Venus and White Desire

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Suzan-Lori Parks’s play Venus (1996) provides a springboard for investigations about a number of issues and topics and offers a template for exploring the black body, black sexuality, Victorianism, and the borders between the human and the animal. How do the politics of race and sexuality intersect, and how do the categories of human and bestial mediate through shifting domains of subjectivity? How do Western notions of blackness and otherness traverse the eddies of white desire? What role does scientific knowledge play in the construction of sexuality, on the one hand, and the organization of desire, on the other? These are all questions that one confronts upon reading Venus. Parks’s play opens the door to reflections on the various intersections of race, sexuality, scientific knowledge, and desire within a significant moment of the Western imperial project.

A figure of historical value provided Parks with the predominant impetus for writing the play: Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman, a young woman of Khoisan origin from the Cape of present-day South Africa who was taken to London in 1810. Baartman had a feature known as steatopygia, that is, she possessed protuberant buttocks. So pronounced was this aspect of her physique that she was transformed into an object of commercial exploitation whereby her body was commodified, fetishized, and exoticized. In exploring the historical significance of the figure of Baartman, playwright Parks not only exposes tropes of commodification, fetishization, and exoticization, but also the ever-shifting states of infrahumanity that the black subject in the era of classical colonialism was forced to negotiate.

In Parks’s play (as in some other contexts), Baartman is known as the Venus Hottentot. At the beginning of the play, the legendary dimensions of Baartman’s life are quickly foregrounded: a character says of her, “wild Female Jungle Creature. Of singular anatomy. Physiqued in such a backward rounded way that she outshapes all others.” Another observes,

thuh gal’s got bottoms like hot air balloons.
Bottoms and bottoms and bottoms pilin up like 2 mountains.
Magnificent. And endless.
An ass to write home about.
Well worth the admission price.
On display here are of course the aforementioned tropes of fetishization and commodification. And we are also provided with intimations about the possible causes of Baartman’s death, which are directly linked to these tropes. We learn that she died either through overexposure or by liquor.

In life and in death, Baartman was not free, and another important trope that Venus explores is the tyranny of possession. She was exhibited naked in Europe without her consent and through deception. She was constantly otherized in order to be represented: “Coco candy coloured and dressed all in au naturel she likes when people peek and poke.” Through the strategy of deceit, it was implied that she would be the “African Dancing Princess.” A duplicitous business speculator tells her that England is “a big town. A boat ride away. Where the streets are paved with gold.” When she is called a princess, she is confounded by disbelief. Again, we are reminded of the violence of (mis)representation when she says “I’m shy,” when only a few moments before a character has announced that “she likes when people peek and poke.” The concerted efforts to transform Baartman into the “African Dancing Princess” disregard the fact of her stated shyness and also the obvious innocence of her sexuality. Through the inexorable dynamics of (mis)representation and commodification, Baartman’s sexuality acquires a misdirected self-awareness. In addition, through the tyranny of the look, the force of the external eye, Baartman’s sexuality and self-consciousness attain further levels of articulation that are not free from the fundamental violence that motivated them in the first instance.

Baartman’s innocence and naïveté are demonstrated by Parks’s text in several ways:

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

Here, Baartman assumes that she will make a fortune displaying her skills as a dancer. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, the objectification of her sexuality is at issue here, and the profits that accrue from such commodification end up in the hands of the financial speculators who “discovered” her. A particular moment encapsulates the distance between—or dependence of—the speculator’s objectification of her sexuality and her lack of full awareness about it: “Tomorrow I’ll buy you the town. For now lift up yr skirt. There. That’s good.” In some instances, objectification is not always directly linked to overt sexualization: “You smell. So smelly yll make em go running. Good God. Heres a bucket and a brush. Take a bath its yr big day today.”

