

# ‘Crafting epicentres of agency’

## Sarah Bartmann and African feminist literary imaginings<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** ‘Crafting epicentres of agency’: Sarah Bartmann and African feminist literary imaginings. The story of Sarah Bartmann has been one of the fascinations of academic writing on ‘race’, feminism and post-structuralism in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century. An enslaved Khoi woman, she was transported to Europe where she was displayed for the amusement, and later scientific inquisitiveness of various public and private collectives in London and Paris. Her paradoxical hypervisibility has meant that although volumes have been written about her, very little is recoverable from these records about her subjectivity. In this paper I am less interested in tracing and engaging with some of the debates engendered by this paradox and difficulty more broadly. Rather, I want to read and analyse how African feminist literary projects have approached Bartmann’s absent presence. My paper then tasks itself with exploring the possibility of writing about Sarah Bartmann in ways unlike those traditions of knowledge-making that dubbed her ‘the Hottentot Venus’. It analyzes a variety of texts that position themselves in relation to her as a way of arriving at an African feminist creative and literary engagement with histories which fix representations of African women’s bodies, via Bartmann in colonialist epistemes.

**Key words:** Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, poetics

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*Editorial note:* the spelling of the name of the protagonist of this argument, Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) has a number of versions, also in the present volume, and because of the respective perspectival, conflicting identity implications it was decided to retain this multivocality at the copy-editorial level.

<sup>1</sup> In its earlier incarnations, this paper has been presented at the *Mother Tongue, OtherTongue? The 14<sup>th</sup> International English Academy Conference in Southern Africa*, the University of Pretoria, 4-6 April 2002 and *The Black Body: Imagining, Writing, (Re)Reading*, DePaul University, 23-24 April 2004. A longer version appeared as the third chapter of ‘Shackled Memories and Elusive Discourses? Colonial Slavery and the Contemporary and Cultural Imagination in South Africa’, an unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Munich, Germany (2004).

Steatopygous sky  
Steatopygous sea  
Steatopygous waves  
Steatopygous me  
Oh how I long to place my foot  
on the head of anthropology. (Grace Nichols (1984, 15).

As the casket left the embassy, I wondered if Sarah Baartman was looking down from heaven and having a chuckle. The empire had indeed struck back, her people had come to claim her, and the ‘savages’ were running the show (Gail Smith 2004, 4).

The quotation at the beginning of this paper is from a poem by Grace Nichols, a celebrated Guyanese/Black British poet. It is an attempt to recast the world in a manner that is friendly to those who inhabit subjectivities inscribed with histories of white supremacist and patriarchal epistememes about African women’s bodies. In other words, it is a worldview that places African women at the centre in affirming ways. Such an endeavour imagines a world with sky, sea, and waves which reflects the pathologised African woman’s body as the norm. If everything in the world Nichols’ persona imagines, reflects the steatopygia that the Black-woman subject lying in the bath and thinking, fantasizes about, then this could not be a world which casts her as a freak. Nichols’ poem is part of that writer’s poetic *oeuvre*<sup>2</sup> which challenges the stereotypes and various demanding historic representations of women of the African world throughout history. It would be a world within which she is comfortable and the norm. She would not be a ‘freak’ or a spectacle, or solely corporeal. Nichols’ speaker continues to express anger at the traditions that have led to the necessity of the ‘fat black woman’ dreaming in this way: various violent epistemic traditions housed in the disciplines of anthropology, history, theology as well as contemporary patriarchal capitalist

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<sup>2</sup> In the rest of the collection *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (Virago 1984), as in *i is a long memoried woman* (Karnak 1983) and *Lazy thoughts of a lazy woman* (1989) various constructions of Black women are explored, from slavery, slave revolts, colonialism, anti-colonial imaginaries, nationalist movements, to twentieth century ‘global’ culture.

industries which take advantage of such racist violence. The stress in Nichols' poem is on the 'fat black woman' thinking, imagining, and feeling anger; in other words, with the expression of her will. Part of the activity of her will, through the juxtapositioning of herself with the objects of her fantasy, is to draw attention to the manner in which a 'Steatopygious me' is the product of the imagination which seeks to assert itself as natural. Her act of the imagination is therefore a willed act which is used as sharp contrast to the overdetermination of African women as excessively corporeal. This representation of the exclusively and hyper-embodied African, also known as objectification, was a necessary facet of the justification of slavery. It was also one for which Sarah Bartmann's history of display and dehumanisation has been used as shorthand to illustrate. Indeed, the use and recognisability of the medico-scientific term 'steatopygia' echoes Bartmann's display and dissection.

To the extent that most traditions, either racist or patriarchal, or a combination, do not represent *thinking* African women subjects, Nichols' 'fat black woman' fantasizing about a better world while lying in the bath is powerful and necessary. Its importance is not so much because it charts a counter-narrative, but rather because it significantly alters the terms of the debate altogether.

The story of Sarah Bartmann has been one of the fascinations of academic writing on 'race', feminism and post-structuralism in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century. An enslaved Khoi woman, she was transported to Europe where she was displayed for the amusement, and later scientific inquisitiveness of various public and private collectives in London and Paris. Yvette Abrahams (1997, 2000, 2004, Abrahams and Clayton 2004), Jean Young (1997) and Zine Magubane (2001, 2004) have written on the contradictions that characterise her story. Her paradoxical hypervisibility has meant that although volumes have been written about her, very little is recoverable from these records about her subjectivity. This is because for most of those who have written about her over the centuries, she has been the body used to illustrate some other academic point that has little to do with her personhood. Magubane has noted that for much colonial thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries the black body offered ‘the meeting of two contrary impulses – of a suffering that could not be denied but that nonetheless had an incredibly fungible character’ (2004: 103).

In this paper I am less interested in tracing and engaging with some of the debates engendered by this paradox and difficulty more broadly. Rather, I want to read and analyse how African feminist literary projects have approached Bartmann’s absent presence. Indeed, if the general hegemonic status of the black bodies has been as spectacle, ‘made to function less as flesh and blood entities than as fertile discursive sites to be mined for images and metaphors’ (Magubane 2004: 106), what happens when the most famously embodied black subject is imagined creatively in ways that do not foreground her corporeality? This failure to reify Bartmann as body, emerges as the most striking similarity in how feminists of the African world<sup>3</sup> have chosen to engage with Sarah Bartmann’s legacy as the ‘Hottentot Venus’. This legacy, and the power of its accompanying scientific knowledge, is such that several centuries later, in the twentieth century, many feminists would continue to write against the *felt* effects of the gaze which fixes them/us as oversexed, deviant object. My paper then tasks itself with exploring the possibility of writing about Sarah Bartmann in ways unlike those traditions of knowledge-making that dubbed her ‘the Hottentot Venus’. It analyses a variety of texts that position themselves in relation to her as a way of arriving at an African feminist creative and literary engagement with histories which fix representations of African women’s bodies, via Bartmann in colonialist epistemes.

