Black Venus 2010

They Called Her "Hottentot"

Edited by

DEBORAH WILLIS

With research assistance by

Carla Williams

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56. See Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's essay, "The Degeneration of the Races," and Georges Cuvier's essay, "The Race from Which We Are Descended Has Been Called Caucasian . . . the Handsomest on Earth," in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA, and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997).

57. Sharpley-Whiting, "Writing Sex, Writing Difference," 27–28.

58. Georges Cuvier, quoted in Sharpley-Whiting, "Writing Sex, Writing Difference," 27. Cuvier had apparently attempted to see between her legs while she was alive, but she would not let him.

59. Sharpley-Whiting, "Writing Sex, Writing Difference," 29–30.

60. Georges Cuvier, "Extraits d'observation faites sur le cadavre d'une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hottentote," in *Discours sur les révolutions du globe* (Paris: Passard, 1864), 266.

61. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 23.

62. Cuvier, "Extraits d'observation," 269.

63. Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race and Nation," 35.

64. Ibid., 36.

65. Ibid., 37.

66. Gilman states: "Rather than presenting the world, icons represent it. Even with a modest nod to supposedly mimetic portrayals it is apparent that, when individuals are shown within a work of art (no matter how broadly defined), the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates. And it dominates in a very specific manner, for the representation of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. These classes in turn are characterized by the use of a model which synthesizes our perception of the uniformity of the groups into a convincingly homogeneous image." Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 223.

67. This usefulness extended several decades after her death; a poster for the Grand Musée Anatomique, dated 1870/71, advertises a showing of "La Véritable Vénus Hottentote," Musée de la Publicité, reference #10859.

ZINE MAGUBANE

3 Which Bodies Matter?

Feminism, Post-Structuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the "Hottentot Venus"

Any scholar wishing to advance an argument on gender and colonialism, gender and science, or gender and race must, it seems, quote Sander Gilman's "White Bodies, Black Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." First published in a 1985 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, the article has been reprinted in several anthologies. It is cited by virtually every scholar concerned with analyzing gender, science, race, colonialism, or their intersections (Haraway 1989; Vaughan 1991; Crais 1992; Gordon 1992; hooks 1992; Rattansi 1992; Schiebinger 1993; Wiss 1994; Fausto-Sterling 1995; McClintock 1995; Pieterse 1995; Stoler 1995; Abrahams 1997; Thomson 1997; Loomba 1998; Lindfors 1999; Sharpley-Whiting 1999; Strother 1999).[1]

In the article Gilman uses Sarah Baartmann, the so-called "Hottentot Venus," as a means of showing how medical, literary, and scientific discourses work to construct images of racial and sexual difference. The basic premise of Gilman's argument is summed up in this frequently quoted passage:

> The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black, and the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot. The physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the black. (1985a, 212)

Gilman's analysis of Baartmann was the genesis for a veritable theoretical industry. After the publication of Gilman's article Baartmann was, in the words of Z. S. Strother, "recapitulated to fame" and became "an academic and popular icon" (1999, 1). The theoretical groundswell her story precipitated cannot be separated from the growing popularity of post-structuralist analyses of race and gender. The ways in which science, literature, and art collectively worked to produce Baartmann as an example of racial and sexual difference offered exemplary proof that racial and sexual alterity are social constructions rather than biological essences. Thus, her story was particularly compelling for anyone interested in deconstructing difference and analyzing the "Othering" process.

The fact that Gilman's article has been "instrumental in transforming Baartmann into a late-twentieth century icon for the violence done to women of African descent"

(Strother 1999, 37) makes it even more critical that we reconsider the ways in which Baartmann, as both subject and object, has been deployed theoretically. In the pages that follow, I will argue that although most studies that discuss Baartmann (or Gilman's analysis of her) are scrupulous in their use of words like "invented," "constructed," and "ideological," in their practice they valorize the very ground of biological essentialism they purport to deconstruct.

Thus, in this article I examine the parameters of inquiry that have structured how scholars have posed their research questions. I am particularly interested in looking at what assumptions about racial and sexual difference inform the theoretical orthodoxy about Baartmann. I argue that most theorists have, following Gilman's theoretical lead, focused obsessively on Baartmann's body and its difference. As a result, they have accepted, without question, his core assertion that "by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general" (Gilman 1985a, 209). They have not, however, asked, "What social relations determined which people counted as black?" "For which people did blacks become icons of sexual difference and why?" Nor have they investigated the important differences that marked how social actors in different structural locations saw and experienced Baartmann—in particular her very different interpellation into French versus British medicine and science. As a result, their work has actually placed Baartmann *outside* history.

In the interest of placing Baartmann (and racial and sexual alterity) back within history, the remainder of this essay will take issue with and disprove three of Gilman's core assertions. The first assumption I disprove is that Europeans' fears of the "unique and observable" physical differences of racial and sexual "Others" was the primary impetus for the construction and synthesis of images of deviance. The second assumption I challenge is that ideas about "blackness" remained relatively static and unchanged throughout the nineteenth century. The final assumption I critique is that Baartmann evoked a uniform ideological response, and her sexual parts represented the "core image" of the black woman in the nineteenth century. The article will conclude with a discussion of the theoretical lapses that precipitated Baartmann's recent theoretical fetishization.