What can be regarded as a recontextualization of sadomasochism (S&M), with its attendant tropes of bondage, is also evident. A show woman in England
whose business it is to display exoticized and otherized black bodies, says “Ive 2 ladies here joined at thuh lip. Bornd that way they’ll die that way mano a mano lip tuh lip.” The theme of bondage differs from the contemporary S&M scene because, as a piece of constructed reality, its violence is one-dimensional, and also because it lacks both irony and the freedom of invention: this is a form of colonial violence that is incapable of self-reflexivity.

One encounters here a crucial problematic at the heart of the human/animal dichotomy. The show woman calls her objects/subjects of display “ladies,” and yet they are kept in actual bondage, exactly as would be animals. It is as if at the moment of sexualization or sexual arousal the women are humanized, though neither before nor after that moment. There is a constant movement from the human to the animal and back, such that the black subject of sexual objectification is persistently exposed to the pressures of the white gaze and desire. Thus the spirals of white desire determine both the humanity and the animality of the black subject. In addition, the conflicting notions of Western and non-Western forms of beauty are foregrounded:

Early in the present century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the appellation of The Hottentot Venus. The year 1810. With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said by those to whom she belonged to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots.

This passage captures most of the central themes of Parks’s play: the black subject in classical coloniality and her/his conflicting status; the violence and tyranny of possession, fetishization, commodification, aesthetics, and totalitarian knowledge. Again, the oscillation of the black subject between humanity and animality is evident. Because black aesthetics do not conform to Western notions of beauty, the black subject is often thrust into the realm of animality, but, given the very undulations of white desire, the existential status—animal/human—of the black subject oscillates back and forth. In many ways, Parks demonstrates how the black subject more generally in the era of classical colonialism is still a creation of the spirals of white desire. The black subject’s status, like Baartman’s, waives between the polarities of humanity and animality.

Baartman’s (re)invention of the boundaries between humanity and animality is constantly reaffirmed throughout the play, as when the show woman exclaims,

turn to the side, Girl. Let em see! Let em see! What a fat ass, huh?! Oh yes, this girls thuh Missin Link herself. Come on
inside and allow her to reveal to you the Great and Horrid Wonder of her great heathen buttocks.

Baartman is available for public display from 10 AM to 10 PM every day from Monday to Saturday. When she asks the show woman for her share of profits accruing from the public display of her body, she is rebuffed and threatened with gang rape. Eventually, Baartman is seen as a public menace:

the Court intends to interfere and receive her immediately under its protection; for the purpose of restoring her to her own friends and her own country so that she not become a burden to the state and contribute to our growing social ills.

While this passage criminalizes Baartman, it also manages to recognize her humanity. But almost immediately the status of her uncertain and problematic humanity is again questioned and undermined:

She was surrounded by many persons, some females! One pinched her, another walked round her; one gentleman poked her with his cane; uh lady used her parasol to see if all was, as she called it, natural.
In death, Baartman is both exoticized and rigorously medicalized:

**The Baron Docteur**
The height, measured after death,
was 4 feet 11 and ½ inches.
The total weight of the body was 98 pounds avoirdupois.
In the following notes my attention is chiefly directed
to the more perishable soft structures of the body.
The skeleton will form the subject of future examination.

External characteristics:
The great amounts of subcutaneous fat were
quite surprising. On the front of the thigh for instance
fat measured 1 inch in thickness.
On the thighs reverse the measure of fat was
4 inches deep.
On the buttocks proper, rested the fatty cushion, a.k.a.
*Steatopygia* the details of which I’ll relate in due course.

The same doctor who clinically medicalizes Baartman in death ignores
professional ethics through having carnal relations with her: “OK OK I
confess: I wanna keep my Sweets all to myself. I’m very greedy.”

