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The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*

In 1810, amid public sensation, scandal, and debate, Saartjie (pronounced, in Afrikaans, Sar-key) Baartman, a member of the Khoi-San (Khoikhoi and San) peoples of South Africa, was put on near-nude public display in London and Paris. Ironically and perversely dubbed “The Hottentot Venus,” she became the main attraction and a thriving business for the London showmen who exhibited her. Baartman’s genitalia and the “abnormal” protruberance of her buttocks, or what was termed steatopygia, served as the central model for Black female “otherness” in the nineteenth century. To this day, Baartman’s preserved buttocks and genitalia are in a jar at the Musée de l’homme in Paris.1

Based on the nineteenth-century exhibition of Saartjie Baartman, the Obie Award-winning stage production *Venus*, written by Suzan-Lori Parks and directed by Richard Foreman, opened at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in May of 1996 to mixed reviews. Critics simultaneously described the work as “a protracted exercise in the obvious,”2 a “formidable experience: a gnarly but brilliant meditation,”3 and a production that, though it played to “small audiences, many of whom decamped before the final curtain,” was nevertheless “remarkable.”4 Suzan-Lori Parks’s authorship includes such noted works as *The American Play*, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, and the screenplay for the film *Girl 6*, produced and directed by Spike Lee. Darius Casey’s description of Parks’s work as a “non-naturalistic meditation on history, identity and culture,” a deconstruction of “both the mythic experience of Black America and the history of America” fits *Venus* well. But while presenting a “non-naturalistic meditation on history,” Parks’s historical deconstruction presents a fictitious melodrama that frames Saartjie Baartman as a person complicit in her own horrific exploitation; Parks depicts her as a sovereign, consenting individual with the freedom and agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of material gain.

This essay focuses on Parks’s representation of Saartjie Baartman as an accomplice in her own exploitation, presenting a contextualized reading of Parks’s play based on the historical documentation. My historicized reading furthers the discourse that considers the issues of power, choice, and agency. I will argue that a close examination of the circumstances connected with Baartman’s removal from the Cape and subsequent exhibition raises serious questions regarding what Parks has described as Baartman’s complicity in her own exploitation. Further, Parks’s portrayal of Saartjie Baartman draws on cultural images and stereotypes commonly used to represent Black woman in demeaning and sexually debased roles, the objectified opposition-
al “Other” measured against a white male “norm.”5 I will argue that Baartman was a victim, not an accomplice, not a mutual participant in this demeaning objectification, and Parks’s stage representation of her 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 mind set, and her mythic historical reconstruction subverts the voice of Saartjie Baartman.

In an interview, Parks explains her decision to construct Baartman as an accomplice and how this perspective relates to her own experiences:

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. (Williams C1)

In the quote, Parks describes Baartman as “multi-faceted,” then goes on to characterize her as “complicit,” as well as “vain, beautiful, [and] intelligent.” Parks also offers a reductionist argument that presents the struggle of Black people in America as a matter of the “white man down the street . . . giving [us] a hard time,” and she describes the attention that Blacks are often forced to pay to the “race issue” as “narrow.” Later in the interview, she characterizes Baartman as a “troubled woman, a sex object”—and states that the play Venus is about Baartman’s trials and tribulations as she moves through the world. But Baartman was a victim and not an accomplice, and the portrayal of her as complicit recapitulates the travesty of objectification or “Otherness” perpetrated by the nineteenth-century exhibition of Saartjie Baartman.

Racial and gendered “Otherness” is a significant part of what mainstream Western popular culture presents6 in stories of domination, violation, and the exploitation of women. At the same time these stories are presented, illusions are created that sexually objectified women are really liberated women who enjoy their status as sex objects, making them complicit in their own exploitation. Parks frames the scenario around Baartman (The Girl) in this regard: She is a liberated and sovereign individual, capable, willing, and with the authority to control her circumstances and make choices, as exemplified in the following example from the play:

The Girl . . . I’ve come here to get rich.
Im an exotic dancer. Very well known
at home.
My manager is at this very moment
securing us proper room.
We’re planning to construct a mint, he
and me together. (Parks 18)