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<sup>3</sup> Feminists of the African world is used here to refer to writing and creative theorisation that I see permeating the works of feminists beyond the continent and into the diaspora. I wish to explore this in the work of some Caribbean feminists here, and although I find the use of ‘African feminist’ to describe them equally useful, for the sake of clarity, I defer to the more conventional understanding of who is an African feminist, even if this is also sometimes contested. The essays in *Agenda* issues 50, 54, 58 which were special issues labelled variously *African Feminisms* Volumes 1 (2001), 2 (2002), and 3(2003) explore these contestations. See also the essays in Nnaemeka, Obioma. 1995. *Sisterhood, feminism and power: From Africa to the Diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

This writing, as I will show, proceeds far beyond simply writing back to histories of the hyper-corporealisation of the African as played out in colonialism, slavery and other white supremacist woundings. Faced with the slew of creative writing on Sarah Bartmann by feminists in the African diaspora and beyond, I remain uninterested in charting, reviewing and analysing the varied ways in which she has been characterised in literature. My concern here is with the emergence of what I see as a very specific idiom which emerges in literature of the African feminist world, and which, as I will show, offers radical departures from conventional representations of her as only embodied (object), pathologised (deviant), evidence (knowable) and/or singular ('freak', myth). This work draws from the insights gleaned from African feminist work in non-literary genre, and recognises this *corpa* as invaluable. Still, the three central creative texts which will be used in addition to Nichols' are Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*, Dianne Ferrus' poem 'I Have Come to Take you Home' and Gail Smith's 'Fetching Saartje', because they offer refreshing narrative possibilities which are more imaginative than

'the science, literature and art [which have] collectively worked to produce Baartmann as an example of sexual and racial difference [which also] offered exemplary proof that racial and sexual alterity are social construction rather than biological essences' (Magubane 2001, 817).

These traditions, Zine Magubane demonstrates, are informed by a variety of ideologies on race, gender and class positions, but have nonetheless been strengthened in their ahistorical usage to explain how Sara Bartmann became the icon for sexual alterity in theory. 'Molara Ogunidipe's invitation to African feminists is that

'[w]e should think from our epicentres of agency, looking for what is meaningful, progressive and useful to us as Africans, as we enrich ourselves with ideas from all over the world' (in: Lewis 2002).

The texts analysed here embark on and approach the topic at hand from various angles, but will be read, nonetheless, as participating in the same larger African feminist project. In other words, as I will demonstrate, while the specific structures of the narratives differ, there are ways in which all three are activities along the same continuum. All grapple with

the (im)possibility of representing Sarah Bartmann by probing the ways in which the silences of history are more interesting for what they refuse to tell us about her, than the volumes of overwritten narratives while she was alive, or the body critiqued by Magubane (2001).

My choice of technique is motivated, firstly, by my conviction that creative spaces offer an ability to theorise, and imagine spaces of freedom in ways unavailable to genres more preoccupied with linearity and exactness. I have become increasingly intrigued (cf. 2001, 2005) by the creative theorisation in the arena of African feminist imagination. By 'creative theorisation', I intend the series and forms of conjecture, speculative possibilities opened up in literary and other creative genres. Theoretical or epistemological projects do not only happen in those sites officially designated as such, but emerge from other creatively textured sites outside of these.

Secondly, read against the texts I will discuss, I find Nthabiseng Motsemme's thinking on silences and African women's subjectivities compelling. Motsemme asserts that 'the mute always speaks', and her work suggests that a key African feminist tool has to be our thinking about how to hear the mute, and what that hearing might look like. Like her,

My aim is not to romanticise silence and thus undermine the power of giving voice and exposing oppression. It is rather to remind us that under conditions of scarcity and imposed limits, those who are oppressed often generate new meanings for themselves around silences. Instead of being absent and voiceless, silences in circumstances of violence assume presence and speak volumes (Motsemme 2004a: 5).

### ***Crafting epicentres of agency***

Zoë Wicomb's novel *David's Story* (2000) confronts the dilemma of positioning, which is to say historicising, directly. In her novel, Wicomb approaches the trickiness of historical location in a variety of ways. In all these, there are intimations of the connections to the historically concrete subject that was Sara Bartmann. Her novel is the fictional biography of David, an activist, who decides to have his life story recorded in the post-

apartheid moment. David's sense of how lives are told, and rooted in past lives' trajectories differs substantially from his Blackwoman fictional biographer's idea of how to record life stories. The novel and the fictional biography it encapsulates is both David's story and not. He takes no joy in the private ownership of it that the biographer imagines should determine his relationship to the story. He chooses not to claim it. Rather, he insists that his story is one that starts with the Khoi women, Sara Bartmann, and Krotoa, the latter of whom is also known as Eva. Both these women are positioned as 'firsts' or symbolic beginnings in some ways: Krotoa, as the first indigenous translator between the Khoi and the Dutch, and Bartmann the beginning of many narratives of belonging. However, Wicomb writes David so that he does not simply romantically root himself through these women, or even position them simply as his foreparents. He repeatedly refuses the psychic safety that would flow from simply claiming and embracing them; they are part of a difficult and necessary identitary project aligned to both memory and the imagination, a project he cannot completely preside over. Interestingly, his fictional biographer is at pains to steer him in the direction of stability. For David, who does not imagine himself participating in an individual project he needs to police, the disquiet centres around what is missing from his narrative, what is elusive. His resistance to narratorial tidiness leads his fictional biographer to muse that 'promiscuous memory, spiralling into the past, mates with new disclosures to produce further moments of terrible surprise' (*David's Story* 194-5) because she has long noticed how:

[h]is fragments betray the desire to distance himself from his own story; the many beginnings, invariably flights into history, although he is no historian, show uncertainty about whether to begin at all. He has made some basic errors with dates, miscalculating more than a hundred years, which no doubt is due to the confusing system of naming centuries; but then, as I delighted in the anachronism, he was happy to keep it (*David's Story* 1).

This anachronism is deliberate on Wicomb's part and points to the relationship between different modes of telling stories, ways more nuanced than timelines. It also exposes the challenges of historicising experiences when there is no dependable narrative, only the colonisers' in written form, plotted along a dateline which is not in itself logical, even as it is

paraded as neutral. David's interest in history suggests that he has reshuffled the events to highlight the desired associations with other herstories, to display more clearly, in Prins' words,

Because even though I do not know when my ancestors lived  
I know that each one of their lives  
Left a mark on my life  
[...]  
Even though I do not know ('Timelines' l. 18-25).

