 in every port.
> She spent her last year of banishment living in a cave carved out
> outside the city wall.
> She spent that whole year longing not looking but longing
> not looking.
> They let her go home right on time
> all of her friends had died and well
> she didn't recognize the place. (95)

Perhaps Parks is more honest than presumptuous then when she says that audiences "only want something simple.. I know my plays aren't for everybody." (Parks as quoted in Garrett, 2000:04) Yet it is a path she has been prepared to walk, risking criticism and condemnation from audiences and certain of her peers. It is the complexity of *Venus* that requires thought and digestion on the part of the spectator. If this has been achieved, it is likely that Parks will add to her growing following. Her approach is a far cry

from that of writer, Barbara Chase-Riboud – the next subject of discussion – who chooses a far more palatable manner of drawing the reader into her understanding of who Sara Baartman was.

Chapter 5

Chase-Riboud's "Hottentot Venus":

Restoring the dignity of "the-thing-that-should-never-have-been-born"

In his article "Criticism Now: The Abandonment of Tradition," Martin Dodsworth draws attention to a limitation on the part of all who create 'art' and put it out into the public domain. He states that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his meaning alone." (Dodsworth, 1983: 492).[43] This, simply interpreted I believe, means that despite an artist's overwhelming gift to create art, a meaningful subject or context is required in order for him/her to produce a work that is likely to create the resonances among receivers that catapult that effort into the category of inspired art. Without these essential ingredients, the same work is unlikely to succeed as it otherwise would.

Barbara Chase-Riboud,[44] the internationally acclaimed writer, sculptor and poet, who is dedicated to the cause of Black activism, particularly, the Black female cause, has found in Sara Baartman a muse of inexorable inspiration. In *Hottentot Venus*, she recounts the life of Sarah Baartman, who is born in Good Hope, South Africa and taken to London at the age of twenty by an English surgeon who promises her fame and fortune. She is paraded naked in Piccadilly, then sold by her owner who may have been her husband, to a French circus owner. Here she ensures unbearable exploitation and humiliation. The leading medical experts of the time subject her to cruel and demeaning tests. When she can stand it no more, she considers suicide. But this is not to be and she continues to live out her miserable existence in the

[43] Martin Dodsworth has written a commentary entitled "Hamlet Closely Observed", edited *The Survival of Poetry* in 1970 and is Professor of English at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London.

[44] Chase-Riboud grew up in Philadelphia and studied Art at Temple University. After graduation she went to Rome on a fellowship for further study at the American Academy and later was accepted by Yale Graduate School of Art. By 1966 her work was being shown in Paris Galleries and began to receive international acclaim. This could explain why her writing is so rich in vivid imagery.

streets of Paris until she drinks herself to death. Then after her death Chase-Riboud resurrects her ghost, who haunts the novel until its last scene when Baartman's remains are repatriated to South Africa and she is given a dignified burial.

Chase-Riboud has a message with which she hopes to penetrate the public domain - her justifiable condemnation of racism, and discrimination, especially on the grounds of gender. And in lieu of an interesting essay, the novel *Hottentot Venus* and more specifically Sara Baartman herself, become the vehicle for Chase-Riboud's often parochial foray into the sleazy streets of London and Paris that provide powerful metaphors for the cities' gawking inhabitants who attend Baartman's "freak shows."

The blurb on Chase-Riboud's book promises that the author "recounts the tragic life of Sarah Baartman, [...] re-creating in vivid, shocking detail the racism and sexism at the heart of European colonialism." (Chase-Riboud, 2003). Although the reader is informed elsewhere that this is a work of fiction based on real-life events, that boundary between historical accuracy and fiction is constantly blurred within the novel, making it rather difficult, if not impossible for a naïve reader to distinguish the historical "gaps" that Chase-Riboud has filled with her personal insertions, from factual events. The high naturalism heightens the suspension of disbelief as Chase-Riboud

skillfully draws the reader in with her lyrical prose that seems to weave a constant dirge around her protagonist.[45]

Yet this is Chase-Riboud's prerogative as a writer of fiction.[46] And admittedly, her work may go a long way in introducing first time readers to the harsh existence of Sara Baartman. Although large tracts of *Hottentot Venus* are fictionalised, the descriptions of Baartman's exhibition before crowds of lecherous Europeans strikes a chord with the reader as being humiliating, unjust and labelling it the sort of preventable behaviour that need never be repeated in the future. Critic Vanessa F. Johnson sees Chase-Riboud's use of Baartman as a useful literary tool in exposing the actions of those guilty of racism and discrimination, no matter during which era:-

