

**Beyond the “Baartman Trope”:  
Representations of Black Women’s Bodies from Early South African  
Proto-nationalisms to Postapartheid Nationalisms**

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I interrogate the discourses through which colonial stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality are uncritically invoked to serve new purposes, particularly in the service of postapartheid nationalist narratives. I argue not only that contemporary South African nationalism is imagined through gendered tropes, but also that the intersecting tropes of gender, race and sexuality which underlie postapartheid nation-building discourses propagate many of the same stereotypes about black women's sexuality first entrenched through colonial representations. More specifically, I argue that these tropes are repeatedly invoked through an uncritical deployment of what I term the "Baartman trope". With this term, I aim to signal the problematic discourses and systems of representation that have reduced Sara Baartman's embodied specificity to that of a generalised, stereotypical symbol, either as the archetypal hypersexualised victim of colonial exploitation and humiliation, or as the symbolic mother of the "new" South African nation.

Throughout this thesis, I not only offer a critique of the "Baartman trope" itself, but also aim to disrupt the decidedly reductive mode of representation which makes an essentialist stereotype such as the "Baartman trope" possible. To this end, I draw on performativity theory and the representational category of intimacy as ethical scholarly approaches to the politics of representation. I interrogate a wide range of literary texts, as well as a number of different scenes of representation that simultaneously challenge, perpetuate, refute and complicate essentialist and stereotypical representations of the black female body. Ranging from early South African proto-nationalist narratives to current postapartheid nationalist discourses, these different scenes of representation show that the same problematic tropes underlying colonial representations of gendered, racialised and sexualised black female bodies are more often than not re-imagined and reconstituted in the postcolonial imaginary. Furthermore, the fact that colonial systems of signification still underpin and influence postcolonial representations, albeit in new ways and to different purposes, highlights the inevitably ambiguous, unstable and hybridised nature of representing race, gender and sexuality in the South African postcolony.

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**SECTION 1**  
**Introduction**

## Chapter 1

### Colonial Spectres and Bodily Spectacles

Few bodies have been made to bear the symbolic weight of as many cultural and academic discourses as that of Sara Baartman's.<sup>1</sup> As an infamous symbol of colonial racism and sexism, the ghost of Sara Baartman's dissected body is almost habitually evoked as an affective argument against problematic portrayals of black feminine sexuality. Writers, journalists and commentators are often quick to draw parallels between Baartman's tragic history and troubling representations of the black female body. During the height of the gender controversy surrounding South African athlete Caster Semenya in 2009, for example, sympathetic journalists and media commentators readily compared the insensitivity of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) in submitting Semenya to invasive and degrading tests to Sara Baartman's exploited body, widely likening Semenya to "a twenty-first century 'Hottentot Venus'" (Ray 18; also see Davenport, Levy, Smith "Semenya Row"). When the then Swedish Minister of Culture, Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth, cut into the symbolic clitoris of a life-sized cake resembling a black woman on 15 April 2012 as part of World Art Day, numerous digital editorials, blogs and online comment pieces began referring to the cake as the "Sara Baartman cake", even though the art installation made no references to either Baartman's name or her particular history. In 2014, when two white female

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Baartman is variously known as Saartjie, Saartje, Sartjee or Sarah Bartmann or Baartmann. In *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus* (2009), Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully point out that the name "Sarah Bartmann", as institutionalised by the South African government around the time of her burial in 2002, originated at her baptism in England on 1 December 1811. Prior to this event, Crais and Scully claim, she was known as either Sara or Saartjie Baartman, the name that, according to most accounts, she enters the Western historical record with. It is crucial to note that we have no historical record of the name she received at birth. Crais and Scully argue that the "strange conflation of British and German spelling" in the name Sarah Bartmann probably resulted from "a phonetic interpretation by the scribe" (*Sara Baartman* 107). It is highly ironic that the South African government's discourse of nation building should appropriate this strange colonial rendition of her name and should proclaim "any other rendition of her name insulting", thereby institutionalising a "hastily scrawled" name in an English baptismal register (see Crais and Scully *Sara Baartman* 107). Many scholars, including Pumla Dineo Gqola, argue that employing the diminutive "Saartjie" infantilises Baartman and is therefore complicit in a colonial "history of naming and objectifying African subjects" (Gqola "Sarah Bartmann" 66). Throughout this study, I will use the name "Sara Baartman", but will retain other naming practices when quoting from sources. It is my hope that this multiplicity of names will, following Gqola and Gabeba Baderoon, point to ways in which Sara Baartman, the individual woman, is "ultimately unknowable", and that accepting this unknowability "is a way to accept her full humanity" (Baderoon "Our Speech" 216).