Such a desire is highlighted in his insistence, for example, on the anchoring of his story through Krotoa and Sarah Bartmann even though he makes little attempt to mythologise them. He is at pains to avoid their erasure, as well as their iconicisation, because he is aware that a wealth of highly problematic writing exists on them already. His response,

'[o]ne cannot write nowadays (...) without a little monograph on Bartmann; it would be like excluding history itself',

can mean in this way (*David's Story* 1). As his biographer suggests, 'the many beginnings, invariably flights into history, although he is no historian, show uncertainty about whether to begin at all' (1). Wicomb's David is convinced of their importance to his narrative, but need not dwell in the precise manner in which their narratives intersect with his, a detail which frustrates his biographer to no end. Rather than wanting to control the narrative, David is content to testify to a collective history which self-consciously points to its constructedness. Succeeding in this venture makes it clear that his narrative does not contain everything. For Wicomb's project, the task of writing history requires that the imagination perform differently, chaotically, in a manner that messes up centuries. Irritated by his logic, his biographer asks him, 'what on earth has Baartman to do with your history?'; to which he replies,

But it's not a personal history as such that I am after, not biography or autobiography. I know we're supposed to write that kind of thing, but I have no desire to cast myself as hero, he sneers. Nothing wrong with including a historical figure (*David's Story* 135).

When in further response to her, 'She may not even have been a Griqua', David says, 'Baartman belongs to all of us' (*David's Story* 135), this is



particularly telling. Sara Bartmann is important for greater reasons than the mere accident of a possibly shared ethnicity, David seems to be saying. His claim to her is not because they both may have Griqua, or more generally Khoi, ancestry. Rather, David's recognition of Sara Bartmann as important is linked to another project which is *not* about the 'recovery' of indigeneity. It is akin to Diana Ferrus' acknowledgment in her poem 'A Tribute to Sarah Bartmann' (1998). David and his biographer both note the extent of his outrage at the mere mention of Cuvier's name. This indignation finds accompaniment in Ferrus' persona's emotions, expressed in the second stanza:

I have come to wrench you away –  
away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark with his racist clutches of imperialism,  
who dissects your body bit by bit,  
who likens your soul to that of satan  
and declares himself the ultimate God! (ll. 10-15)

Ferrus' poem, written in Holland in June 1998, would eventually be responsible for the release of Sara Bartmann's remains by the French government, facilitating her return for burial in South Africa nearly two centuries after she left South Africa for England and France as a slave. While African feminist historian, Yvette Abrahams, wrote the first full-length study on Sarah Bartmann after noting the absence of academic material which sought to make sense of Sara Bartmann as subject rather than object, human rather than symbol or spectacle, Wicomb and Ferrus provide two imaginative texts in which it becomes impossible to view Sarah Bartmann as anything but a concrete historical subject. However, even an investment in humanising her is a thorny path for creative representations of Bartmann. Both Wicomb's and Ferrus' projects engage with this pointed issue. Through highly varied mediums, the acts of self-definition for both narrating subjects in Wicomb and Ferrus are thoroughly historicised, and acutely mindful of the interaction between the present and various possible pasts. For David, then, a historicising of his experience, although necessary, is not easy. His recognition, and indeed acceptance of its inevitability, translates into an ability to leave his life-story unpoliced. It facilitates his surrender of it once it is written down.

A similar impulse hides in the narrative uncertainties that are left unresolved by Ferrus in her poem as laid bare in the links between the desire of the speaker to use peace as the emotional currency that clears space for her conversation with Bartmann. Although the manner in which the persona treats Bartmann is illuminated as claiming one of her own, and therefore bringing her peace as part of taking her back home, it remains rather enigmatic how Bartmann has managed already to bring the speaker peace. Lines 21-22 and 29-30, respectively read:

and I will sing for you  
for I have come to bring you peace.

and

where I will sing for you,  
for you have brought me peace.

Within the context of the poem, where the reader is positioned as listening in on a private conversation between two people joined by a relationship s/he is excluded from, there is no room for explanation of what may already be understandable to the two subjects engaged in conversation. This absence from a poem, which, in its written form is always accompanied by a glossary, can only be read as part of the context of how meanings and knowledge is circulated within the internal ordering of the conversation. It is therefore not a failure, any more than David's bungling narrative is a fault.

Although this reading is suggested by the structuring of, and selective translation of exchanges in both texts, it is not an interpretation which enjoys wide recognition. Writing on representations of Krotoa and Sara Bartmann, Kai Easton (2002) has commented that the two are

'very allusive and elusive characters who figure in [*David's Story*], only to slip out of the story'.

Further, Easton continues,

'[d]espite their fleeting presence in Wicomb's novel, both of these women, I would argue, are integral to a book that refuses to engage them wholeheartedly

in its plot'.<sup>4</sup>

For Easton then, the fact that Krotoa and Bartmann are not represented is seen as a lack in the novel's material and treatment of the historical positioning of these women. In order to discover the manner in which they are integral then, Easton needs to read specific meanings into the 'refusal to engage them wholeheartedly'. While this reading of the absences of Wicomb's (and Ferrus') text is commendable, and also informs my own reading of these texts, it falls short of recognising that this refusal is part of the plot, rather than an unresolved anxiety. Against the overwhelming discourses and regimes of knowledge that write about these African women as known, and yet reveal little about their human-ness, African feminist imaginative projects such as Wicomb's and Ferrus' draw attention to the need to write about Krotoa, Bartmann and other historic African women differently.

That Sara Bartmann and Krotoa are not portrayed in any detail save for their importance in understanding David's story testifies to the validity of Easton's argument. However, to the extent that Wicomb's reader is not allowed to forget their presence, through the various narrative techniques discussed below, I think it inaccurate to characterise the novel as 'a book that refuses to engage them wholeheartedly in its plot'. This deliberate re-presentation, especially of Bartmann, which does not offer comfortable or reliable characterisation is exactly an unreserved engagement with these two women that Easton misses in Wicomb's novel. In Wicomb's novel, the silence is a very loud one whose echoes the reader is constantly mindful of.

Further, the 'as told to' structure of the novel echoes eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives, and the references to Krotoa and Sara Bartmann reinforce this connection. Although much is revealed, there is no possibility of narrative completion. David's beginnings, he thus seems to insist, lie in slavery and colonialism. They also linger in multiple discursive and linguistic registers, and require meticulous and constant translation. It is not coincidental that Krotoa was a translator

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<sup>4</sup> Easton 2002, p. 237.

who spoke English and Dutch in addition to her mother tongue; or that Bartmann spoke English and Dutch, and had learnt some French by the time she died at the age of twenty eight. The reader is invited to constantly translate first between the biographer and the protagonist and between tangible presences and implied ones. Nor is it accidental that both women are rendered homeless: one transported to another continent, and the other banished to an island off the coast of her homeland. They are both exiled, and therefore separated from any sense of 'authentic' rooting through various tropes. A tale that begins with them, therefore, cannot be one with narrative certainty. Required of the reader is the constant mediation between the various worlds of meaning uncovered and recovered in the pages of Wicomb's novel. Here, then, Wicomb's reader is invited to participate in the contact zone as theorised by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. This contact zone is 'a place where cultures met on unequal terms, the contact zone is now a space that is redefining itself, a space of multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities' (1999: 14). This space foregrounds the reality that 'languages articulate reality in different ways' (Bassnett 2002: 13).