In the following scene between
Baartman (The Venus) and Cuvier (The
Baron Docteur), Baartman is repeatedly portrayed as having control and options concerning her captivity, and enjoying her sexual exploitation, as the following example shows:

The Baron Docteur. You can’t stay here
forever you know.
. . . I’ve got a wife. You’ve got a home-
land and family back there.
The Venus. I don’t wanna go back inny
more.
I like yr company too much.
Besides, it was a shitty life . . . . (Parks
83)

Unsurprisingly, white male New
York theatre critics exalted Parks’s framing of Saartjie Baartman for its lack of societal indictment. New York Times critic Ben Brantley praised Parks for not “present[ing] Baartman as just an uncomprehending victim,” and he believed Venus to be at its “best when it drops its sweeping condemning historical perspective . . . . this woman is clearly an accomplice in her own humiliation” (C3). Likewise, critic Robert Brustein lauded Parks for “wisely avoid[ing] pushing sympathy
buttons” and for “portraying the humiliation of Blacks in white society without complaint or indictment,” and, incredibly, he framed the dramatic presentation of Baartman’s kidnap, nude exhibition, and sadistic exploitation as an “ interracial, inter-sexual and inter-cultural pageant” representing “a major advance for an integrated American theater” (29). Thus, Saartjie Baartman becomes twice victimized: first, by nineteenth-century Victorian society and, again, by the play Venus and its chorus of critics.

“Venus is about a woman who makes choices,” according to Parks (Casey interview), a theme depicted in the following passage from the play as Baartman (The Girl) is propositioned by two South Africans, The Brother and The Man:

The Girl. Gold, Sir?
The Girl. Dance?
The Girl. Gold.
The Brother. We’ll split it 50-50 . . . Half for me half for you. May I present to you: “The African Dancing Princess!”
The Girl. A Princess. Me?
. . . I would have a house. I would hire help.
. . . Do I have a choice? Id like to think on it.
The Brother.Whats there to think on?
Think of it as a vacation! 2 years of work take half the take. Come back here rich. It’s settled then.
The Man. Think it over. girl. Go on. Think it all over. (Parks 14-16)

Concepts of consent and choice are limited to non-subjugated individuals involved in free labor, and Baartman and her peoples were neither. During the time of Baartman’s removal from the Cape, the indigenous people of South Africa were being severely reduced by the military expeditions of the Dutch commandos and by European diseases. British traveler John Barrow found not “a single horde of independent Hottentots” (Chidester 58) and fewer than a score of individuals not in servitude of the Dutch. By the early nineteenth century the conquest of the peoples known as the Khoikhoi, Hottentot, and Bushmen was nearly complete. The few remaining survivors of this slaughter were dispersed throughout the colony, totally subjugated and forced to work as servants for the Dutch. Saartjie Baartman was one of the survivors in service of a South African Dutch settler, Peter Cezar; and Hendrik Cezar, thought to be Peter’s brother, brought her to London.

Once in London, Baartman was received amid great awe and speculation, and placed on exhibition in Piccadilly by Henrick Cezar to display her steatopygia or “abnormally” protruding buttocks, amid much speculation regarding her genitalia. Cezar described Baartman’s body as the “kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen” (qtd. in Altick 269), a statement which, as Rosemary Wiss notes, implies that the abnormal female body is normal among the Africans, and implying a form of pathology in African sexuality. The female body is here taken as the essential statement of feminine difference. Saartjie was exhibited based on this difference or pathology, but not without controversy and opposition. According to court testimony presented by the African Association, a group of upper-class Englishmen, the Association had every reason to believe that the unfortunate female in question was brought away from her own country without her consent, was kept here for exhibition without her consent, and that the appearance of compliance which she evinced was the result of menaces and ill-treatment. The object of these most humane and respectable Gentlemen was to release her from confinement, put her under proper protection while she remained here, and restore her to her country by the first conveyance that offered. (Altick 270)