[45] The suspension of disbelief in novels such as *Hottentot Venus* is aimed at creating an alternate reality for the individual engaged in the process of reading the text. As he becomes absorbed in its content, so the author's detailed descriptions mentally (and emotionally) dislocate him from his physical reality and mentally transport him to the milieu being described in the novel. At that moment in time, he ceases to be conscious of his physical surroundings and surrenders to the author's created reality. Esslin explains the significance and purpose of naturalism pioneered by French writer Emile Zola. He states, "Zola not only wanted a realistic representation of everyday life, he rejected the idea which had infused the classical, the romantic and even the realistic theatre of his period, that art should strive to show the beautiful, heroic, uplifting and inspiring. Zola wanted the artist to uncover the truth about society in the same spirit of objective inquiry as that of a natural scientist's approach to nature […] The basic impulse behind the naturalist movement was a determination to capture the whole of human experience, however sordid and ugly, to leave nothing unsaid. It did this by an accumulation of significant detail." (Esslin,1976: 60) I would however argue that when the prose offers too much lyricism as seen in *Hottentot Venus*, it detracts from the human experience and merely romanticises it.

[46] Renowned academic Martin Esslin explains the challenges that novelists face in comparison to playwrights. In *An Anatomy of Drama*, Esslin writes, "a novelist has to describe what a character looks like. In a play the appearance of the character is instantly conveyed by the actor's body and costume and make-up. The other visual elements in the drama, the setting, the environment in which the action takes place, can be equally instantly communicated by the sets, the lighting, the grouping of the characters on the stage. […] A line of dialogue like 'Good morning, my dear friend!' might be spoken in a wide variety of tones of voice and expression. Accordingly, an audience might wonder whether the person who spoke these words meant them sincerely, used them sarcastically, or even had a note of hidden hostility in them. In a novel the author would have to say something along these lines: "Good morning my dear friend," he said, but Jack had the impression that he did not really mean it. Was he sarcastic, he asked himself, or was he suppressing some deeply felt hostility.." (Esslin, 1976: 18)

> Some readers may find an agenda in a novel not to their liking, preferring only to be entertained. Yet, the novel as an art form is the perfect vehicle for raising awareness. Similar to authors of black protest novels in the 1940's such as Ann Petry and Richard Wright, Chase-Riboud carefully chooses her issues and her subjects. In this case they are one and the same. She chooses as her subject an obscure, yet intriguing personage that reminds us that even "those-things-that-should-never-have-been-born" have hearts and souls. And that sometimes things should be left as they are and where they are. (Johnson, 2003:01)

There is no doubt that Chase-Riboud achieves this. Written in the first person, the novel is often heart-rending in its intensity of words and imagery. Passages such as the one below permeate the entire novel, making it a harrowing read:-

> Surrounding me would be scores, sometimes hundreds of white faces, all peering up at me, a sheen of horror, pity or terror occupying their faces, or perhaps a smirk of amusement, contempt or nervous excitement; eyes gleamed, lips pursed, skin transpired. Cries, insults, shouts and laughter would sometimes overwhelm me as if the waves of the ocean engulfed me except it was not salt they deposited but liquid hatred, which beat upon my naked skin, my bare feet, my burning face and scorched brain. I had learned over the years to divorce myself from the crowd, to hover just above it like a purple heron in flight. I learned to feel not, to listen not, to think not. I decided to understand no language, not even that of pity and compassion, for this too was part of their game, to pity the monster, the animal, the dis-human, the ugly, the heathen, the Hottentot.
>
> I was the black Moor, evil encased in black skin, a warning and a symbol to all those upturned faces and jammed-together bodies that God could punish them as he had punished me with expulsion not only from Eden but from the human race. I was a thing-that-should-never-have-been-born, a creature made in Eve's image yet, unlike her, not part of mankind. I was a female who was the missing link between beast and man, a wonder of nature created only for the delectation of discovery by

> hordes of paying Parisian customers, who for three francs could, from a distance, contemplate the form and color of monstrosity. (Chase-Riboud, 2003: 04)

In his article "Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoires", James E. Young explains the inadequacy of language in describing the exact experience of human suffering. In this case, he is using Holocaust survivors' experiences as an example. For him, there are certain levels of human suffering that are so horrific that no writer, no matter how superior at their craft, could re-create those events in perfect detail and realism. But he does note that writers who do attempt this, play an important role in conscientising the public about these events:-

> …the language, tropes and selected details of their texts ultimately shape *our* understanding of events afterwards. The actions we take in the current world *in light* of the Holocaust are necessarily predicated on our understanding of the Holocaust, as it has been passed down to us in the victims' and survivors' literary testimony. (Young, 1987: 407)