Ways of Seeing: Hierarchies of Value and the Social Construction of Perceptions

Long before the first post-structuralist put pen to paper, Emile Durkheim (1982, 34) argued that "social life is made up entirely of representations" (34). His strongest criticisms were directed against social theorists who naturalized these representations, treating them as the result of universal sensory impressions rather than historically specific cultural creations. He thus argued that

> consciousness allows us to know them [representations] well up to a certain point, but only in the same way as our senses make us aware of heat or light, sound or electricity. It gives us muddled impressions of them, fleeting and subjective, but provides no clear, distinct notions or explanatory concepts. (36)

Durkheim argued that representations must be analyzed like social facts (1982, 36). Viewing representations as social facts, he explained, "is not to place them in this or that category of reality; it is to observe towards them a certain attitude of mind." He was essentially arguing that analyses of psychic impressions must give way to analyses of social relations if the theorists are to arrive at a sophisticated understanding of how we perceive and order our world.

It appears that Gilman (1985a) was determined not to repeat the mistakes of a generation of theorists before and after Durkheim when he began his essay with this compelling question: "How do we organize our perceptions of the world?" His analysis suggests that he sees differences as "myths" that are "perceived through the ideological bias of the observer" (204). However, the ahistorical perspective he adopts on how human beings perceive "difference" and organize hierarchies of value belies this seemingly radical constructivist stance. Gilman essentially argues that ideas about difference are the unmediated reflex of psychic impressions. In his analysis, the visible stigmata of racial and corporeal abnormality—what he terms "unique and observable physical difference"—are of key importance (212). He argues that the scientific discourse of degeneracy, which was key in pathologizing the Other, devolved primarily in relation to non-European peoples as an expression of fears about their corporeal difference:

> It is thus the inherent fear of the difference in the anatomy of the Other which lies behind the synthesis of images. The Other's pathology is revealed in anatomy. . . . The "white *man's* burden" thus becomes his sexuality and its control, and it is this which is transferred into the need to control the sexuality of the Other. . . . This need for control was a projection of inner fears; thus, its articulation in visual images was in terms which described the polar opposite of the European male. (237)

Despite his ahistoricism and psychological determinism, a number of feminist scholars wholeheartedly embraced Gilman's analysis. Several, following Gilman's theoretical lead, argued that Cuvier's dissection was an expression of his inner fears of Baartmann's anatomical difference and his need for control (Haraway 1989; Schiebinger 1993; Fausto-Sterling 1995; Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Fausto-Sterling was clearly drawing on Gilman when she argued:

> Cuvier most clearly concerned himself with establishing the priority of European nationhood; he wished to control the hidden secrets of Africa and the woman by exposing them to scientific daylight. . . . Hence he delved beneath the surface, bringing the interior to light; he extracted the hidden genitalia and defined the hidden Hottentot. Lying on his dissection table, the wild Baartmann became the tame, the savage civilized. By exposing the clandestine power, the ruler prevailed. (1995, 42)

Anne McClintock also employed Gilman in support of her claim that it was necessary to invent visible stigmata to represent—as a commodity spectacle—the historical atavism of the degenerate classes. As Sander Gilman has pointed out, one answer was

found in the body of the African woman, who became the prototype of the Victorian invention of primitive atavism (1995, 41).

In following Gilman's lead and analyzing the discourse of degeneracy as a product of psychological dispositions, these accounts cannot explain the paradoxical stance of the founder of the science of degeneracy, Augustine Benedict Morel. Morel argued "between the intellectual state of the wildest Bushman and that of the most civilized European, there is *less difference* than between the intellectual state of the same European and that of the degenerate being" (emphasis mine; Pick 1989, 26). Morel's comments become even more striking when we recall that many scientists and travelers believed that Baartmann was a female member of the so-called 'Bushman' tribe.

Morel's comments become much more understandable if we proceed from the assumption that social relations, rather than psychological dispositions, provide the background and context for human encounters. Degeneration, as an explanatory framework, did not develop in response to external "Others" and their corporeal alterity. Rather, the discourse was a response to fears about the blurring of class and status differences within the European polity. This was considered far more threatening than the racial and sexual alterity of non-European peoples. Malik explains that, "for the ruling classes equality and democracy were themselves symptoms of degeneracy" (1996, 112). What was distinctive about the idea of degeneration was that external features were *not* reliable indicators of its existence. Degeneration was not always (or even primarily) associated with "unique and observable physical differences." As Pick (1989) explains, degeneration was considered so dangerous precisely because it was a process capable of usurping all boundaries of discernible identity. Degeneracy was marked by its slow, invidious, and *invisible* proliferation.