Inattentive to this, David's biographer is plagued by a divergent set of practical concerns. Given that there are numerous written texts on Bartmann, would it not make more sense to use a shortcut and simply quote these here, she asks. What she cannot understand, an aspect Wicomb's reader may not miss, is that rooting his narrative with Bartmann has little to do with a linear historical chronology which she criticises him for 'bungling up'. Having established Sarah Bartmann as starting point, although Wicomb occludes what it is Sarah Bartmann can anchor, there are few more references in the text to the latter. These do not yield concrete information about her. All of these entail writings by David, or sketches, or a combination. Each time the biographer is stunned by their significance. They illustrate nothing for her, except the impossibility of excavating their relevance. *David's Story* does not mention Sarah Bartmann again at any length<sup>5</sup> or in any explicit manner, which is to say

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<sup>5</sup> See brief references to her on pages 33, 134-5.

there is no new material except the constant assertion that she will not be inserted into this narrative in the usual way. Wicomb does not allow us to forget her presence, but at the same time will not write (about) her in ways that mythologise or fix her. The challenges for a reader of this novel, perhaps in search of Sarah Bartmann, but who doubtlessly has also read about this woman at great length, is to make sense of the ways in which Wicomb chooses to engage with her legacy and to represent her physical absence from the text. Clearly, to speak her name is to invoke more than associations with the concrete historical subject that she was, it is also to awaken a litany of images and narratives seen to be easily associated with her. As David reminds his biographer,

[t]here've always been other worlds; there always will be many, all struggling for survival' (*David's Story* 197).

The reader is to participate in the contact zone 'for to interpret is no less than to act' (*David's Story* 89).

When Wicomb writes a novel that begins with Sarah Bartmann but does not participate in the project though which she has been the subject and object of myth, she is in conversation with the literary and theoretical lives of Sarah Bartmann. Bartmann's treatment is not isolated, so Wicomb scripts a fictional world peopled with elusive Blackwomen characters that 'appear' subservient only to turn out as revolutionaries. Because Sarah Bartmann's specific resistance cannot be pigeonholed, it can be rendered imaginatively as the participation of various young African women whose bodies may mask this subjectivity. The preponderance of names like Saartje, Sarah and Sally as a continuum where at times the same character moves back and forth, again locate the most famous 'Saartje' or 'Sarah' within a context that normalises her, like Nichols' poem where the world reflects and centres 'the fat black woman'. The insertion, but not definitive description, of these Sarah/Saartje/Sally figures' interiority signals that their histories begin with and link indefinitely with Sara Bartmann and Krotoa's in as much as David's does.

Similarly, the activist Dulcie, whose name peppers the narrative because of her association with David's own activism, proves as illusive as Sarah Bartmann, or Krotoa. Although her name finds its way into the

various explanations and self-narrations offered by David, little is known about her at the end of the story. The biographer goes to great pains to extract specific details about her, but in the end he fails. That the revolutionary Dulcie often appears shortly after the mention of Sarah Bartmann, or rather David's attempt to speak his anxiety more coherently about these women, links them in Wicomb's novel quite forcefully. It underlines the delicacy of ways of seeing, and emphasises the necessity of translation activity in the contact zone. This becomes quite important in light of the connections between Sarah Bartmann and Dulcie (September), both elusive women from the records, one from the nineteenth century and the second from the twentieth.

Their separate, and joint, elusiveness, as well as their immersion in various narratives of masking and unmasking, and of narratives by Blackwomen are significant. They suggest the ever-presence of a multitude of ways of seeing, and the simplicity of engaging only the surface meanings. Bartmann's resistance, like Dulcie's and that of the numerous other women in Wicomb's text, points to the activity of alternate storying, and suggests the pervasiveness of sublimated histories of struggle which reside in spaces that do not easily give up meaning. Wicomb's project makes the imagining of these sites possible. Dulcie is central to David's life, yet few details about her are provided.

In her 'Fetching Sarah',<sup>6</sup> Gail Smith notes a rare moment of relaxation for those South African officials responsible for the particulars of Bartmann's repatriation. After Bartmann's coffin has been loaded onto a plane headed for South Africa, the Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture,

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<sup>6</sup> There are two versions of this essay. One, shorter was published as 'Fetching Saartje' in the *Mail and Guardian* 2 May 2002. Another, longer, is as yet unpublished, and is under the title 'Fetching Sarah'. I choose to read Smith's pieces as literary even though its publication in the above newspaper framed it as an opinion piece because closer examination of the piece reveals Smith's reliance on a range of literary, 'fictional', and creative techniques. Some of these include the suspension of disbelief which is invited by Smith when she imagines Sarah Bartmann laughing, the splitting of the narrating voice into different selves, the play with the fiction/faction and autobiography genres, and so forth. The page numbers refer to the longer, unpublished version.

one of these officials, seems calmer. Smith notes that in her relief, Deputy Minister Mabandla reminisced about 'exile travel stories, and a rare moment of poignant remembering of Dulcie September, another great South African woman who had died a horrible death in Paris' ('Fetching' 4). Dulcie September was assassinated by agents of the South African apartheid state in March 1988, outside the ANC offices in Paris, and the highly visible, if convoluted, gathering of information on possible assassins notwithstanding, nobody has ever been charged with her murder.

To the extent that Dulcie September's name is well-known, it is she who is hinted at when the trajectory is unearthed in Wicomb's novel; Dulcie, the character, then suggests September, or others whose names are less known to chart along with the numerous Sallys, Saartjies and Sarahs in Wicomb's narrative, varieties of participation in anti-colonial struggle. Wicomb's text charts a pattern of Blackwomen's presences which has been inarticulable in the conventional hegemonic languages of white supremacy or African nationalism. It pays

'broad attention to [how] voice, communication and agency enlarge conventional understandings of women's agency and transcend the 'resistance' models that have often constrained understandings of women's roles as political and historical actors' (Lewis 2002a, 1).