Here Young is referring specifically to the literary records of survivors' experiences of the Holocaust – a process that gives each interviewee a voice. Chase-Riboud attempts to do the same with Baartman, narrating the entire story in the first person. It serves to personalise the journey and afford the reader a sense of one-on-one interaction with Baartman. Chase-Riboud employs this literary device to the end, even after Baartman has died, been dissected and had her remains displayed in the French Museum. Abandoning

realism here, Chase-Riboud finds catharsis in allowing Sarah to tell her own story to the bitter end, even beyond the grave she is denied for decades:-

> I held on until the end where Sarah speaks as a dissected corpse stripped of her womanhood by a depraved scientist determined to confirm her as the missing link in the Great Chain of Being. (Chase-Riboud as quoted by V. F. Johnson, 2003: 01)

It is refreshing to find that the character Sarah is given a voice of her own in this novel. What is disappointing, however, is how that voice is used at times. One is never quite sure what to make of Sarah. The novel begins with a paragraph entitled "THE HEROINE'S NOTE." And this is how Sarah begins her account in eloquent fashion:-

> Once upon a time there was a Khoekhoe nation called the People of the People, who inhabited the Eastern Coast of South Africa. In 1619, we were discovered by the Portuguese, who, besides civilization, brought us syphilis, smallpox and slavery. They were followed by the Dutch, who gave us our name, Hottentot, which means "stutterer" in Dutch, because of the way our language sounded to them, and who introduced us to private property, land theft and fences. They were succeeded by the English, who organized us all into castes and categories and who called themselves and others like them white, and us, Hottentots, Bushmen and Negroes, black, although to my knowledge, none of us ever chose that name. And so to tell this, my true story, I was stuck with a name we didn't choose but must use so that those who gave us these names may listen. And although Hottentot is an insult equivalent to nigger, I used it in this, my story, just as Negroes use that word they do not recognize themselves by with whites, who gave them that name to begin with. I am sure that God doesn't call me Hottentot any more than He calls them white. (Chase-Riboud, 2003: 01)

It is a candid, forthright account of what Baartman sees as the corruption of her society and the denigration of her people through insulting nomenclature. These opening sentiments appear to emanate from an intelligent, discerning young woman who seems to be able to see beyond the superficial and has a very definite stance on the political events of her time. But this is not consistently the Sarah that Chase-Riboud goes on to reveal in her novel. In many ways the character is at odds with herself, at times the victim who knows nothing of the machinations of the newfound society around her, at other times miraculously migrating from naivete to absolute knowledge and understanding of her situation. Sarah is seldom heroine, but largely victim and the vacillation between the two becomes confusing, even annoying for the reader. Chase-Riboud is caught in the dilemma of whether to evoke sympathy in the reader for Sarah's plight, or to help Sarah rise above her suffering and transform her into the tragic heroine – the victim of circumstances who stands up to the system from within it, even though she will suffer the harsh consequences of her efforts. Compare for example the following passage from the novel with my previous quotation above in order to note the duality which Sarah presents. At times she shows flashes of defiance and rebellion:-

> No one understood my need to remain here if only to prove the fact of my existence. I refused to be a figment of their imagination. I would be real in all my Hottentot monstrousness, I was real, I existed, I ate and slept and pissed and shat and loved and fucked and cried and dreamed and bled. My humanness was the only thing I possessed. My right to exist was the reason I stayed. Their hew-haws and ha-has wanted to erase me, damn me to extinction, but I wouldn't go. I remained

> stubbornly here, refused to move my ass. I was famous, a household name, Frenchwomen dressed Hottentot style, all kinds of things were given that name, everything that was ugly, savage, uncivilized, brutal, deformed, reprehensible was called Hottentot, my name. (Chase-Riboud, 2003: 06)

This is a good example of what David Holbrook considers "turning the tables" in his book entitled *Sex and Dehumanization*. He delves into what he believes to be far-reaching psychological consequences for the voyeur as opposed to the more commonly explored effects on the subject. As far as he is concerned, the subject exercises far more power than originally thought and the power play can be reversed. In using the example of a male object exhibited to a heterosexual female voyeur, Holbrook states that:-

> ..the shocked observer has feelings aroused which are unpleasant and disturbing, and these objectify her and arouse strong feelings in her life which are uncomfortable and destructive to her emotional life. The exhibitionist is acting out a primitive (or early infantile phantasy), and demanding from the spectator an equally primitive response – but an inappropriate one, for the exhibitionist is not an infant, but a grown man, and the woman is not his mother. Because of the disturbed elements, the effect may be to make the spectator feel mad. (Holbrook, 1972: 41)