Parks’s slippery interpretation of the historical record surrounding the
tragedy of “Venus” (Baartman) is in and of itself a tragedy when one considers that, as Brantley aptly observes, the play is at its “best when it drops its sweeping historical condemning perspective.” Parks’s blending of truth and fiction is both a distortion and an historical reconstruction, because Parks uses the distorted lens of gender and racial typecasting to portray Baartman. An example of this distortion can be seen in the comparison between Parks’s text and an eyewitness account of Baartman’s exhibition by Mrs. Charles Mathews at Piccadilly Street in London, who describes John Kemble’s reaction to Baartman:

“Poor, poor creature! ... very, very extraordinary, indeed .... Poor creature!” He minutely questioned the man about the state of mind, disposition, comfort, &c. of the Hottentot. ... I had observed that at the time Mr. Mathews entered and found her surrounded by some of our own barbarians, the countenance of the “Venus” exhibited the most sullen expression; but the moment she looked in Mr. Kemble’s face, her own became placid and mild—say she was obviously pleased. ... “Now, Mathews, my good fellow, do you know this is a sight which makes me melancholy. I dare say, now they ill-use that poor creature! Good God! how very shocking!”—and away he stalked, as if musing, and totally forgetting his companion until the moment of separation recalled his recollection. (qtd. in Altick 269)

In the play Venus, Parks offers a reconstructed representation of the eyewitness account which inverts the sense of the original:

Witness #2. ... She once handed my man a feather from her head. They’re said to bring good luck. A fight ensued. 3 men died. Uh little boy went mad. Uh woman lost her child. My man escaped with thuh feather intact. “Poor Poor creature!” “Very extraordinary indeed!”

“This is a sight which makes me melancholy!”
My husbands words exactly. He was standing at the window. I can see him now. And then he walked away from me, deep in thought, and then, totally forgetting his compassion, shouted loud: “Good God what butts!”

(rest)
Thuh shock of her killed him, I think .... (Parks 57)

Parks frames Saartjie Baartman as a person complicit in her own horrific exploitation.

Parks does not attempt to give agency to Baartman, but simply amplifies the satirical representations and caricatures made of her in the press, as this example of the court hearing from the play demonstrates:

Chorus. Dont push us, girl! We could lock you up for life!

Answer this:
Are you here of yr own free will or are you under some restraint?

The Venus. Im here to make a mint.
... After all I’ve gone through so far to go home penniless would be disgraceful. (Parks 62)

Based on Parks’s fictionalized presentation of Baartman, an assessment can easily be made of her as a woman who is “clearly an accomplice in her own humiliation.” An account at Piccadilly by Mrs. Mathews offers a radically divergent perspective:

One pinched her, another walked round her; one gentleman poked her with his cane; and one lady employed her parasol to ascertain that all was, as she called it, “nattal.” This inhuman baiting the poor creature bore with sullen indifference, except upon great provocation, when she seemed inclined to resent brutality. ... On these occasions it required all the authority of the keeper to subdue her resentment. At last her civilized visitors departed .... (qtd. in Altick 269)

Parks’s play Venus feeds the audience a steady stream of domination and eroticized humiliation, as the seminude 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. Venus’s “love interest,” The Baron Docteur, is ironically played by a Black actor. This attempt at multicultural casting by director Richard Foreman suggests that Black men are the primary exploiters of Black women, further distancing white males from a recognition of Baartman’s (i.e., the Black woman’s) exploitation and dehumanization. In the play, The Baron Docteur, whose character is based on that of Georges Cuvier—who dissected Baartman upon her death, detailing her genitalia and buttocks—plays out a “love” scenario on a giant, vertical white satin bed amid his own spasms of uncontrollable lust. He stops probing the Venus’s monstrous prosthetic posterior only to turn away and masturbate:

The Baron Docteur. Don’t look! Don’t look at me.
Look off somewhere
Eat yr chockluts.
Eat em slow
thats it
Touch yrself.
Good.

(He’s masturbating. He has his back to her. He sneaks little looks at her over his shoulder. He cumms.)

The Venus. Whyd you do that?
The Baron Docteur. Im polite
The Venus. Love me?
The Baron Docteur. Do I ever. (Parks 83-84)

In this scene, as in many others in the play Venus, the sexual coercion of Saartjie Baartman is assiduously eroticized. Parks’s stage representation in Venus creates the illusion that Baartman was a free and liberated woman who enjoyed her status as a sex object and/or was in complete denial of such status altogether. But historical accounts contradict this representation.