*David's Story* invites us to question to what, and whose, ends stories work and, more specifically to make these inquiries in relation to the various discursive constructions of Sarah Bartmann. Wicomb's novel bravely defies and resists closure. Unlike much of the writing on Sarah Bartmann, it at once acknowledges that she is more than object and/or icon, and registers some of the ways in which she resists closure. There can be no disclosure which brings us closer to her and this acknowledgment is a crucial precursor to any project which does not re-objectify her and continue to erase her subjectivity and the agency whose demonstrations are lost to us. Writing on her which does not recast her as a 'freak', reading her in ways that parade her as the ultimate icon of alterity, can only draw attention to the reality that we know nothing about her. Yet her presences continue to haunt us in Wicomb's text.

## **Remembering home**

I have lived in so many places, I think I have forced myself to find home in smaller things.<sup>7</sup>

Making a home has become a critical instinct in all living creatures, and for humans who claim that they are above all other creatures in terms of intelligence and the ability to survive, home is the true marker of having arrived, of being there and having lived ( 1999, n. p.).

The above quotations seem to speak to two antagonistic impulses in the naming and definition of homespaces. In the longer citation, Patricia McFadden points to the sociability of home. It is that space which, although usually physical, bears the mark of relationship to human-selfhood. This relationship to self is always marked in tandem with other creatures, and a stamp which apparently shows humans' superiority over other living beings by the level of sophistication human abodes represent. Human homes are evidence of people's existence, and as such are of enormous importance. For African feminist poet, Jessica Horn, home is mobile, and more conducive to carrying within as a psychic space. It is not so much proof of having being here, or there, but a condition which responds to obligation or necessity. Like McFadden's, it is a relationship to the human-self.

Both Horn and McFadden underscore the negotiated element of home, its choices, its locations and its necessity. Horn makes it smaller, but still needs to 'find home'; McFadden defines it as a 'critical instinct' at the same time as she underscores its social value. In both cases home is necessary.

Sitting in Holland, in June 1998, Diana Ferrus wrote one of the most famous pieces on Sarah Bartmann. It might be more appropriate to describe it as a poem *to* her. In its very title, 'Tribute to Sarah Bartmann', the poem unsettles expectation and marks itself as participating in an undertaking markedly different from many of those who have scripted Bartmann. A tribute is an acknowledgement, a mark of respect. It is the

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<sup>7</sup> Poet and feminist activist, Jessica Horn in an interview by Christopher Simpson for the BBC Radio 4 show, *Other*, 20 July 2003.



opposite of the degradation Sarah Bartmann endured in the last years of her life. However, the relationship Ferrus' persona details with Bartmann need not be mediated through colonialist, and other related mythologisations, of Bartmann. The poem is not a celebration of Sarah Bartmann in the sense of recovering her from the many ways in which she has been objectified. Ferrus does not offer her reader, or listener, for she often performs her poetry, a straightforward representation of Bartmann. Her persona is concerned with the comfort of Bartmann's inner workings, her emotional and psychic health. Bartmann is being taken home.

In an interview, Ferrus has noted how she came to write the poem:

I was doing a course that included a segment on sexuality in the colonies, so my mind went to Sara Bartmann and how she was exploited [...] But more than that, the really big thing was how acutely homesick I was. [...] My heart went out to Sara, and I thought, 'Oh, God, she died of heartbreak. She longed for her country. What did she feel? That's why the first line of the poem was I've come to take you home (in Setshwaelo 2002, n.p.)

Further, Ferrus' refrain 'I have come to take you home' (l. 1, rpt. as 24 and 29) addresses Bartmann directly as one who has a home. Taking her home is a gesture of intense emotional saliency. The meanings which attach to home challenge the status of Sara Bartmann as object, positioning her instead as a loved one. Home is a place of particular importance for the exiled and enslaved; it is a space which provides the possibilities of belonging, of acceptance and special significance. The love suggested in the act is further intensified given the specific meanings which attach to the act of taking her home. Taking somebody home is always an intimate act of rescue given that only specific people can participate. Ferrus' interview underscores this when she speaks of the possibility of dying from heartbreak when going home is foreclosed. Its importance is so emphasised that 'going home' in some (African) languages is conceptually and linguistically different from going back to the place where you live<sup>8</sup>. Further, home is a space where one is always welcome, a sanctuary

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<sup>8</sup> This intimacy is emphasised when we imagine the separate, more *intimate* verb that 'going home' has in some African languages, like for example, the isiXhosa language in southern Africa, which uses 'ukugoduka', as completely separate from the act of

to which one always has access. To be away from home, exiled, and in need of being brought home speaks powerfully to the alienation of the one away from home. The late Edward W Said, who has written movingly about exile, and the condition of homelessness in great detail, called it the feeling of being ‘out of place’, the title of his memoir. When Ferrus’ persona offers to take Sara Bartmann home, it is a declaration of immense affection.

I have come to take you home –  
Home! Remember the veld?  
The lush green grass beneath the big oak trees?  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,  
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white  
and the water in the stream chuckles sing-songs  
as it hobbles over little stones. (ll. 1-9)

The tone of the poem, which stresses connection, intensifies the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. The memory of home is one that is shared, gesturing to a common past and that they have the same home. Ferrus’ persona has, through effort, ensured that upon her return home, Sara Bartmann will be comfortable. Home is more than the physical dwelling inside which people live. It represents the psychic familiar which brings peace. The evocation of proteas, mint and buchu along with the use of ‘veld’, clarifies where this home is located geographically. However, it also captures the presence of smells, tastes and other feelings which do not correspond to how Bartmann feels in exile. These familiar things are also put in the position of being desired because they represent, and are from, home. The memory that is evoked and stressed is one of familiarity through which Bartmann knows how to shelter herself from the elements. It is one that entails Bartmann’s freedom to roam about in the veld, unlike her enslaved position in Europe. Home offers pleasures by way of beautiful proteas to behold, and musical water flowing over little stones.

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going anywhere else. ‘Home’ is the location of your parents and birth family, and is never the abode (also ‘home’ in English) you set up with your life partner (and offspring).

Further, the speaker is also committed to the project of restoring Bartmann to herself, which is to say, bringing her home, to allow her to *be* and *feel* at home. Ferrus' persona is thus, akin to the family of the addressee, and 'I have come to take you home' is the verbal equivalent of an embrace that cannot be refused. Because home is a place that one voluntarily goes to, the fetching marks the event as somewhat urgent, bearing as it does strong overtones of rescue. The emotional prominence of home is further complicated as the persona imbues it with additional layers of meaning.