But no sooner has Chase-Riboud explored this territory than she backs out of it, extinguishing that fire with which Sarah speaks. And it continues to elude both Chase-Riboud and her character in the rest of the novel. Sarah shows none of the tenacity or determination of the heroine, despite Chase-Riboud's reference to this quality in her heading "THE HEROINE'S NOTE" that jump-starts the novel. This title implies and naturally requires that Sarah's belief in

her decision to stay on in Paris and allow herself to be exhibited remains largely unshakeable, because it is motivated by the power-play through which she manipulates the very crowds who throng to observe her. Instead, Chase-Riboud reverts to her initial intention of demonstrating "victimage" through Sarah's character. When Sarah is lamenting her fate one day, Master Taylor tells Sarah "People like you and me are born to mourn and weep…" (Chase-Riboud, 2003: 188) At the end of this chapter Sarah curses her destiny, feels the bitterness of sad memories well up inside her and attempts to commit suicide by throwing herself into the sea. She is saved by her friend Alice. This is one of several passages where Sarah considers the hopelessness of her fate and is "rescued" by her friends. The repetitiousness and constant indulgence of this theme often leaves the reader with the sense that Chase-Riboud is revelling in the romanticism of her protagonist's suffering, doomed as Sarah is to be the victim.

In the first chapter of the book *Victimization: Nature and Trends*, subtitled "Introduction: Victimology as a new and evolving field", I believe W. J Schurink defines victimisation in much the way Chase-Riboud depicts it through the character Sarah:-

> To some it is an emotional and dramatic term that suggests helplessness and innocence unjustly harmed. Often it has a political ring and is used by those who wish to draw attention to the disparity in power between those in control and those affected by this control. The emphasis on helplessness and innocence also appeals to our sense of tragedy and drama so that the plight of the

> victim is the theme of many artistic and literary creations. (Schurink, 1992: 06)

This is what I believe has made the novel a success in much the same way Mills and Boon books satisfy the reading public that laps up the romanticisation of rejection, entrapment, loneliness and suffering. *Hottentot Venus* is a tear-jerker because of the constant drone of persecution that runs as a powerful, relentless undercurrent in the novel. Sarah never quite becomes her own person, even though the events and tools exist to shape her character into a powerful figure. Even when the deceased Sarah's remains are returned to South Africa, she continues to calculate her status in relation to others - never afforded the freedom to define herself. Instead, she continues to be defined in relation to those around her and the meaning she carries for them. Sadly, that is all the power she is permitted to yield upon her interment:-

> As my coffin slid from the belly of the machine, amazed, I saw tens of thousands of colored people, more colored people than there was elephant grass on the plain, spread out in all directions as far as my eye could see. They rose as one to greet me.
> --Mama Sarah! Mama Sarah, Mama Sarah, they shouted, and their voices ricocheted across the plains, an ocean of sound. I Sarah Baartman, the dis-human, was now an icon for all humankind.. With a click of my tongue I commanded a million women to rise up and bear witness to my agony by wearing gloves in honour of Sarah Baartman. (Chase-Riboud, 2003: 316)

For Chase-Riboud's Sarah, there is only consolation in her recognition by others and only redemption in death. This is not just because she escapes the clutches of the hostile Europeans (for her spirit still lurks to observe her

dissection by Georges Cuvier[47]). Chase-Riboud appears to confer Sarah with the gift of immortality to compensate for her short life of suffering. It is such a powerful literary technique and departure from Chase-Riboud's use of naturalism hitherto, that it seems to betray the author's desperate need to herself bring comfort to Baartman's troubled soul by giving her a voice and presence that stretch from her mortal life to her death, to the present-day. Carl Jung in his book *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* postulates that:-

> ..we must not forget that for most people it means a great deal to assume that their lives will have an indefinite continuity beyond their present existence. They live more sensibly, feel better and are more at peace. One has centuries, one has an inconceivable length of time at one's disposal.. In the majority of cases the question of immortality is so urgent, so immediate and also so ineradicable that we must make an effort to form some sort of view about it. (Jung, 1963: 332)

Perhaps this is a consolation to the reader who has willingly participated in this horrific journey and wept with Sarah. Perhaps it is even more of a consolation to Chase-Riboud, who, as a liberated modern black woman is understandably outraged at the story of Baartman's life and short of turning back the clock, does everything within her power to recall Baartman's spirit and attempt to restore her dignity. But even the writer who owns the licence to manipulate words, facts and history can unwittingly disempower the character she means to elevate, by the process in which she puts pen to paper. A noble effort though it is, one has to consider whether it indeed matters that Sarah lives forever in *Hottentot Venus*, when Chase-Riboud, for