The importance of analyzing social relations, rather than enumerating psychological dispositions, is nowhere more evident than in Georges Cuvier's stance on the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain of Being was a theory that speculated all creatures could be arranged on a continuous scale from the lowliest insect to the most highly evolved human. After the publication of Gilman's article, Cuvier became popularly (and erroneously) associated with the Great Chain of Being (Gordon 1992; Sharpley-Whiting 1999; Strother 1999). Wiss, for example, asserts that "Cuvier, by fractioning the gradual continuities of the 'great chain of being' was able to divide humanity into four distinct races" (1994, 29).

What these analyses do not and cannot account for is Cuvier's stubborn and enduring *resistance* to the doctrine. As Appel explained:

> Of all the speculative theories, the one that most aroused Cuvier's passions was the eighteenth-century doctrine of the chain of being. It became in effect his *bete noire*. . . . Cuvier's main stated objection to the chain was that it was a speculative *a priori* scheme that went beyond the facts. . . . By 1812 Cuvier had already renounced even the possibility of arranging classes along a scale of perfection. (1987, 50–51)

Cuvier's stance can be better understood if it is analyzed in relation to nineteenth-century European class dynamics, rather than simply concluding that his actions reflect the generalized psychological dispositions and fears of European males. Indeed, his

disaffection for the notion of a Great Chain of Being stemmed equally from socio-political sources as it did from scientific or psychological sources.

In Cuvier's day, it was commonly believed that speculative philosophies had been the source behind the French Revolution. During the Revolution scientific theories had been intensely politicized. Thus, Cuvier was acutely aware of the power that unregulated ideas, political or scientific, could have on the masses. The ideas of Mesmer, for example, had been joined to the revolutionary ideas of Rousseau, as were Felix Pouchet's ideas about spontaneous generation. Cuvier associated speculative theories with materialism and feared that the two taken in tandem could be used to promote social unrest. Speculative theories could, in his opinion, be more easily exploited by the masses, who were intent on overturning the social order.

Thus, although Cuvier's observations about Baartmann suggest that he viewed her as sharing a number of affinities with apes, it is important to note that he never explicitly stated that she was the "missing link." His reluctance to do so tells us less about his attitudes toward racial and sexual alterity than it does about his attitudes toward class. It demonstrates his profound aversion to any action that could potentially endow the claims of the "dangerous classes" to equality and legitimacy. This aversion was strong enough to prevent him from drawing the "logical" conclusion about Baartmann, based upon his own empirical observations. As strong as Cuvier's fears about Baartmann's corporeal difference were, it appears his fears about the potential political equality of his fellow Frenchmen were even greater.

The actions of Cuvier demonstrate that the social relations of nineteenth-century France tell us far more about the process of constructing boundaries between Self and Other than do blanket generalizations about the psychological dispositions of European males. His behavior makes evident the truth of Barbara Fields's claim that "the idea one people has of another, even when the difference between them is embodied in the most striking physical characteristics, is always mediated by the social context within which the two come into contact" (1982, 148).

Sex and Savagery: Africa in the Historical Imagination

The ahistorical and psychologically determinist perspective Gilman adopts in his discussions about degeneration and the Great Chain is even more pronounced in his discussions about race. The publication of "Black Bodies, White Bodies" in the anthology *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, was instrumental in securing the article's place as a foundational text in a "post-foundationalist" world. The anthology soon became one of the most cited texts in the fields of post-structuralism, feminism, critical race studies, and post-colonial studies. It is not difficult to ascertain why. In the introduction Gates explains that the purpose of the text was "to deconstruct the ideas of difference inscribed in the trope of race" (1986, 2). The title's use of quotation marks around the word race announced the volume's emphasis on critically engaging race as a discursively and socially constructed phenomenon. The characterization of race as a trope, and thus similar to any other kind of figurative language, was clearly meant to decisively and permanently

disrupt any notion of race as referring to innate biological or physical differences. Race, as a trope, is the ultimate empty signifier.

Although Gilman's intention is to argue that perceptions of difference are socially constructed, he focuses on Baartmann's "inherent" biological differences. He argues that "her physiognomy, her skin color, the form of her genitalia label her as inherently different" (1985a, 213). Gilman argues that because of her "unique and observable" physical differences, Baartmann represented "the black female *in nuce*" (212, 206). He thus concludes that, "while many groups of African blacks were known to Europeans in the nineteenth century, the Hottentot remained representative of the essence of the black, especially the black female" (206).

Gilman's theoretical adherents, with little question and much enthusiasm, took up the idea that Baartmann's physical stigmata transformed her into a representation of "the black female *in nuce*" (Schiebinger 1993; Wiss 1994; Fausto-Sterling 1995; McClintock 1995; Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Donna Haraway, for example, uses Gilman to support her claim that, because of their perceived biological differences, "Black women were ontologically the essence of animality and abnormality" (1989, 402).