Home is signalled here by everything that the addressee's current location is not; it has fragrant buchu to soothe the effects of the humiliation from being displayed as well as to counteract her objectification as slave, freak/specimen and her dissection for further examination after her death. Home in Ferrus' poem has open spaces ('veld') and protection ('shade') which are contrast to the confinement of Bartmann in Europe. She is not peered and poked at there. The proteas too, which are missing from the Europe she remained enslaved in, represent something particular to home. The speaker appeals to an emotional memory as well as a memory of the senses. Home is cool, and she can lie in the shade unexposed. She can see the breadth of the veld, and the colours of the proteas. It is her eyes, and the eyes of the persona from her home that are privileged here. The smell of buchu, and mint, as well as their healing possibilities are also foregrounded. To complete the image of home, Ferrus offers the playful sounds of water flowing freely and singing.

In the writings of late eighteenth-century Europe, in various public debates and court cases, it became clear colonialism was being explained in a variety of intertwined ways. First, the colonised space tempted the coloniser to subordinate it, and the very difference offered and embodied by the territory and peoples invaded propelled the colonising mission into a justification of an increasing spiral of violence in an effort to make it knowable, and thereby controllable (Kitson 1998). Within this violent regime of knowing, or making knowable, was the body of the slave or colonised. Clearly, then, this was a quest which had no illusions about the coupling of material and epistemic violence. To be known, the colonised

and enslaved had to be brutalised, and their home fundamentally altered. Further, this violation of the subjected was an integral part of the coloniser's own self-definition and constitution as ultimate power, and exclusively authoritative (Kitson 1998). This pattern inevitably affects the ways in which (previously) colonised subjects then interact with each other, which is not to say that Africans are defined wholly by the experience of having being brutalised.

However, this history does have implications for the framing of an African feminist project addressing itself to the creative imagining of Sara Bartmann by addressing the kind of language, and a politics of representation that can be used in its service. It is no small matter that the feminist texts analysed here make no attempt to re-view Bartmann since gaping at her has become the standard way in which she features in a variety of discourses. The literary texts examined here are informed by a politics which resists the oppressive gaze. Therefore, Bartmann, when represented here, is not discernible via a series of physical descriptions, as she is in Cuvier's notes for example. Part of resisting the dominant tropes through which Bartmann has become 'familiar' is a disavowal of linguistic systems which represent her primarily through her corporeality.

Wicomb leaves her reader with an elusive Sara Bartmann. Ferrus allows her persona anger and gentleness depending on who is being addressed. Bartmann is the beloved, she is treated as human with feelings of sadness, homesickness, and so forth. Ferrus, however, stops short of romanticising Bartmann. She does not make Bartmann someone we merely look at, or a subject in need of all our embrace and rescue. Rather, she invests her with commonplace, in other words human, internal workings. The simplicity of this move serves to highlight the utter brutality of the systems that put Bartmann on display.

When Wicomb resists showing Bartmann as knowable, and Ferrus speaks to a Sarah Bartmann whose interiority is privileged, this stems from a refusal by both writers to describe Bartmann, to offer her as a known and knowable subject. It is enough that she is human, and to explore the obvious things that accompany that recognition. Among these are that she must have experienced emotions, felt sensations, and recog-

nised the humiliation she was subjected to. It also is obvious that she must have resisted it. Both texts participate in a new politics of representation, crafting a new language through which to speak to the creative imagination at hand. This is based on the recognition that

[o]ne difficulty with the assumption that language can be overturned in favour of an entirely new lexicon and world outlook is the problematic assumption that words and their meanings can be neatly separated from a globalised cultural repertoire pervasively underwritten by centuries of western discursive dominance (Lewis 2000a, 3).

It is important that Ferrus offers descriptions of the landscape as part of her reminder to Sara Bartmann's imagined self since part of the alienation of colonialism is the separation of 'native' from her land. And, in Bartmann's case, as well as that of many other slaves, displacement from this home. It was important, as the Dutch became Afrikaners, that the same land(scape) be emptied of its indigenous occupants. One of the consequences of this pertains, more recently, to the paucity of landscape in Black South African literature, as opposed to its centrality in the Afrikaner novel, especially the *plaasroman*<sup>9</sup>. That Ferrus' speaker, who intends to take Sara Bartmann home, has access to their land she prepares for Bartmann's return charts a different location to land in the literary imagination. Part of her return, part of the mutual exchange of peace, has to do with being at home, and having part of one's humanity restored. It is noteworthy that while the anger expressed at those responsible for Sara Bartmann's fate is unflinching, it does not detract from the purpose of the speaker's trip and therefore is confined to six out of the total thirty lines which make up the poem. In this manner the speaker resists complicity with the colonial mistreatment of Bartmann by concentrating on the scientific and colonial quests to which she fell victim. Rather, the focus is shifted and altered significantly in addressing her as a beloved, as ordinarily human.

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<sup>9</sup> Literally translated into 'farm novel', a widely subscribed to genre in Afrikaans literature. For a lengthy discussion, see J.M. Coetzee (1988) *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

The third stanza further challenges conventional representations of Sara Bartmann by showing her as one who is loveable, desirable and aesthetically pleasing; in other words, she is humanised since all human beings are these things to someone. Line 20's 'I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you' highlights a different way of looking at her than fills the volumes penned about her in the last two hundred years. Here again Ferrus' project intersects with Wicomb's, who, without specific reference to Bartmann each time, nonetheless installs the image of steatopygia as normal for all the women in her novel, and later points to its valuation in another context as beautiful. It is also a location which welcomes her, like the world of Nichols' poem above. It is a worldview which is not hostile to Bartmann; it is a literary homing. All four feminist writers examined here choose not to reinscribe Sara Bartmann's discursive hypercorporeality; at the same time they do not pretend that she is unembodied. She is not invisible physically or metaphorically; but in the imaginations of feminists of the African world, her body is like many others: recognisable, and therefore cannot be the spectacular focus of attention.

Smith's title puns on her 'fetching' of Sara Bartmann to bring her home. A member of team responsible for repatriating Sara Bartmann's remains for burial, and the scriptwriter on a second Sara Bartmann documentary collaboration with the director Zola Maseko, Smith's speaker also echoes Ferrus' more figurative home-bringing. The act of 'fetching' signifies more than mere collection since one fetches things and people one claims ownership of. Additionally, to fetch somebody suggests that you will ultimately return with that person home, and that the fetched is currently misplaced. This is why for Smith's narrating voice the act of fetching is linked so closely to the ability to claim Sara Bartmann back.

Like Ferrus' speaker's tone in the second stanza, 'I have come to wrench you away' (l.10), there is indignation in Smith's piece at the degradation Sara Bartmann had to suffer. Smith lashes out in an acidic manner at the trajectory of scientific racism, and at the celebrated anatomists who took pleasure in such depravity. However, she is unsurprised by the rise of rightwing sentiment in present-day France because, for her, events in history are linked. Thus her troubled stance as she recognises the pat-

tern is exacerbated by the surprise she finds expressed in the French media. There are no shocks for her in the politics of contemporary France, with the threat of Le Penn taking leadership as she writes. Historical narrative is portrayed as a series of complex linkages rather than sporadic moments. Consequently, Le Penn, the exhibition of Bartmann and the lies which aimed to keep her remains in the Musee are not unconnected. They occupy moments apart in time, but are all part of the same logic.