[47] "The baron raised his scalpel. It flashed like a bolt of lightning, as if his hand were the hand of God himself. He stood alone in the circle of light; his assistants with their towels and basins stood nearby in the shadows, as if not to mar the perfect aura of godliness […] the knife slit me from collarbone to anus.. (Chase-Riboud, 2003: 279)

all her good intentions, deprives Baartman of the heroism that could truly have marked her existence and restored the dignity she lost in the short twenty six years she walked the earth.

Chapter: 6

CONCLUSION

Martin Stannard, who is Professor of English Literature at the University of Leicester, and simultaneously the author of biographies of writers such as Evelyn Waugh has written a daring article about the very medium in which he chooses to write most often – that of the biography.[48] His article entitled "The Necrophiliac Art?"[49] raises questions that are both probing and disturbing about the biographer's pre-occupation with his subject. Yet the questions he poses are as valid to Maseko's *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman,* as they are to Suzan Lori Park's *Venus*, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* and even Cuvier's *Extrait d'observations Faites sur le Cadavre d'une femme connue a Paris et a Londres sous le nom de VENUS HOTTENTOTTE" [Extracts of observations made on the Body of a woman known in Paris and London by the name of VENUS HOTTENTOT].* Stannard writes:-

> At the root of all this lies that most awkward of questions: 'Who owns a life?'[…] There is, of course, an equally weary post-modern response: no one owns a life, can, or should attempt to 'possess' it. No one knows another. Facts are relative to the point of view from which they are constructed. (Stannard, 1996: 37)

Famed poet and writer Ted Hughes and his wife, the renowned poet Sylvia Plath were both the subjects of unauthorised biographies. As Hughes pointed

[48] Stannard is also the editor of *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage* and author of *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years, 1903-1939* and *Evelyn Waugh: No Abiding City, 1939-1966.* His Norton Critical Edition of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* was published in 1996, at which time he began work on the authorised biography of Muriel Spark.

[49] This article is to be found in an extremely useful collection that combines 19 articles on varying aspects of biography. It is entitled *The Literary Biography, Problems and Solutions* and is edited by Dale Salwak, 1996.

out, at least the couple was still alive, availing them of the opportunity to speak out about these literary reflections on their lives:-

> It is infuriating for me to see my private experiences and feelings re-invented for me, in that crude, bland, unanswerable way, and interpreted and published as official history […] And to see her [Plath] used in the same way. If we can't get it right about the living, what chance do we have with the even more remote dead? Were they to rear up from their graves, would they not turn a weary eye on us and say, 'That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all? (Hughes as quoted by Stannard, 1996: 37)

Speaking out about the primary texts used in this study and the many others about her life that are in circulation, is not a luxury that Sara Baartman ever had. And that in itself is perhaps a loophole for at least three of the originators of the primary texts in this study.[50] Aside from the public that has access to these texts, there can be no backlash aimed at Maseko's film, Chase-Riboud's novel or Parks's play from Baartman, which is certainly an advantage as far as freedom of expression is concerned. But perhaps Hughes's statement lays too much blame at the feet of those who produce the texts in question. Are they not, after all, satisfying the morbid curiosity of readers and spectators of the period in which they are published? And is the public not guilty of lapping up the revelations of public figures' private lives with satisfaction? Perhaps it is the South African viewing public's exposure to American television norms that may well put us into the category of

[50] In *Biography: Fact, Fiction and Form*, Ira Nadel reminds us that "the reader of a biography should try to remember that he is dealing with a written rather than an actual life, a literary artifact that can never be a definitive or wholly accurate record, precisely because the biographer is always being forced to make choices - and no less than any other writer, he will sometimes make good choices and sometimes bad ones. What we can never escape, in any biography, is the biographer's presence, just as we can never escape the novelist in the novel." (Nadel, 1984: 160)

observers who revel in knowing the details of other peoples' private lives, especially if they have made a name for themselves. Pulitzer prize-winning biographer Justin Kaplan sees this biographical delving into the privacy of others as:-