The exhibition of the near nude African woman aroused much interest and sensation, as the numerous caricatures, newspaper articles, and limericks written about her depict. Letters of protest also appeared in the Morning Chronicle and the Morning Post.

According to the November 24, 1810, edition of The London Times, a Mr. M’Cartney, member of the African Association, petitioned the court for Baartman’s “release” and to ascertain whether or not her keeper, Cezar, had sexual access to her. One member of the society who had visited Baartman’s exhibit presented an affidavit that described Saartjie as enclosed in a cage on a platform three feet above the floor and indicated that, “on being ordered by her keeper, she came out, and that her appearance was highly offensive to delicacy . . . . 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” (qtd. in Altick 270). From her heavy sighs and her appearance of anxiousness and uneasiness, M’Cartney was convinced that she was totally under Cezar’s control. But M’Cartney reported that he was unable to converse with her. A Dutch-speaking visitor questioned Baartman, asking if “she had any relations in the Cape,” if “she felt herself comfortable here,” and “if she wanted to go back to Africa.” To these questions, “she did not answer” (Altick 270). Baartman’s silence is understandable, considering her position as a captive in London and the genocide committed against her people by Dutch settlers in South Africa.

Some days later, during a three-hour examination conducted by representatives of the court and the attorneys for her “keepers,” her silence was transformed into “assurances” that she was “happy” in England, that she had two Black boys to attend to her, that she went out in a coach for two or three hours on Sundays and, finally, that “the man who ‘shews’ her never comes till she is just dressed, and then only ties a ribbon round her waist.” The attorney-general ruled that Baartman was “plainly not under restraint,” and added that she was pleased at the prospect of receiving one-half of the profits made from her exhibition,
which she seemed perfectly to understand. The ill effect of taking her away from her “keepers,” the court ruled, would be “to let her loose to go back again.” A warning against indecency was given to her “keepers” and the case was dismissed (Altick 270).

But there is something forced and contrived about this discourse that essentially renders Baartman mute. In circumstances where the powerful suppress the powerless, a discourse of dominance evolves—or what Edward Said, in his Foucauldian analysis in Orientalism, terms the “strategies of power and subjugation, inclusion and exclusion, the voiced and the silenced” (Brantlinger 176). Discourse is power, and this power is self-validating. The power over Baartman was created and maintained by a monopoly on discourse, as the account of the court hearing makes clear. Here, Baartman’s voice finds representation almost entirely by silence. The silent “voice” of Baartman is misread, interpreted as acquiescence in this exchange or “discourse of domination.” Baartman is never allowed to speak on her own behalf, her voice interpreted by translators. Hence, the desire for freedom is silenced by a system that views Baartman as incapable of being a moral person by Victorian standards and by the decree of the courts (Wiss 17).

Parks, in her play, frames this scenario as complicity, completely ignoring the issues of power and control, as shown in the following dialogue between Baartman (The Venus) and the Chorus of the Court:

**Chorus.** Simple questions first.
. . . Were you ever beaten?
Did you like it was it good?
Do you wanna go home?
If so, when? If so, when?
. . .

**The Venus.** The Venus Hottentot is unavailable for comment.

**Chorus.** . . . Answer this:
Are you here of yr own free will
or are you under some restraint?

The Venus. Im here to make a mint.
. . . After all I’ve gone through so far
to go home penniless would be disgraceful. (Parks 62)

The play revisits and subverts this court ruling:

**Chorus of The Court.** Hear ye hear ye hear
All rise and hear our ruling:
It appears to The Court
that the person on whose behalf this suit was brought
lives under no restraint.
Her exhibition sounds indecent
but look at her now, she’s nicely dressed.
Its clear she’s got grand plots and plans
to make a mint by playing outside the bounds so that we find
Her persons much depraved
But she has the right to make her mark
just like the Dancing Irish Dwarf.
At this time the Court rules
Not to rule. (Parks 64)