Smith's confrontational stance, like Ferrus', is, however, modulated by another gentler voice. Ferrus' and Smith's imaginative projects centre on Sara Bartmann. As such, then, the bulk of the narrative space needs to be dedicated to concern with her. This is evident in the proportions of time between the expression of anger towards Sara Bartmann's exhibitors on the one hand, and acknowledgement of her interiority, on the other hand. The confrontational stance and the harsh tone when discussing the monster she needs to be rescued from rhymes with the outrage that the same monster, Cuvier, evokes in Wicomb's David.

Gail Smith's, unlike the other writers discussed, was first published after Bartmann's return, reflecting on the process of fetching her from Paris. Wicomb's novel was finished long before, and published prior to Bartmann's return. Although Ferrus' poem would eventually bring about the return of Bartmann, to do this it had to be written long before the actual event. Ferrus' tribute, then, is in some respects prophetic.

In her piece, Smith eschews the distance prized by conventional academia between the knowledge-maker and the subject, or 'object', of her text. Instead her narrative voice plays on the politics that decide which meanings can be made about the past, on how the knower and dispenser of knowledge participates in this, as well as on the violence involved in epistemic projects. In this text, she explores these issues specifically in relation to the history and science on Sara Bartmann. For both Smith's essay and Ferrus' poem, it is more than the mere fetching of Sara Bartmann's remains that matters; it matters who is fetching her.

It is an emotional act of bringing back, clear enough when her narrator comments, 'My spirit self was reclaiming an ancestor', making Sarah Bartmann part of her past, and herself (like David too in Wicomb's

novel), part of Bartmann's future. The narrator positions herself in relation to Sarah Bartmann as more than object, as someone whose relationship is also circumscribed by a subjective history. No pretence at objectivity is made by either speaking personalities. It is poles apart from the allegedly objective, unemotional treatment which saw Sarah Bartmann used so violently and degradingly. Smith, like Ferrus' speaker, does not shy away from the contradictions that this poses but rather acknowledges the split between the self who is claiming an ancestor and the other one, the 'earth self' making a film about the return of Sarah Bartmann. There is no need to mask such a conflict, and Smith's narrating splitting undulating voice makes no attempt at this. This is not a narrative that this African feminist writer chooses to tell from a distance, coldly. Bartmann's life and hers are influenced by similar discourses, even if not to the same extent. Sylvia Tamale has underlined that 'no African woman can shield herself from the broad negative and gendered legacies left behind by forces such as colonialism, imperialism and globalisation' (Tamale 2002, 7). Given this recognition, it is possible to see contemporary (Blackwomen's) lives as being shaped by the histories which so demonised Sarah Bartmann, to the same extent that the French cannot be free of histories of men like Cuvier. This is how Smith's concept of shame works. It is the brutalisers, in the legacy of Cuvier and the later, curators at the Musée who lied about having lost Bartmann's skeleton, genitalia and brains, who should be ashamed.

The split-spirit persona Smith constructs disavows the objective distance that is valued by science, and later in her piece, she points to some of the reasons why this is both important and possible. Her stance is different from that of Cuvier, who felt greatly honoured to present Sarah Bartmann's corpse after he had dissected her<sup>10</sup>. Smith, instead, recounts how 'unremarkable' the bottles containing Sarah Bartmann's body parts are to her, and wonders about 'what treasures of scientific discovery they

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<sup>10</sup> I have chosen not to reproduce Cuvier's reading and notes on Sarah Bartmann here. Yvette Abrahams has analysed them in some detail, as have I in less detail than Abrahams, in our respective doctoral dissertations. See Abrahams 2000 and Gqola 2004.



could possibly have yielded'. Unlike Cuvier *et al.*, however, she reflects on the implications of trying to ascertain something spectacular in the parts of Bartmann's body that lie pickled in the jars. Repulsed by responding in a manner that may be seen to mirror Cuvier's, she remarks that she stopped trying to ascertain what was so remarkable about Bartmann's brain and genitals. The writer is equally struck by the contexts within which she was kept at the Musee del'Homme. Walking through the Musee del'Homme she is struck by the many bodies meticulously catalogued in the name of science. The neatness of the cataloguing system leaves her feeling 'horrified', 'appalled' and 'disgusted' by the rows of cupboards each with a page that

'listed the contents (...) skeletons, skulls and other bits of indigenous people from every corner of the earth, but mostly Africa, North & South America' ('Fetching' 2).

Cuvier's science that legitimates a feeling of honour at the display and dissection of human beings and animals contrasts with the spirit Smith speaks about: both her own that comes to claim an ancestor and make a film about the return, as well as Sarah Bartmann's own which must have 'cried out again and again to be taken home, and her cries have reverberated through the centuries, and her name has lived on' ('Fetching' 3).

As 'the ancient mountains shout [Bartmann's] name' in Ferrus' poem, so in Smith's literary essay Bartmann's spirit 'clearly cried out again and again to be taken home, and her cries have reverberated through the centuries, and her name has lived on' ('Fetching' 3). The Director of the museum, Andre Langenay, had lied about how Sara Bartmann's remains had been destroyed in a fire long before he was employed by the institution (captured on tape in a conversation and incorporated into Smith's and Maseko's earlier film). About this incident, Smith remarks in retrospect,

Sarah Baartman was not simply a powerful symbol of scientific racism, but she clearly has magical powers. She could bring back her own genitals and force the modern day representatives of the men who dissected her into a shame-faced apology at being caught out in a very public lie ('Fetching' 2).

Smith's speaker makes connections between the logic of lies at the core of the French scientists, curators and director's words claims to knowledge, which she sets up against the more complex sets of relationships and relationality between herstories of knowledge creation. She and Bartmann have spirits that find expression in ways that need no forced linear narrative of lies, but through routes that index a more creative relationship to time. Interestingly, in her choice of language, Smith rejects the Eurandrocentric violent heritage of lies, taking risks instead with complexity that cannot be flattened out as her own voice splits and Sarah Bartmann works her magic beyond the grave.