The doctor isn’t the only character in the play who harbors lustful feel-
ings for Baartman, who at one point reveals that his colleagues in the
academy “touch” her behind his back. Again, the human/animal dichotomy
is complicated by what appear to be deep relations of affect and carnality,
which compel a reconsideration of, an ever-shifting split between, bestiality
and humanity:

**The Venus**
Love me?

**The Baron Docteur**
I do.
Ah, this is the life.

Within the context of extreme Victorianism, Baartman’s status among
the family of the *human* is never secure. In this regard, race is a crucial
factor. The immense protuberance of Baartman’s buttocks, which had ini-
tially been reconfigured as a defining mark of animality, also becomes a
site of excessive exoticization and eroticization, which leads in turn to sexual
congress and a form of humanization through intimacy. (It is difficult to
imagine what would have occurred had Baartman been a male figure.) Yet
Baartman’s humanity is never stable, as its status is always defined by the vagaries of white desire. Her humanity also depends on the ever-shifting dynamics of the microphysics of power. Who determines what is human or humanity? Which categories of beings belong or do not belong to a particular conception of humanity? Can we imagine a black male with a member of mythological proportions having sexual congress with white females during Sarah Baartman’s era? That would be difficult to conceive, but the hierarchies of race and gender go a long way in determining what is taken to be human and which beings are said to make up humanity.

Michel Foucault’s work on the microphysics of power and human sexuality is relevant at many levels, but it encounters a fundamental problem when applied to a scene or conceptual space fractured by the violence of race. This is because the concept of race and the brutal hierarchies it engenders call into question the very category of a universal humanity. Foucault’s analyses of human sexuality do not problematize the human/animal dichotomy or the idea of universal humanity; they work only at a certain level, interrogating an assumed universal sexuality but not quite at the level where sexuality is experienced and articulated at an assumed site of infrahumanity (where race and the intersections between the human and the animal intersect). Instead, Foucault demonstrates how the violence of the sexual act disrupts forms of social order; hence arises the need to constantly police and regulate it.

The strategies that Victorian sexuality employed to police and regulate the sexual act were not brutal mechanisms of repression but subtle conventions of containment. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (1990) explains that

a single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents’ bedroom.

The theologians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sexuality were concerned not only about the regulation of sexuality but also the production of discourse (*épistémé*) pertaining to the sexual field:

First, there was medicine, via the “nervous disorders”; next psychiatry, when it set out to discover the etiology of mental illnesses, focusing its gaze on “excess,” then onanism, then frustration, then “frauds against procreation,” but especially when it annexed the whole of the sexual perversions as
its own province; criminal justice, too, which had long been concerned with sexuality, particularly in the form of “heinous” crimes and crimes against nature.

Within the domain of the human, Western culture also produced forms of juridical constraints for the policing of sexuality: canonical law, Christian law, and civil law. With the entry of various forms of legislation into the field of sexuality, certain aspects of the field were criminalized:

On the list of grave sins, and separated only by their relative importance, there appeared debauchery (extramarital relations), adultery, rape, spiritual or carnal incest, but also sodomy, or the mutual “caress.” As to the courts, they could condemn homosexuality as well as infidelity, marriage without parental consent, or bestiality. What was taken into account in the civil and religious jurisdictions alike was a general unlawfulness. Doubtless acts “contrary to nature” were stamped as especially abominable, but they were perceived as an extreme form of acts “against the law.”

In Foucault’s view, the elaborate regulatory procedures and mechanisms led to a hysterization of women’s bodies, a pedagogization of children’s sex, a socialization of procreative behavior, and a psychiatrization of “perverse” pleasure.

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How does the concept of sovereignty play out in Baartman’s own drama of sexuality and existence? Within the context of colonial England and France, she is denuded of sovereignty and kept in a cage like an animal. In Hobbesian times, Foucault explains,

the sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring.

Stripped of personal liberty, Baartman is thrust into an essentially Hobbesian epoch by a Victorianism paradoxically meant to spell the beginning of sexual modernity. So, apart from straddling an inconstant divide between humanity and animality, a particular tussle between modernity and pre-modernity plays itself out as the inscription of Hobbesianism within the heart of Victorian sexual modernity. The era of “biopower”—defined as the
right of a sovereign or such constituted authority to decide who must die and who might live—introduced concerns
centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body.