Neither Parks’s Venus nor the London court recognizes the unequal power relationship, as Saartjie, a kidnapped, colonized captive, is forced to speak on her own behalf against her “keepers,” who have assumed absolute control over her body and person, subjecting her to coercion, trading her along with stacks of animal skins, displaying her in a cage, and forcefully subduing her at will. Saartjie Baartman was represented as being able to “speak free from all alarm” and avow her “full consent,” and the case was evaluated on the possibility of her receiving income from the exhibition of her body. An agreement of monetary exchange between she and her captors is unlikely, because under Dutch occupation of South Africa no contract among Hottentots was considered valid unless made before a magistrate because Hottentots were considered subhuman and “incapable of managing their own concerns.” But because of her alleged “consent,” Baartman was inconsistently coded as incapable of being a “fully moral person,” while simultaneously represented as “lowest on the great chain of being” by the European male bourgeoisie and the scientific community (Wiss 18).
Debates over slavery in the early part of nineteenth-century Victorian England represented the institution as a direct extension of African “savagery” (Brantlinger 198), and Wiss states that this displacement resulted in Africans being “re-coded as responsible for slavery by their participation in the slave trade” (18). That is, the victims were blamed for their own victimization, and what could be termed Europeans’ “darkest impulses” were projected onto Africans. Within this conceptualization, Baartman, who existed under the most extreme circumstances of physical subordination, was positioned as a participant in her own enslavement—in Wiss’s words, “ambiguously situated—judged by the criterion of the knowing rational self, but without the authority of determining her own position” (19). With her subjugators’ sexual exploitation of her framed in patriarchal and imperialist terms as “compliance,” her transformation from victim to active collaborator was complete.

In London the court hearing Baartman’s testimony was mediated through and translated by her captors, essentially rendering her silent, and this silence was interpreted by a nineteenth-century London court, which never once addressed her by name, as “consent.” Baartman became the ultimate “Other,” not only owned and exploited but mediated and rendered powerless through a constructed European discourse that viewed her as primitive, bestial, and irrational. In a case of double victimization, she was treated by Ellenborough’s court as a free person in enough control over her circumstances to express her own will and desires, but at the same time a primitive incapable of making decisions regarding her own welfare.

After the exhibition in London, Saartjie Baartman became a “sensation” of the English provinces. In September of 1814 she was taken to Paris, where an animal trainer exhibited her daily, from eleven in the morning until ten at night for fifteen months in a shed in the Rue Neuve. Later, she was abandoned in Paris by her English “keeper” to a showman of wild animals, and then abandoned again (Wiss 23). By November of 1815 she had grown desperately ill, and her owners were unable to continue her exhibition. But scientists were still interested in her. French comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier, despite the gravity of her illness and predicament, commissioned a painting of her in the nude at the Jardin du Roi for “scientific” purposes. On December 29, 1815, Saartjie Baartman’s life came to a tragic end. “She was not rich,” reports Rosemary Wiss, “not in the Cape and certainly no less subject to prurient gazing in death than in life” (26).

Cuvier sought and received official permission to dissect her at the Jardin du Roi, where he had her entire body cast in plaster, and her genitals and anus “moulded separately in wax” (Wiss 26). But the cause of Baartman’s death at the age of twenty-six incurred much less attention than her life. Cuvier indicated that he might be willing to “ascribe her death to an excess of drink to which she gave herself up during her last illness” (qtd. in Wiss 26). And Richard Altick’s reading of contemporary reports states that

> she possessed, in addition to the fondness for trinkets, customarily attributed to savages, an even greater one for the bottle. Thus debilitated, she was in no condition to fight the smallpox, which, in collaboration with a doctor who mistakenly treated her for “a catarrh, a pleurisy, and dropsy of the breast,” killed her . . . (272)

Wiss states that Saartjie Baartman was perceived as “naturally degenerating the way ‘savages’ customarily do when corrupted . . . her own body destroyed her life, not contagion from those around her, or her [lack of] medical care” (28). “Misdiagnosed,” Baartman was not treated for smallpox, an acute, highly infectious, and deadly disease characterized by widespread eruption of pimples that blister and produce pus. Smallpox decimated
indigenous populations such as native Americans and the Khoi-San of the South African cape, when it was introduced into those areas.