> […]largely an Anglo-American phenomenon. Other societies draw a stricter line than we do between public and private arenas, between the work and life. They don't share an obsession with childhood and adolescence, 'creativity' and 'identity', the quirkiness and singularities of private lives. We assume we have a right to know everything about other people. This includes knowing what they 'do' in bed – with whom and with what – even though it can be argued that this may have a strained connection with what they do out in the world. By current standards, biographies without voyeuristic, erotic thrills are like ballpark hot-dogs without mustard […] the distinction between public figures who are fair game for comment and private people who think they shouldn't be – between the individual's 'right to privacy' and the public's 'need' to know – has been blurring for centuries. (Kaplan, 1996: 01)

Thus, all our primary texts have this aspect in common. Cuvier dissects Baartman's body and opens her up to the rest of France, scientists and laypeople alike, in his medical report. Maseko explores the smallest minutiae of Baartman's suffering, including details of her exhibition, sketches, the private accounts of journalists and public responses contained in graphic letters to the editors of European 19th century newspapers. Chase-Riboud and Parks tend to fill in the gaps where there is a lack of historical documentation. In *Hottentot Venus* there are extended passages that describe Baartman's physical and emotional suffering, as well as sexualised accounts of Baartman's perception of her own body, motivated by the way Western eyes see her. Parks fictionalises a love affair between the Baron

Docteur and Baartman, in which Baartman becomes his manipulative mistress, whom the doctor eventually murders and dissects, so as to beat any other scientists to the discovery of this unique African body he has made.

For Baartman, the works discussed in this study, well-intended though most of them are, could be a mere re-enactment of her daily exhibition in London or Paris. For as the reader turns the page or watches the film, he himself is transformed into that gawking observer who delights in viewing the secrets of his subject and colluding with the filmmaker or author to decode them. Baartman lives again as an object of curiosity, this time, even to the South African compatriots for whom she has become an icon – which itself is another interesting mould into which she must fit.

Although the producers of texts are often fingered as the main culprits in exposing their subject, as in the case of Baartman, I would argue that it is quite possible that they unconsciously give into societal pressure. I have noted in the first chapter of Cuvier's work, the role that pre-conceived societal notions played in his ultimate conclusion, following the dissection of Baartman's body.

In 2002, when Baartman's body was returned to South Africa, it was the culmination of years of negotiation on the part of the South African government. But it was also the era of democracy in a country that had

ushered in a new dispensation in 1994 – a country that was brimming with the pride of having adopted a new national anthem, a new constitution that emphasised the importance of equality among the races and parity between male and female. The return of Baartman's remains heralded more than one victory. It elicited an admission from the French government that the very acts of exhibiting Baartman and keeping her remains for as long as they had, was a blight on the history of the French.[51] Furthermore, as black female South Africans came into their own, many saw the return of Baartman's remains as a personal, private triumph for them as African women. This was heightened by the fact that the special commemorations for Baartman were held on Womens' Day. President Mbeki delivered an emotive speech in which he proclaimed that:-

> The story of Sarah Baartman is the story of the African people of our country in all their echelons. It is a story of the loss of our ancient freedom. It is a story of our dispossession of the land and the means that gave us an independent livelihood. It 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.' It is an account of how it came about that we ended up being defined as a people without a past, except a past of barbarism, who had no capacity to think, who had no culture, no value system to speak of, and nothing to contribute to human civilization – people with no names and no identity, who had to be defined by he who was, "man par excellence". (Mbeki, 2002: 22)

In this highly politicised speech the President stirred the emotions of the masses who had suffered at the hands of the apartheid government.

[51] See for example President Thabo Mbeki's reference to this admission in his speech at Baartman's graveside ritual. He quotes the then French Minister of Research, Roger-Gerard Schwartzenberg as saying, "This young woman was treated as if she was something monstrous. But where in this affair, is the monstrosity? (Mbeki, 2002: 02)

Described as she is above, there is little wonder that the crowd's identification with Baartman was, and still remains so strong. But Mbeki did not leave it there. He then alluded to a new role that the South African government had virtually defined for Baartman in the future:-

> The changing times tell us that she did not suffer and die in vain. Our presence at her graveside demands that we act to ensure that what happened to her should never be repeated. This means that we must act to restore the dignity of the Khoi and San people as a valued part of our diverse nation. It means that we must act firmly and consistently to eradicate the legacy of apartheid and colonialism in all its manifestations. It means that we must not relent in the struggle to build a truly non-racial society in which black and white shall be brother and sister. Our presence at this graveside demands that we join in a determined and sustained effort to ensure respect for the dignity of the women of our country, gender and equality and women's emancipation. It demands that we defend our democratic order and our regime of human rights with all necessary means. (Mbeki, 2002: 07)

It is indeed a rousing speech, to be sure. But even as Baartman is being laid to rest, the president again invokes her as a national symbol and guardian of human rights. Thus, the process of re-encoding Baartman begins again, this time in the country of her birth.