Most scholars, in accepting Gilman's declaration about Baartmann's racial representativeness, have neither historicized nor problematized the idea of "blackness." They have made "the assumption that race is an observable physical fact, a thing, rather than a notion that is profoundly and in its very essence ideological" (Fields 1982, 144). However, as Wacquant observed, American conceptions of race are better thought of as "folk conceptions" which reflect the "peculiar schema of racial division developed by one country during a small segment of its short history" (1997, 223). The fact that many Baartmann scholars have unthinkingly reproduced commonsense understandings of "blackness" as it exists in the contemporary United States is evidenced by two historically untenable assumptions they make about race. The first assumption is that Baartmann's color and sexual difference not only marked her as "different" but also rendered her fundamentally *the same* as all other "black" people. The second assumption is that ideas about what constitutes "Africanity" and "blackness" have remained relatively unchanged over time.

The assumption that Khoikhoi people were considered broadly representative of Africans as a whole is central to Gilman's argument. It allows him to move from a discussion about Baartmann to making much broader claims about perceptions of African people as a whole. This theoretical maneuver allows him to argue that Baartmann represented "the black female *in nuce*." However, the reports of nineteenth-century travelers demonstrate that this particular assertion does not withstand historical scrutiny.

Travelers made much of the fact that the Khoikhoi were not "black" or "brown" but "yellow" or "tawny" and thus different in important respects from Africans living further North, as well as from those on the West coast (Barrow 1801; Lichtenstein 1812; Burchell 1822; Thompson 1827; Pringle 1834). Travelers and naturalists also drew sharp divisions between different classes of Khoikhoi people based on their color, culture, geographical location, and appearance. Barrow, for example, distinguished the so-called "colonial Hottentots" or "bastard Hottentots," who lived inside the colony, from those in the outlying regions ("savage Hottentots") who "retained more of their original character" (1801, 151). He went on to note that, although the "elongated nymphae [Hottentot apron] are found in all Hottentot women . . . in the bastard Hottentot

it ceases to appear" (1801, 281). Other travelers testified to the existence of different "races" within the "Hottentot nation." George Thompson, for example, remarked that "in personal appearance the Korannas are superior to any other race of Hottentots. Many of them are tall with finely shaped heads and prominent features" (1827, 269).

Even those travelers who did not make such fine distinctions between individual Khoikhoi people drew sharp distinctions between the Khoikhoi and other "black" ethnic groups within the Cape Colony. It was widely agreed that the Xhosa (called variously Kaffirs, Caffirs, and Caffers) and the San (pejoratively referred to as Bushmen) were wholly unlike the Khoikhoi. An article in the *Quarterly Review* remarked that, "no two beings can differ more widely than the Hottentot and the Caffre" ("Review of *Lichtenstein's Travels*": 1812, 388). Barnard Fisher likewise commented that "three races more distinct and unlike than the Hottentot, Caffre, and Bushman cannot possibly well be" (1814, 7). James Prior echoed Fisher when he marveled at the "marked differences as appear in the three races of Kaffir, Hottentot, and Bushman" (1819, 14).

The fact that historical evidence suggests that the Khoikhoi did *not* represent blackness *in nuce* is important because it forces us to return to the central question posed earlier: "How do we organize our perceptions of the world?" Gilman imputes a timeless stability to the idea of race. He argues that "the primary marker of the black is his or her skin color" (1985a, 231). However, skin color and hair textures were not stabilized as markers of racial difference until fairly late in the nineteenth century. Barrow, for example, observed that the Xhosa were "dark glossy brown verging on black." He also described them as having "short curling hair" (1801, 168). Nevertheless, he concluded that they had "not one line of the African Negro in the composition of their persons" (1801, 205). Lichtenstein concurred with Barrow that "the Kaffirs have in many respects a great resemblance to Europeans. Indeed they have more resemblance to them than either to Negroes or Hottentots" (1812, 303). Thomas Pringle echoed Barrow when, after describing the Xhosa as being "dark brown" and having "wooly hair," he declared them as having features that "approached the European model" (1834, 413). What these historical observations suggest is that "blackness" is less a stable, observable, empirical fact than an ideology that is historically determined and, thus, variable.

The profoundly ideological nature of "blackness" becomes even more apparent when we consider that, as Englishmen continued to speculate as to whether the "dark skinned" (by contemporary standards) Xhosa should be classified as Negroes, they were convinced that the "pale skinned" (again by contemporary standards) Irish most definitely *should* be. As Cheng noted, "the Irish/Celtic race was repeatedly related to the black race not merely in terms of tropes, but insistently as *fact*, as literal and biological relatives" (1995, 26). Indeed, much was made of the "unique and observable physical differences" (to borrow a phrase from Gilman) that separated the Anglo-Saxons from the Celts. Dr. John Beddoe, founding member of the British Ethnological Society, devoted most of his career to establishing that the Irish Celts were not only genetically distinct from and inferior to Anglo-Saxons, but also bore biological affinity to Negroes. His work served to "confirm the impressions of many Victorians that the Celtic portions of the population in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland were considerably darker or more melanous than those descended from Saxon and Scandinavian forbears" (Curtis 1997, 20). Beddoe was by no means alone in his estimation of the "Africanoid" origin of the Irish (Price 1829; Bentham 1834; Prichard 1857).