But Parks does not present this scenario, or the effect that it had on Saartjie Baartman. Instead, Parks ends Venus as it began, with the death of Baartman. Parks overshadows white male complicity in Baartman’s death by framing the scenario around Baartman’s illness and death as an uncaused misfortune, even implicating Baartman, “a shameless sinner,” rather than Georges Cuvier, Alexander Dunlop, Lord Ellenborough, Peter Cezar, and Hendrick Cezar, et al., and the wrongs perpetrated by them:

All DRUM DRUM DRUM DRUM
Hur-ry Hur-ry Step in Step in
(rest)
The Venus Tail end of the tale for
there must be uh end.
Is that Venus, Black Goddess was
shameless, she sinned, or else
Completely unknowing thuh God
fearin ways, she stood showing
her ass off in her iron cage.
When Death met Love Death deathd
Love and left Love tuh rot
Au naturel end for thuh Miss
Hottentot.
Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in
heaven, yes, that it
Loves corpse stands on show in muse-
um. Please visit. (Parks 130)

Here Parks renders invisible the sadism, racism, misogyny, and exploitation perpetrated on the Khoi-San woman because of her physical difference.

The social construct of the white prostitute, the “Other,” also came to represent the embodiment of deviant female sexuality. The icon of the Hottentot and the body of the white prostitute, both with “oversized” buttocks, were inextricably linked in a fusion of race, gender, and social class. The iconography also served the need for a subhuman African Black. If slavery were to be defended and if Black sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be proof that Blacks were a separate (lower) race.

The treatment of Black women’s bodies in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States is considered the foundation upon which Black women’s commodification and objectification is based, and the racist iconography of the sexuality of Black women’s bodies emerged from these contexts. Representing Black women as the “Other,” or outside the “mythical” norm in terms of physicality and alleged sexual behavior, served to legitimize the commodification of the Black woman and to mask contradictions in social relationships (Collins 71). As “Others,” Black people could be marginalized and affixed to negative characteristics, in opposition to and inferior to those of whites. The positioning of Black women as the “ultimate other” allows the overall ideology of domination and race, gender, and class oppression to endure. Stereotypes and myths about Black women support the underpinnings of gender-specific “Otherness” and maintain a system of oppression based on oppositional difference. In this respect, rape becomes an impossibility, given the myth of the Jezebel or Black women’s rampant and deviant sexuality. This ideological justification of sexual violence and rape allows the entire history of Black women’s sexual subjugation and exploitation, including sexual assault during slavery, domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion, to be denied.

Therein lies a central premise of Western psychology and psychoanalytic theory that much of what determines a person’s behavior is located within the internal psyche or the unconscious. Parks’s representation of the Venus or Saartjie Baartman tells us little about Baartman. Critic Robert Brustein is quite correct in his critique of the play; it does without argument portray “the humiliation of Blacks in white society without complaint or indictment” (29). Whether or not this portrayal represents a “major advance for integrated American theater” (29) is entirely another issue indeed.
1. The exploitation of and controversy over Saartjie Baartman has not ended. Sartrical prints of her published during her “tour” of London and Paris can still be purchased. Three jars labeled une nègresse, une pèruvienne, and la Vénus Hottentotte contain the dissected genitalia of three Third World women at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. French anatomist Georges Cuvier dissected Baartman upon her death in 1815. He, along with pathologist Henri de Blainville, had two intentions in their written autopsy published in 1817: to make a comparison of a female of the lowest human species to the highest ape, the orangutan, and to describe the anomalies of the Hottentot’s genitalia. The Griquas, a South African tribe that inhabited the area long before the Zulus, Xhosas, and other indigenous tribes, accuse the Musée of exploiting Baartman’s remains and want them returned in order to establish tribal legitimacy in South Africa. Museum officials claim they were removed from display more than two decades ago, but in 1995 they were brought out for a display depicting the racist portrayal of aboriginal peoples in nineteenth-century Europe. Museum officials say they might consider returning the remains if the request is high-level and diplomatic. The Griquas are lobbying the French government.