Yet admittedly, it was a fertile time for Maseko's documentary film to be screened and Chase-Riboud's novel to be published. In light of the hype around Sara Baartman at home and abroad, it was inconceivable that *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* and *Hottentot Venus* would not receive a warm response. There are literary critics who see works of this nature

timeously released to the public, as the producers' attempts to pander to public demand, thereby increasing their own popularity. John Van Zyl believes that:-

> ..one responds to attitudes or beliefs that one favours. The newspaper that one reads is the one that reflects one's own political beliefs, and one scorns the newspaper that supports the other party. If one is confronted by an item on television news with which one does not agree then one usually suppresses it. How often has one not heard an irritated adult throw down a paper or switch off the radio growling, "What rubbish! Who do they think they're fooling?" That is the sort of selective perception that blocks out anything that is unfamiliar or at odds with one's own prejudices. (Van Zyl, 1987: 38)

It is hardly surprising then, that neither Maseko's film nor Chase-Riboud's novel upset the public, since both producers adhered strictly to the revered image of Baartman as a victim of colonialism who displayed no free agency whatsoever. That was what the public wanted to believe and both Maseko and Chase-Riboud appear to share that belief. Yet Lori Parks was bound to offend with her stage-play, because it presented the possibility that Baartman could have transcended the status of victim and taken her fate in her own hands.

Dawkins's "Meme Theory" mentioned earlier in this study comes into play strongly here. There was a general feeling in modern society that Baartman had been completely disempowered and was totally deprived of the ability to think or act. If she had indeed been complicit in her own exhibition, then the reader or viewer would be deprived of a subjugated protagonist and a colonial villain. This would prove disappointing, because it would remove

from what is otherwise a captivating story, the romanticisation of Baartman's suffering at the hands of her colonial masters. Stannard insists that readers of biography have certain desires that they want the film or novel to fulfill. He says that receivers are likely to spurn the work, should it not fulfill those desires:-

> There is, it seems, no escaping the fact that readers of biography often turn to it, not in the spirit of free enquiry, but to support preconceptions, and that the contradiction of these notions represents an insult to both subject and reader. No matter how even-handed you try to be with the evidence, there are always two stories being told: that of your subject, and that of your relationship with your subject. The biographer can never eradicate that tone of voice which reveals him as a participant in the narrative, nor should he. (Stannard, 1996: 40)

A picture begins to emerge that appears to reveal Cuvier, Maseko, Chase-Riboud, and Parks's dependence on Baartman. She is equally a canvas for each of them – one on which they project their belief systems and reinforce certain societal belief systems too. Cuvier, attempting to gain credit in the eyes of the French society that turns to him searchingly for answers, transforms Baartman into the sexualised ape about which his contemporary explorers have written at length. In underlining, through his dissection, that they have been correct all along in their assumptions about the sub-human African form, he wins favour with the European public, hankering for confirmation as colonialism takes hold, that they are indeed a superior race.

Had science refuted this myth, it might have deprived Europe of the underlying paradigm required to colonise, for all men would have been equal, and subjugating others may have been categorised as repugnant behaviour for Europe to avoid. Thus, Cuvier used Baartman's body as a springboard to achieve enhanced status among his peers and to set their minds at rest about the colonial ideal.

One wonders whether Zola Maseko indeed faced the filmmaker's quandary of what angle or entry point to choose, for his initial objectivity lasts all of one scene, after which he launches head-first into his story of Baartman - the victim without recourse. The interviews he has recorded often leave the viewer feeling slightly ambiguous about Baartman's real situation.

If one were to create a re-edited version of the film, omitting all voice over and narrative from *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* and merely analyse the interviews in isolation, they may tell a different story. For the historians make reference to the possibility that Baartman could have indeed willingly travelled to London and later Paris, with the intention of ascending the European social ladder, and leaving behind a life of slavery in a Dutch household at the Cape. Maseko does not even suggest this as a possibility – what is clearly an equivocation on his part. Each time that an interview introduces this possibility, Maseko then begins to steer away from the statement, drowning it out with a return to his ubiquitous voice over.

Maseko, too, "needs" Baartman. Through her, he finds a voice for the black majority of South Africa who lived under crushing white rule for decades. Maseko seems to connect with Baartman on that level. She is the oppressed black South African who lived centuries ago, yet knew first-hand the suffering that resulted from being the subject of a white master. Maseko, a 21st century South African, though living in a different age, has similarly experienced domination at the hands of the apartheid regime. It is possible that Maseko sees Baartman as his parallel in a different époque. But powerful and politicised figure that Baartman has become, she is now able, not just to tell her own story, but from behind a veil, to tell Maseko's story too, in a documentary that doubles-up as the exorcism of Maseko's ghosts.