I have gone to such lengths to demonstrate that (1) the Khoikhoi were not considered representative of Africans; (2) not all Africans were thought of as Negroes; and (3) not all Negroes were "black" for two reasons. My first objective is to challenge Gilman's core assertions and thus unsettle the theoretical orthodoxy about Baartmann. My second objective is to make a larger sociological point about ideologies about "racial differences" (or any other kind of differences for that matter).

As the above selections from British travel writing, missionary reports, and related ephemera so graphically illustrate, there was no uniform opinion on the Khoikhoi or other Africans with regard to sexuality, appearance, habits, or otherwise. This is because "race is not an idea but an ideology. It came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons" (Fields 1990, 101). Races are not clearly demarcated and bounded groups existing "out there" in the world, prior to the process of categorization. English perceptions of the Irish make it clear that the characteristics that we currently identify as important for establishing difference (i.e., "dark" skin) were not pre-existing in the world, simply waiting for someone (scientists, colonialists, travelers, Europeans) to come along and construct a hierarchy of value. Rather, what we "see" when we look at each other is profoundly mediated by social context. Whether we are looking at the source of discourses of degeneration or at impressions of biological characteristics, the end result is the same. An analysis that does not go beyond psychological impressions to consider the importance of social relations will do nothing more than produce theories that explain "not the facts . . . but the preconceptions of the author before he [sic] began his research" (Durkheim 1982, 38).

When and How Do Bodies Matter? Science, Sex, and Ideological Struggle

There is no doubt that the express aim of post-structuralist scholarship on Baartmann has been to critique racism and biological essentialism. The question must be asked, therefore, why the theoretical orthodoxy has reproduced the very assumptions it purports to destabilize? Part of the problem stems from the fact that, despite theorists' claims that race is a notion that is essentially ideological, their analyses fail actually to treat it as such. This fact becomes especially clear when we subject Gilman's most popular theoretical claim to a rigorous sociological analysis.

Writing almost a decade and a half after the article was first published, Z. S. Strother (1999, 38) observed that Gilman's assertion that Baartmann's sexual parts "serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century" remains its most frequently cited statement. This assertion, perhaps more than any other, was taken up without question (Haraway 1989; Crais 1992; Fausto-Sterling 1995; McClintock 1995; Pieterse 1995; Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Londa Schiebinger, for example, argued that "African women were seen as wanton perversions of sexuality. . . . They served as foils to the Victorian ideal of the passionless woman, becoming, as Sander Gilman has written, the central icon for sexuality in the nineteenth century" (1993, 159). Similarly, bell hooks also cites Gilman, writing that "Gilman documents the development of this image

. . . he emphasizes that it is the black female body that is forced to serve as an icon for sexuality in general" (1992, 62).

Although writing about ideology, these scholars fail to appreciate the very essence of ideology—what makes them so *ideological*—is the fact they are riddled with contradictions and marked by continuous conflicts and struggles over meaning. As Mannheim explained in *Ideology and Utopia*:

> It is with this clashing of modes of thought, each of which has the same claims to representational validity, that for the first time there is rendered possible the emergence of the question which is so fateful, but also so fundamental in the history of thought, namely, *how is it possible that identical human thought-processes concerned with the same world produce divergent conceptions of that world.* And from this point it is only a step further to ask: Is it not possible that the thought-processes which are involved here are not at all identical? May it not be found, when one has examined all the possibilities of human thought, that there are numerous alternative paths which can be followed? (1936, 9; emphasis mine)

Theorists who contend that there was a single ideology, central icon, or core image about blackness and sexuality in the nineteenth century make two mistakes. First, they discount the extent to which ideas about blackness were still emerging. Second, their analysis implies that this particular ideology magically escaped the types of conflicts that all other ideologies are subject to. Only by underplaying the existence and importance of ideological conflict can they sustain Gilman's argument that people from such widely different social locations as French aristocrats, English merchants, displaced peasants, gentlemen scientists, and factory workers held a singular and unified opinion about and image of "black" women and sexuality.

The available historical evidence strongly contradicts Gilman's claims about the alleged ideological unanimity of such diverse social actors. Historical sources demonstrate quite clearly that the issue of whether or not steatopygia was a general attribute of Khoikhoi women, and whether Baartmann was considered a typical example of a Khoikhoi person, remained open to debate. Fisher, who compiled a compendium of his journey to the Cape, noted that "there is something like symmetry in the person of a Hottentot, their limbs being neatly turned, but they are for the most part of a diminutive stature, and no just idea of them can be formed from the specimens seen in this country [England], particularly that singular character the Hottentot Venus" (1814, 8). William Burchell made a similar observation in his *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*. After describing a Khoikhoi woman with "a very large and protuberant behind," he hastened to add that this was not a general condition of the Khoikhoi people:

> The exhibition of a woman of this description, in the principal countries of Europe has made the subject well known to all those who are curious in such matters. . . . I ought not to allow this occasion to pass by without endeavoring to correct some erroneous notions. . . . It is not a fact that the whole of the Hottentot race is thus formed. Neither is there any particular tribe to which

> this steatopygia, as it may be called, is peculiar. Nor is it more common to the Bushman tribe than to other Hottentots. It will not greatly mislead if our idea of its frequency be formed by comparing it with the corpulence of individuals among European nations. (1822, 216)

It might be tempting to conclude that some people are simply more prescient observers than others are or, alternatively, that some people simply harbor less racial prejudice. Although important differences marked the standpoints of travelers in Africa versus pseudo-scientists and lay people in England, the access to a wider array of empirical evidence is not the only reason that opinions varied so widely. Rather, what these examples make clear is that ideologies about racial and sexual alterity display the same basic characteristics as other ideologies do. They are internally inconsistent, they are constantly subject to struggle, and they reflect the structural locations of their adherents.