2. In his dramatic review of Venus, critic Ben Brantley describes the play as lost in “the singular limbo land of Richard Foreman,” “unusually accessible,” and “strangely flat.” It is at its best when “it drops its sweeping condemning historical perspective” and focuses on the personal. He adds that Venus is “rich in dramatic potential and social reverberations” and goes on to praise Parks for presenting Baartman as not “just an uncomprehending victim . . . [but] clearly an accomplice in her own humiliation” (C3).

3. John Lahr, in his dramatic review of Venus, describes the production, then goes on to describe the play as a “well-directed, opaque tale” and the play’s tragedy as the “Venus Hottentot’s inability to understand the role she has played in her own oppression” (98).

4. Robert Brustein believes that Venus “needs editing,” but is an “interracial, inter-sexual and inter-cultural pageant represent[ing] a major advance for an integrated American theater.” He believes that Parks “wisely avoided pushing sympathy buttons” and lauds her for managing to “portray the humiliation of [B]lacks in white society without complaint or indictment” (29).

5. Rosemary Wiss states that the European perception of difference was partially informed by exhibits of indigenous people brought back to Europe by colonial scientists and entrepreneurs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She sites Derrida’s and Foucault’s respective ideas of those depicted as different being the “other” and subsequently constructed and devalued with regard to their difference from white European male body types. These “others” are represented in terms of pathology. Prevailing scientific discourse characterized Baartman’s “race” as hovering on the border between animal and human, based on the emergent scientific classifications based on race and difference. Baartman’s “abnormal” body also implied a form of pathology in African sexuality.

6. Black female characters in the mass popular culture of theater, film, television, and print are too often represented as stereotypes—portrayed in demeaning, sexually debased, and exploitative roles. Feminist critic Patricia Hill Collins further asserts that this iconography of Black women as “stereotypical mammys, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mamas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women’s oppression” (67). Exploitative stereotypes such as these present a complete and extreme historical reconfiguring of the representation of Black women through Western popular culture and can be seen as an attempt on the part of white society to justify its dehumanization and exploitation of Black women by making these demeaning images appear to be “natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (Collins 67).

7. According to Rosemary Thompson, Baartman’s exhibition became “inextricably linked to the cultural productions of gender and race” (70). Baartman was cast in opposition to the “ideal” representation of gender and sexuality, as a deviation from the “norm” which was represented by the “cult of true womanhood” and exemplified by social constructions of white femininity. To the Western mind Baartman’s body signified savagery and physiological inferiority, the antithesis of femininity. This obsession with physiological difference and racial classification served white supremacy by legitimizing colonial expansion and racial exploitation. Thus the “ape-like” body of the female Hottentot was projected to the lower dark fringes of humanity, where it could justifiably be appropriated for the needs of colonialism and presented as a spectacle—the “Other” that is owned, exploited, mediated, and subsequently silenced by white males of the “civilized” culture of Europe (Thompson 71).

8. The cultural interplay between entertainment and the emergent scientific discourses of the West located Baartman as the “true missing link,” the lowest of the low on the “great chain of being.” The Systema Naturae, introduced by Carl Linnaeus while exploring the flora, fauna, and humans of the Cape, declared natural science as the science of classification. Human beings were divided into four distinct groups in terms of complexion, physiology, and disposition: Americanus, red and choleric; Asiaticus, yellow and melancholy; Afer, black and phlegmatic; and Europaeus, white and sanguine.
The infant science of ethnology saw “primitives” or “savage” races as prime raw material.

9. Sander L. Gilman states that, by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of Black females (and males) became the icon for deviant sexuality, and that nineteenth-century physicians and sociologists linked the iconography of the two “seemingly unrelated female images—the icon to the Hottentot female and the icon of the prostitute” (225)—two models of sexual deviancy, with prostitutes having a “peculiar plumpness” and excessive weight. Further, he explains, case studies by the student of sociology Abele de Blasio in the early 1900s of the steatopygia, or the perceived protuberance of the buttocks of the prostitute, meant that prostitutes were, quite literally, Hottentots. Thus the image of the prostitute in the late nineteenth century merged with the perception of the Black, based on the perceived physical difference and primitiveness of the primary (labia) and secondary (buttocks) sexual organs. These “primitive qualities” of the Black female became those of the prostitute.

Works Cited