How can the disciplining of Baartman's body be interpreted within the sphere of biopower? First, even when socioeconomic modes of organization sought to enforce the docility of the body for the purposes of capital, there was a concurrent trend to undermine the power of the sovereign, at precisely the time when individual rights and liberties and their accompanying concepts were being expanded. It is all right for Baartman's body to be made amenable to economic exploitation, but it is not acceptable to grant her the rights that accrue to the individual within the context of modernity. So a powerful process of selectivity is at play across a series of sites: the exhibitions that feature the public display of her body; the market as a principle of economic organization; the domestic context in which she conducts amorous relations with the doctor; and, finally, the contexts in which her human and animal attributes are debated and problematized. At each of these various sites, Baartman's humanity is sometimes emphasized over her assumed animality, and vice versa.

By extension, the intersection of race and sexuality also proves to be exceedingly problematic in the drama of Baartman:

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, "biologizing," statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement (peuplement), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the body and ensuring the triumph of the race.

The doctor who elects to have carnal relations with Baartman undermines the above racial conception of sexuality. He fails in his duty to ensure the purity of the race, and he also transgresses the sexual boundary that separates
the human from the bestial. He commits a grave racial blunder, and he also carries out—according to the prevailing sexual morality of the time—an act of sexual bestiality. In other words, he is a doubly anomalous character.

When Baartman becomes pregnant, just how deep and sincere his love for her is becomes apparent:

_The Baron Docteur_

God. Is there anything we can do about it.
Ive a wife. A career.
A reputation. Is there anything
we can do about it we together in
the privacy of my office.
Ive got various equipments in here
we could figure something out.

For the doctor, once Baartman has crossed the line that divides the human and the beast, her fundamental _humanity_ becomes difficult to shake off or ignore. In having carnal relations with her, he creates a very human problem which in the realm of gross animality does not quite exist. Animals do not agonize in the way humans do about the consequences of copulation. Animals do not procure abortions for unwanted pregnancies. Animals do not problematize notions of personal integrity. The demands of survival and the exigencies of the flesh rarely move beyond the level of pure instinct in the animal realm. So, by transgressing boundaries of sexuality, the doctor undermines the artificial _human/animal_ dichotomy that prejudice had erected around the figure of Baartman. In a way, a base form of desire exoticizes her, while creating a dual approach to viewing her. A colonial kind of desire, through a rather curious gesture, robs Baartman of basic humanity _via_ a fractured and skewed lens of sexuality. Her sexuality is objectified and commodified by the innocence of its initial lack of awareness and also by white desire, which through its paroxysms unsettles the artificial categories of white rationality.

Much as the doctor disrupts the accepted social and sexual order, he contributes significantly to the _rehumanization_ of Baartman by his very acts of sexual transgression. In this manner, he abandons the prison house of Victorianism for a certain emancipatory postmodern ethic. And even with her assumed drawbacks of pre-modernity, Baartman still shares in this ethic, which also has the makings of a form of aesthetics. Sexual congress between the doctor and Baartman undermines the schema that identifies her as an _animal_. Furthermore, even the scandal of her possible pregnancy can only be read, conceived, and made meaningful within the category of the _human_.

In a different way, Baartman is also anomalous. She is deemed to exist at the level of pure animality, yet she is supremely capable of expressing refined
emotions of affect. She fully understands the institution of matrimony and its social power, just as she appreciates the intricacies, bliss, and dangers of amorous situations. In essence, the metaphysical construction of the separate conceptions of human and bestial unravels. Baartman undermines that metaphysic through the elaborateness of her speech, her dreams, and her expressions of affect, and also by a certain understanding of the logic of capital. Surely, these attributes elevate her above the merely bestial: the constructed categories of human and bestial which are thrust upon her lose a great deal of their power and stability. Baartman exposes the limitations of these categories and also their fundamental artificiality. Still, in spite of her multiple subversions of those artificially constructed categories, in spite of copious evidence testifying to her humanity, she is made to live and die like a beast.