Most studies of Baartmann, following Gilman, have focused their attentions on the role of science in establishing her sexual alterity (Haraway 1989; Wiss 1994; Fausto-Sterling 1995; McClintock 1995; Sharpley-Whiting 1999). However, because scholars have so readily accepted Gilman's claim that the mere sight of Baartmann produced a uniform and unvarying ideological response, few have noticed or been motivated to investigate the important differences between British and French representations of her. None have questioned Gilman's assertion that Baartmann's "genitalia and buttocks summarized her essence for the 19th century observer" (235). Thus, they have neither noticed nor analyzed Baartmann's relatively weak interpellation into British medical and scientific discourses as compared to French. However, as Fausto-Sterling observed (but did not analyze), "although a theater attraction and the object of a legal dispute about slavery in England, *it was only in Paris*, before and after her death, that Baartmann entered into the scientific accounting of race and gender" (1995, 33; emphasis mine).

A second key question that goes unremarked and unanalyzed is how and why Baartmann came to reside in Paris at all. Despite the importance of this move, most scholars, following Gilman's lead, do not take up the issue at all (Schiebinger 1993; Wiss 1994; McClintock 1995). Strother, for example, simply states that "Baartmann moved to Paris in 1814" (1994, 33). Likewise, Fausto-Sterling takes note of it only to comment that after 1814 she "somehow ended up in Paris" (1995, 29). However, Baartmann did not simply "move to" or "end up in" Paris. Writing to the *Morning Chronicle*, Baartmann's original captor, Henrik Cezar, explained that he quickly sold her to "an Englishman" because his "mode of proceeding at the place of public entertainment seems to have given offense to the Public" (23 October 1810). According to Baartmann's own testimony, she was subsequently abandoned in Paris "by another Englishman" and thus came to be the property of a showman of wild animals.

We might ask why a commodity of such value to the English, both commercially and ideologically, passed through so many hands before she had to be taken out of the country and abandoned. Why didn't British theaters of anatomy, schools of medicine, or museums jump at the chance to examine and display this bit of curiosity from their newest imperial outpost? Science was critical for rescripting conquest as both a necessary and essentially humanitarian act. Why, then, didn't British science make greater use of Baartmann's alterity?

It is important to note that at the time of Baartmann's exhibition in London, medical science was no less developed or commercialized than in France. There were many large medical hospitals and "theaters of anatomy" wherein the nongentlemanly members of the British scientific community earned their livelihoods. A large portion of these scholars combined medical practice with teaching as a form of economic support. Furthermore, the popularity of medical and anatomical lectures amongst the lay community was even more pronounced in Britain than it was in France. French scientists were employed by secular public institutions and wrote mainly for other scientists. In London, however, the line between science and show business was easily and often traversed. As Hays explained, "lectures on biological subjects could draw on another London resource in addition to the talent of the medical community. They could exploit London's position as the center of entertainment, spectacle, and display" (1983, 106).

The fact that Baartmann failed to arouse commensurate amounts of scientific interest in England and France illustrates my earlier point that social relations, rather than biological essences, are critical for determining what individuals see when they look at one another. I maintain that Baartmann represented far more in the European imagination than a collection of body parts. Indeed, closer examination of the furor that ensued in the wake of her exhibition demonstrates that what she represented varied (as ideologies are wont to do) according to the social and political commitments of the interested social actors. Baartmann's exhibition provoked varying and contradictory responses. These responses can be better understood if they are analyzed as part and parcel of larger debates over liberty, property, and economic relations, rather than seen as simple manifestations of the universal human fascination with embodied difference.

Despite the popularity of contemporary claims that Baartmann was seen "only in terms of her buttocks" (Wiss 1994, 31), a substantial portion of the British public actually saw her as representing much more. When many people looked at Baartmann, they saw not only racial and sexual alterity, but also a personification of current debates over the right to liberty versus the right to property. For many, Baartmann's captivity encapsulated the conflict between individual freedom and the interests of capital.

The contemporary debates over slavery provided the context to the Baartmann controversy, and it is within their parameters that it must be understood. Many individuals who opposed slavery on humanitarian grounds nevertheless were reluctant to infringe upon the property rights of slaveholders. Reformers also balked at ideas of personhood that had the potential to complicate the relationship between capital and "free" labor. There was "a wish to attack slavery but not to infringe upon legally acquired property rights or to question long term indenture or even service for life" (Malik 1996, 64). Thus, Lindfors incorrectly characterizes the legal battle that occurred over Baartmann's exhibition as "a classic confrontation between heated humanitarianism and commerce, between the abolitionist conscience and the entrepreneurial ideal, between love and money" (1985, 138). There is a clear connection between the legal furor over the exhibition and how the British envisioned incorporating the Cape into the British Empire.