students from the University of Pretoria posted a photograph of themselves in blackface makeup and with excessively padded buttocks on social media, South African artist Zanele Muholi expressed her anger at the offensive image by stating that the students had “dressed as Sara Baartman and they painted their faces black” (quoted in Sosibo). Ntombenhle Shezi and Panashe Chigumadzi considered the image in the same light as Muholi: “It felt like Sarah Baartman all over again”, they wrote (Shezi and Chigumadzi).

All of these examples illustrate the regularity with which Sara Baartman’s body is symbolically invoked to address problematic contemporary representations of the black female body. A particularly incongruous example of this occurred when South African artist Brett Murray’s controversial painting, *The Spear*, was decried as “a Sarah Baartmanisation of the black body” (Dana). The use of Sara Baartman’s name as a concept noun, rather than a proper noun, not only signals the extent to which her body and her painful history have been reduced to discursive tools. It also points to an unusual conflation of the colonial eroticisation of the black female body with the symbolic phallus of a patriarchal figurehead. This highlights crucial and pertinent questions with regard to contemporary South African representations of race, gender, sexuality and corporeality. It is for this reason that I want to introduce this study with a brief discussion of the media controversy surrounding *The Spear*.

*The Spear*, described by Murray as “a metaphor for power, greed and patriarchy”,<sup>2</sup> depicts former South African President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed in a pose parodying a Soviet-era propaganda poster of Vladimir Lenin.<sup>3</sup> *The Spear* sparked heated debates in South Africa on censorship, artistic freedom and the ethics of representation when the ruling political party, the African National Congress (ANC), appealed to the South African High Court to have *The Spear* removed from the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, to have all printed material relating to the exhibition destroyed, and to have the image banned from electronic media. The two principal arguments in debates surrounding the painting focused either, on the one hand, on South Africa’s painful

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<sup>2</sup> Murray’s full affidavit can be accessed at: <http://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2012/05/25/i-m-no-racist>. Site accessed 28 May 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Zuma resigned as the president of South Africa on 14 February 2018.

history of apartheid iconography and a continued colonial “othering” of African bodies, or, on the other hand, on the ANC’s current political problems and ways in which the ruling party used the painting to mobilise public anger in the president’s favour. Still, while South African digital and print media were flooded with daily comment pieces debating the politics of colonial “othering”, the ethics of representation and freedom of expression, hardly anyone commented on the fact that former President Jacob Zuma was regularly described as *a* twenty-first century Sara Baartman.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that former President Jacob Zuma could frequently and consistently be described as *a* Sara Baartman suggests that problematic representations of race, gender, sexuality and corporeality are uncritically invoked in the service of contemporary postapartheid South African nationalism. Throughout this thesis, I argue not only that contemporary South African nationalism is imagined through gendered tropes, but also that the specific, intersecting tropes of gender, race and sexuality which underlie postapartheid nation-building discourses propagate many of the same stereotypes about black feminine sexuality first entrenched through colonial representations. More specifically, I argue that these tropes are repeatedly invoked through an uncritical deployment of what I will term the “Baartman trope”. With this term, I want to signal the problematic discourses and systems of representation that have reduced Sara Baartman’s embodied specificity to that of a generalised, stereotypical symbol, either as the archetypal hypersexualised victim of colonial exploitation and humiliation, or as the symbolic mother of the “new” South African nation. Whenever I refer to the “Baartman trope”, I will retain the inverted commas. This constant use of inverted commas may seem jarring or disruptive. However, that is precisely why I am doing so. I want to signal clearly my discomfort and critical distance from the kinds of discourses that would reduce the name, personhood and particular history of Sara Baartman to a generalised concept noun, thereby erasing all embodied and historic specificity. I fully agree with Gayatri Spivak’s pithy comment in this regard: “There is no more dangerous pastime than transposing proper names into