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Sarah Baartman was not an animal in the most basic meaning of the word. She was capable of speech and also the intimacies of affect, and she understood the conventions and obligations of modern matrimony. At a certain ontological level, the common perception of her as an animal loses all force. The figure of the modern medical practitioner was crucial to the colonial structure of power in legitimating a racialized hierarchy for humanity. The figure was also responsible for the devaluation of the black subject within the context of the racial hierarchy that he had helped to establish. As Foucault saw, medicine played a key role in the autosexualization of the social body and the embourgeoisement of sexuality. Medicine was at once a tool of power and also a part of it, as Foucault explains:

Medicine made a forceful entry into the pleasures of the couple: it created an entire organic, functional, or mental pathology arising out of "incomplete" sexual practices; it carefully classified all forms of related pleasures; it incorporated them into the notions of "development" and instinctual "disturbances"; and it undertook to manage them.

Given this power structure, the doctor denuded Baartman of her humanity, engendered her social isolation, and then proceeded to transgress the very sexual boundaries he was meant to enforce. He was thus a figure of deep ambivalence: a metaphorical reflection and literal embodiment of the ambivalent nature of white desire. Attraction and repulsion are embedded in the typology of this desire, which both commodifies and fetishizes Baartman's body and what it implies within this social order. The same desire that fetishizes and commodifies her body is finally compelled to rehumanize her through the expenditure it initiates (on the site of Baartman's
body) and the violence it provokes. Before Baartman’s body and sexuality engendered expenditure, excess, and rupture on the part of white desire, her invention as a figure of modernity was already based on a foundation of violence. Baartman was first and foremost a victim of violence.

Baartman’s body was fraught with notions of ambivalence. She was desired for purposes of commodification and “scorned” for her freakishness. She disrupted the same/other dichotomy by moving between both, by virtue of her own inexplicable powers and as a result of the rush of white desire. Her freakishness, which elicited feelings of revulsion toward her, became also the grounds for the marketing of her body. In other words, the cause of her own otherness, her exotic nature, formed the very basis of her dehumanizing commodification.

Was Baartman’s humanity ever absent, as per the popular assumption? In fact, her humanity was always present, but its modes of enunciation were always subject to the vagaries of white desire. Similarly, the ambivalence

Renée Cox, *Do or Die*. 1992. Courtesy of the artist
within white desire—its movements between revulsion and fascination—grounds the status of her being, for identifying her as an animal of the lower kind or as quite human. White desire not only decrees her ontological status, but it also has powerful supporting institutions to enforce its whims. The stroke of irony is that, even in her state of relative powerlessness, Baartman exudes a power that deprives white desire of its consistency. Suzan-Lori Parks’s portrayal of Baartman provides the grounds for this range of reflections on the resilience of the agency of the subjugated colonial subject even in highly brutalizing and racialized times.
American artist Renée Cox’s beautiful photographic images of the black female body highlight the role of desire: sexual, intellectual, material, and maternal. Many of her works have displayed her own body nude, and in the series “Yo Mama,” produced from 1992 to 1997, she featured herself during and, later, after pregnancy, along with her children.

Cox’s autobiographical work is highly eroticized and overtly critical of racism. Her provocative images have both delighted and offended. However, because Cox is the creative subject who produces what are interpreted by some as objectifying images of herself, the artist defies the standard critiques. She is neither an unwilling slave to agents of commodification beyond her control, nor is she engaged in a program of self-degradation. Instead, Cox celebrates the black female body through the fully conscious production of artworks that simultaneously criticize what she regards as a racist society.

One of Cox’s most controversial works, “Yo Mama’s Last Supper,” is a remake of Leonardo Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper,” but features the nude Cox in place of Jesus Christ. In this work, Cox is surrounded by black disciples, with the exception of Judas, who is white. Many Roman Catholics were outraged at the image, for example, then-New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who called for the establishment of a commission to draw up “decency standards” to prevent such works from being displayed in any publicly funded New York museum. In response, Cox asserted her right to artistic freedom and self-expression:

*I have a right to reinterpret “The Last Supper” as Leonardo da Vinci created the Last Supper with people who look like him. The hoopla and the fury are because I’m a black female. It’s about me having nothing to hide.*

—Renée Cox