It is important to note that the society that sued Henrik Cezar, Baartmann's captor, on her behalf was called "The African Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior of Africa" and sought to play a leading role in opening a new phase in the exploitation of the Continent. It was to this end that subscriptions were paid which

were then used to subsidize sending travelers and explorers to Africa. Thus, the pertinent contest was never *between* "love and money." Humanitarianism, as expressed in the actions of the African Association, served the interests of the landed and mercantile elite. These men were concerned with securing the global expansion of capitalist relations of production. Commercially minded men recognized the importance of Africa as a place where tropical products such as tea, coffee, tobacco, sugar, and rice, desired by the growing middle class market, might successfully be grown at less cost. They also saw Africa as a potential market for British manufactures.

High hopes were held out that the Cape Colony could be transformed to meet the objectives of both the merchant and landed elites. However, this transformation was contingent upon a proletarianization of the indigenous labor force. This proletarianization required that slavery, the existing system of labor relations, be overturned in favor of a capitalist legal order wherein the Khoikhoi would be legally "free" but more completely open to subjugation as laborers in the developing frontier economy (Keegan 1996). As John Philip, director of the London Missionary society, explained:

> By raising all the Hottentots of the colony . . . a new and extensive market would be created for British goods. We say nothing of the increased consumption of British manufactures . . . or the increase of our exports which would necessarily arise from the additional stimulus which would be given to the industry of the Hottentots by the increase of their artificial wants. (1828, 365)

Thus, it was no accident that the goals of progressively minded landed elites, the mercantile and commercial classes, and humanitarians coalesced so readily in the goals of the African Association. Despite the many points of disagreement between merchants, missionaries, and explorers over how it would be accomplished, most agreed that the Khoikhoi would eventually be proletarianized and made to understand the value (and responsibility) of self-commodification. Humanitarianism readily and easily embraced the cause of economic liberalization, particularly in the areas of productive and commercial relations. The rhetoric of anti-slavery (which provided a critical backdrop to the opposition to Baartmann's forced captivity) merged (almost) seamlessly with that of imperial expansion.

The discussions around the Khoikhoi at the Cape thus paralleled the legal furor over Baartmann's exhibition. The question of the ownership of labor power took center stage in both. The immediate concern of the African Association (which sued Baartmann's captor, Henrik Cezar, on her behalf) was to ascertain whether she owned her own labor. As Macauley stated in the affidavit filed on her behalf, his purpose was to determine "whether [Baartmann] was made a public spectacle with her own free will and consent or whether she was compelled to exhibit herself" (quoted in Strother 1999, 43). Those opposed to Baartmann's exhibition debated less about whether her confinement represented a moral blight than over whether she was owned by someone else, and hence subject to forced exhibition, or if she belonged to herself, and thus was acting freely. For example, the *Morning Chronicle* argued:

> The air of the British Constitution is too pure to permit slavery in the very heart of the metropolis, for I am sure you will easily discriminate between those beings who are sufficiently degraded to shew [*sic*] themselves for their own immediate profit where they act from their own free will and this poor slave. (12 October 1810)

Thus, in a number of ways, the Baartmann exhibition encapsulated in miniature the debates that were occurring over the labor more generally. Henrik Cezar, her brutal Dutch master, represented the old economic order at the Cape, based on enslavement, forced captivity, and despotism. The African Association represented the coming of a new colonial order based upon a "voluntary" commodification of the self and a "willing" capitulation to the dominant logic of capital.

I have explored the widely divergent actions and reactions of the African Association, British travelers, missionaries, and the British viewing public at such length to demonstrate that when Europeans looked at Sarah Baartmann, it was not that they saw *only* her buttocks. Although her body represented sexual alterity, that was not all it represented. Some observers looked at her and her captivity and "saw" a particular system of productive relations they wanted to overthrow. Others "saw" a new area of the world ripe for exploitation and a new way to exploit it. And still others looked and "saw" the aesthetic antithesis of themselves. Most probably saw a combination of these and more. Although the members of the African Association, no less than Cuvier, Cezar, and the hordes of British and French citizens who came to gawk at Baartmann's most intimate parts no doubt took notice of her difference and believed in some notion of white supremacy, it is a mistake to take their actions as expressions of a *single, trans-historical, and uni-dimensional* ideology. If that were the case, it would be impossible to explain why Baartmann's alterity led one group of social actors to fetishize her exhibition and another to call for its immediate cessation.

Baartmann's exhibition also makes clear that white supremacy was never the simple expression of color prejudices. Each group of social actors, whether its particular interest was in looking at Baartmann, dissecting her, or sending her home, had its particular brand of racialist ideology which was reflected in its political program. These political programs, in turn, reflected the social positions of their advocates. Thus, the only way French scientists (or any other group of social actors for that matter) could have imposed their exact understanding of Baartmann, black women, and black sexuality on any other group would have been if they could have transformed the lives and social relations of the relevant actors into exact replicas of their own.