### ***Turning the circle***

Representations of Sarah Bartmann have incensed feminists of colour the world over due to the manner in which she has been instrumentalised as part of inscribing Blackwomen's bodies in white supremacist colonial culture as oversexualised, deviant and spectacular. In her 'Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath', the poem on which this paper opened, Grace Nichols reclaims and subverts dominant representations of African women's bodies. Her speaking subject lies in her bath, thinking about a world that reflects her in different ways from those that have historically positioned her in terms of a deviant body that requires explanation. It is with anger that the 'fat black woman' in the bath responds to both the multiple sites of this inscription, as well as to the combined authority it continues to exert. As she lies in the bath, then, she allows for the possibility of enjoying her own body, her own mind, of being more than she is to the white supremacist capitalist epistemic systems that she must continue to endure. These epistemic systems continue to exert power over her. Importantly, she links her positioning as a contemporary Blackwoman to the historical constructions of that subject category, whether these take the form of anthropological discourse, historiographic inscription, theology, or the diet industry.

Nichols's narrator locates her reality in tandem with the violence with which Sarah Bartmann was inscribed. Like Smith, Nichols refuses to

pretend that the volumes penned to make sense of Blackwomen's bodies are removed from her own persona's lived experience. The vision she immerses herself in, like the full bubble bath, is a fantasy that she needs to create for herself, where steatopygia is the norm, where the world reflects her. It is not a distant reality, but one which intersects in a variety of ways with her own imagined home.

Further, Wicomb's text asserts the necessity of historicising Bartmann and Krotoa, which is to say, the need to make them human, and at the same time demonstrates that this project of representation and her-storification is not one which offers wholeness or closure. Indeed, Wicomb's text both structurally and metaphorically resists offering definitive answers, or seeking refuge in explanatory narrative. The reality we are faced with, after volumes of ink outlining 'facts' have been spilt about Sarah Bartmann, is that:

*Dismembered, isolated, decontextualised* – the body in the glass case epitomises the way white men were trying to see Khoisan women at the time, as unresisting objects open to exploitation. [...] After reams of measurements and autopsy notes, we do not know the simplest thing about Sarah Bartmann. We do not know how she laughed, her favourite flowers or even whom she prayed to. We cannot even know with certainty how she looked (Abrahams 1997, 45).

And,

Very little is known of Baartman's experience in Paris. No one can say for sure where she lived, if she had friends, what she took for menstrual cramps, what she thought of French food, or the cold (Smith 2002, 3).

Given the near total absence of information about her person, how then is she representable? And what available tropes are there for this representation in ways unlike those systems that mythologise her? Wicomb chooses to weave traces of Bartmann's ghost into her novel, never allowing her to be a known character. In this way she ensures that Sarah Bartmann is seen as relevant to the larger picture in a myriad of ways. Similarly, that Sarah Bartmann is found in echoes throughout Wicomb's text highlights the difficulty of representing her in refreshing ways. Wicomb's novel, like Smith's essay and Ferrus' remarkable poem, partakes in the project of *remembering, connecting, contextualising* Bartmann and Krotoa. For Smith, Sarah Bartmann's history is linked to her own, and is not one from

which she feigns emotional distance. It is linked to Dulcie September's. Equally, it intersects with the struggles over identity and self-positioning which accompany the readings of Blackwomen's bodies in ways that trap them/us in discourses of hypersexualisation. It is this circulation of 'white supremacist, Eurocentric beliefs about knowledge and its production' which perpetuates 'practices that invisibilise black women' (Matlanyane Sexwale 1994, 65), that is unsettled by the writers whose work on Sarah Bartmann I have analysed here. In their collective resistance to cast Bartmann as spectacle, to force the reader to look at her physical being these writers recognise, as Gabeba Baderoon has pointed out, that:

Black people live amid the visual precipitate of racism. How does one engage with this legacy of images of which Black people have been not only the subject but also the audience? Should we prohibit them? Does showing them repeat their initial impact? (Baderoon 2000, n.d.)

The writers here examined seem to answer the final of Baderoon's questions in a qualified affirmative. They suggest that there is necessarily a variety of lenses brought to bear in representing Blackwoman subjectivities, and also that these are linked to Bartmann, as one of the women most conspicuously subjected to the violence of this gaze. Homi Bhabha writes:

The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. [...] The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. However impeccably the content of an 'other' culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is [...] the demand that [...] it be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination (1994, p. 31).

In these texts, Sara Bartmann does not remain the 'docile body of difference'. The main question all these texts address pertains to the difficulty in speaking about how Blackwomen's subjectivity is constituted. Indeed,

'[w]here does agency lie when the body in question has been defined and manipulated by Eurocentric, and hegemonic cultures?' (Shaw 2003, 2)

Like Smith, Wicomb, Ferrus and Nichols refuse the arbitrary distance which is constructed as a necessary position from which to theorise,

to make knowledge. The thinking subject lying in the bath is 'Steatopygous me'. The literary texts here discussed unsettle the Eurandrocentric perspective as norm by imaginatively illustrating the inescapable marrying of perspective and discursive construction. Thus, the logic and aesthetics of colonial valuation, biased in the interest of white-supremacist patriarchy, are unravelled in the refusal of linear narrative strategies (timelines). Collectively the literary texts imagine a revision of prevalent literary representations of the past. Bartmann is not used as an illustration for some alternative ideology. Rather, her narrative is engaged with in ways that are irredeemably contaminated by the past of her violation. One of the most obvious ways is her positioning as spectacle, as excessively corporeal. To the extent that all three representations of Bartmann in the texts analysed in this chapter avoid resting the reader's gaze on the spectacle of her body, this is not a viable form of imaginatively rendering her. The stance taken by the writers above problematises the repetition of certain oppressive positionings. In this regard, they link up with Abraham's (1997) earlier rejection of Sander Gilman's incessant repetition of the sketches made when Sarah Bartmann was exhibited. Sarah Bartmann's representation becomes a matter of balancing to what extent repetition of colonialist and misogynist material can work to subvert original intention. For the writers analysed here, as well as for the scholars Abrahams and Magubane, this is an unworkable option.

The African feminist writers whose literary work I have analysed above suggests that representing Sarah Bartmann is more complicated than appears to be the case when at first encountered by her prominence in the academic imaginary. All gesture towards what is not knowable, invite us as readers to

'wrestle with ways of unifying concepts which [we] had come to believe were polarised opposites, or could be placed into neat hierarchies, such as is the case with speech/silence' (Motsemme 2004a, 4).

What has emerged is the manner in which re-presenting Sarah Bartmann within an African feminist imagination has to be about making her speak/visible through drawing attention to history's silences/blanks about her. All three literary texts suggest that rather than speaking about her

obliquely, it is possible to gesture to Sarah Bartmann's absent presence, contextualise and humanise her imaginatively. The literary texts examined herein participate in this project of

creating spaces which facilitate the telling of ... stories as connected as possible to [our own African feminist] centres of meaning, then we will have to take the risk of leaping into places which have become unfamiliar for many of us fed on the restricted diet of the power of articulation and the text (Motsemme 2004a, 5).

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