Similarly, Chase-Riboud is a black woman who has made her home in France - the second country that saw fit to physically and emotionally dislocate Baartman from all that was familiar to her. In *Hottentot Venus,* Chase-Riboud appears to want to assume the role of liberator, either freeing Baartman from the horrors of history, or at least resurrecting her, to conscientise humankind about this lost African woman's life that needs to be relived and experienced as Baartman herself may have experienced it. Chase-Riboud gives Baartman a voice. Yet, it is not truly that of the Sara Baartman we as readers hope to encounter. It is Chase-Riboud's powerful and believable attempt at mimicking her voice, and driving Baartman's narration with the writer's own personal agenda.

Recognition is important to Chase-Riboud. She uses her pen to encourage the black women who have been neglected by history, to rise up and remind modern-day readers of their suffering for the cause through the centuries. It seems that through her writing, Chase-Riboud tries to propel them to claim their rightful place in the literary hall she has created for African female victims of history. At no point does Chase-Riboud seem to ask whether a figure like Baartman, given a choice, would even desire to be counted among that number. For there is little or no heroism on the part of her protagonist in Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus.* The novel appears to be aimed at evoking guilt and shame in those who oppress others, and perhaps this is Chase-Riboud's most powerful result – that her languishing Sarah could awaken pity even in a hardened aggressor, (optimistically) result in a change of heart, and therefore perhaps, a change in the course of history.

But this is the illusion that most writers seem to have. Even Lori Parks claims that she writes for the characters themselves and not for audiences. Her works are based on the premise that she herself as a sort of theatrical medium, will call up the spirits of those who fall into the category of the "black downtrodden" in history, and through her writing that will act as a kind of séance, will re-tell their stories, affording them liberation from the political shackles, in which they have been imprisoned over the centuries. Thus Parks will breach that boundary between the living and the dead, and create a powerful space for the dead protagonist in which to reappear in

another time and space, to exact revenge on the spectator, in lieu of being able to avenge her suffering at the hands of her historical tormentors.

Skillful and imposing though *Venus* is, Parks's agenda is far more evident than any of the other producers of the primary texts explored in this study. But what is heartening, is that Parks herself expresses a consciousness of her own agenda, which both refreshing and surprising. Parks is aware that she needs Baartman as a vehicle, in order to undertake this supernatural journey with an audience. Similarly, Parks's audiences are familiar with the nature of her work, and know to expect a harrowing intellectual ride in the staging of *Venus*, splattered with indictments against them as members of a flawed, racist, patriarchal society.

What Parks must be commended for, is her lack of illusion in creating her works. She is not afraid to stir public discontent. In writing and staging various productions of *Venus,* she does not attempt to conform to societal notions of the afflicted, languishing *Venus* that society expects Baartman to be. The character is unashamedly what Parks wants her to be – what I perceive to be an admission on the playwright's part, that it is humanly impossible to re-create the "true" Sara Baartman, and that any writer who sets out to try to do this, has already failed.

Academic Anne Stevenson points out what for her, is the most useful exercise in writing about the life of a person, during a period in which many

other writers are doing the same. This statement is perhaps what may rescue the varied writing around Sara Baartman that is already in existence, as well as the works that have yet to be penned. Stevenson suggests that:-

> Truth is, in its nature, multiple and contradictory, part of the flux of history, untrappable in language. The only real road to truth is through doubt and tolerance. (Stevenson as quoted by Stannard,1996: 38)

If one is to believe this, then it seems that we will only ever come to an understanding of Baartman, by scrutinising the wide variety of writing around her life that is available. If Stevenson is correct, then each text will at least serve to interrogate the other, opening up a world of debate around the issue of "truth" to the reader or viewer.

Perhaps this will also equip receivers to attempt to prise apart the voice afforded to the central character or persona, from that of the author or filmmaker, if this is indeed possible at all. Or on the other hand, there exists the possibility that all writers are locked into a literary trap that does not permit them to do anything other than live out their hopes and fantasies through characters, and bemoan their fate through the same voices in their texts.

Perhaps too, this study in itself, critical though it is of Cuvier, Maseko, Chase-Riboud and Parks's texts, is yet another re-writing of the writing of Sara Baartman, and that simply by undertaking it, I too join the ranks of writers

caught in the labyrinthine exercise of reproducing Baartman, with little hope of finding a way out of the maze, to her "real" self.

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