Conclusion: Whose Bodies Matter?

Artist and scholar Jean Young (1997, 699) writes that Sarah Baartmann has been "re-objectified" and "re-commodified." Yvette Abrahams, a South African scholar, also argues that, "the genital encounter is not over. It may be seen in much recent scholarship on Sara Bartmann" (1997, 46). The question must be asked why *this* woman has been made to function in contemporary academic debates as *the* preeminent example of racial and sexual alterity. This question becomes even more compelling when we consider that Sarah Baartmann was one of thousands of people exhibited and transformed into medical spectacles during the course of the nineteenth century (Altick 1978; Corbey 1993;

Lindfors 1999). Examples abound of women with excessive hair (who were primarily of European and Latin American ancestry) who were exhibited in circuses and "freak shows." These women were not only believed to be the "missing links" between the human and animal worlds, but also hermaphrodite hybrids, caught between the male and female worlds (Bogdan 1988; Thomson 1997). However, none of these women (nor the category of excessively hairy women more generally) have been made to stand as "icons" of racial or sexual difference.

We might also return to the example of the Irish. Londa Schiebinger (1993, 156) maintains that "male skulls remained the central icon of racial difference until craniometry was replaced by intelligence testing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries." Nancy Stepan (1990, 43) has also argued that the systematic study and measurement of male skulls was "especially significant for the science of human difference and similarity." We might also add that nineteenth-century ethnologists speculated about the biological basis for the "effeminancy" of the Celtic male. As Curtis explains, "there was a curiously persistent and revealing label attached to the Irish, namely their characterization as a feminine race of people. This theme of Celtic femininity appears repeatedly" (1968, 61). Yet, to my knowledge, the Irish male skull has never had the dubious distinction of being "the central 19th century image for racial and sexual difference between the European and the Black." The fact that Irish male skulls have not been thus characterized reflects less about the available historical evidence than about scholars' abilities to free themselves from contemporary understandings about what, historically, has constituted a "black" experience. For if we compare the amount of ink spilled, the volume of studies done, and the number of corpses examined, it becomes apparent that Irish male skulls were of far more interest, and caused far more speculation about the nature of racial and gender differences, than steatopygious African backsides ever did.[2]

Some critics of post-foundationalist theories, like post-modernism and post-structuralism, have argued that they "simply appropriate the experience of 'Otherness' to enhance the discourse" (hooks 1994a, 424). The lacunae and lapses that mark much of the contemporary feminist scholarship on Baartmann make us pause and ask: *Is* this simply another case of what Margaret Homans identified as the tendency for feminist theory to make black women function as "grounds of embodiment in the context of theoretical abstractions" (Homans 1994)? Although some might argue that this is the case, this argument fails to consider the diverse strands within feminist theory and the long and intensely varied tradition of feminist thought and praxis. It also discounts the contributions of the many feminists of color that employ post-modernism and post-structuralism in their work (Spillers 1987; hooks 1994a; Carby 1999).

Sarah Baartmann's curious and problematic "theoretical odyssey" cannot simply be explained as stemming from a lack of theoretical "fit" between post-foundationalist theory and the historical experiences of African and African American women. Rather, the ways in which she has been constructed as a theoretical object highlight the inherent dangers in the deployment of any theory without due attention to historical specificity. In particular, it points to the problems that occur when race and gender are universalized and, thus, reified; or in other words, when "commonsense understandings of these categories as they exist in the United States are elevated to the status of social scientific concepts" (Loveman 1999, 894).

Baartmann's curious theoretical odyssey also points to the dangers of analyzing the construction and perception of human difference as primarily a product of inner psychological drives. Gilman's pronouncements about Baartmann (and the theoretical "industry" that emerged therefrom) would not have been possible had her exhibition not been largely abstracted from its political and historical context. It was this theoretical abstraction (coupled with a healthy amount of psychological determinism) that made it easier for scholars to momentarily forget that "blackness," as an ideological construction, could not possibly have inspired a singular and uniform response. Privileging psychological dispositions over social relations also allowed scholars to give Baartmann's corporeal alterity the power to produce history, while momentarily forgetting this alterity was, at the same time, a historical product. Thus, in the final analysis, the theoretical lapses of contemporary social scientists, rather than the actions of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientists, are the ones that threaten to succeed finally in transforming "the Hottentot Venus" into the central nineteenth-century icon for racial and sexual difference between the European and the black.

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1. Full citations for sources cited in this chapter are included in the Bibliography at the end of the book, page 215.

2. By Fausto-Sterling's estimate there were a mere seven articles published between 1816 and 1836 (including Cuvier and de Blainville's dissection reports on Baartmann) on the subject of Khoikhoi women and steatopygia. There was not a single book-length monograph. Compare this to the hundreds of monographs and articles, published both in Britain and in the United States, that used craniology to establish the racial inferiority and Negroid ancestry of the Irish Celt. These articles appeared in such journals as *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain* and *The Anthropological Review.*