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, S’Thembiso Msomi’s “Zuma has Become the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Saartjie Baartman” in *The Times* of 23 May 2012, David Mosoma’s “Zuma Treated Like Saartjie Baartman with His Portrayal in *The Spear*” in *Pretoria News* of 29 May 2012, and Simphiwe Dana’s “The ‘Sarah Baartmanisation’ of the Black Body” in *Mail & Guardian* of 12 June 2012.

common nouns, translating, and using them as sociological evidence” (quoted in Maggio 420).

Following the media controversy surrounding *The Spear*, Zuma explicitly invoked the image of Sara Baartman’s exploited body when he told the National Assembly that “[w]e are building a new nation out of the ashes of colonialism and apartheid” and that

we [do not] want to re-open the wounds of the humiliation of Sara Baartman, who was painfully exhibited in London and Paris, and whose genitals and brain were stored in a pickle jar and shown off in a museum until the administration led by President Mandela demanded the return of her remains for a decent burial.<sup>5</sup>

Given that Zuma’s speech noticeably highlights the legacy of Sara Baartman’s suffering as a product of both colonialism and apartheid, and therefore as the antithesis to the ruling party’s discourse of postapartheid nation building, such an uncritical equivalence between the real history of Sara Baartman’s humiliation and Murray’s satirical portrayal in *The Spear* not only evokes personal sympathy for the former president. It also inverts Murray’s intended criticism of Jacob Zuma as president, thereby mobilising public support for the ruling party. Indeed, public anger at the painting’s perceived racism soon threatened to overshadow the ruling party’s attempts at limiting both artists’ and newspapers’ freedom of expression, and, by extension, obscured the ruling party’s attempts at censoring media criticism of the president.

Since the historical figure of Sara Baartman occupies a very prominent place in the postapartheid South African national imaginary, it is clear that comparisons between the colonial spectre of Baartman’s exploited body and the political spectacle surrounding *The Spear* were deliberately evoking a very strong affective response against what was validly seen as the painting’s dehumanisation of black South Africans. However, it is

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<sup>5</sup> For the full address, visit: <http://www.africalegalbrief.com/index.php/component/content/article/533-zuma-hits-back-at-his-critics.html>. Site accessed 10 June 2012.

important to clearly distinguish between a satirical portrayal of former President Jacob Zuma, invented by an artist's imagination, and the very real exploitation and humiliation suffered by Sara Baartman, the woman. Sara Baartman and the former president occupy such radically different positions in terms of historical context, personal freedom, public support and financial, social, political and gendered power, that uncritical parallels describing the former president of South Africa as *a* twenty-first century Sara Baartman seem ludicrous at best. The uncritical use of such a phrase and, even more importantly, the fact that the ruling party could appropriate this kind of discourse to serve a nationalist rhetoric which could deflect political critique from the president, clearly illustrate how postapartheid nation-building discourses both rely on and subtly propagate the "Baartman trope". In this way, the embodied specificity of the life, history and suffering of the individual woman, Sara Baartman, is completely erased. Her name becomes a generalised, convenient symbol of colonial racism and sexism that can be used to illuminate or substantiate a variety of arguments that are very far removed from her particular history and experience.

Furthermore, the fact that the ruling party's rhetoric could appropriate the humiliation that a disempowered and vulnerable woman suffered as a means to express outrage at a satirical portrayal of one of the most powerful men in the country highlights the ruling party's particular deployment of the "Baartman trope" in order to legitimise a postapartheid nation-building discourse. Hurtful colonial gender stereotypes are held up as a foil to postapartheid nationalism, ensuring a sense of outrage at imperial and apartheid injustices, but thereby also effectively obscuring the political interests of the ruling elite.

It is important to touch briefly on the particular rhetorical value that nudity played in the controversy surrounding *The Spear*, as I will explicitly draw on nudity as a category of representation in later chapters of this study. The public outcry against *The Spear* did not seem to stem from its satirical portrayal of the president, as such, but rather seemed to stem from the fact that Murray created a depiction of an exposed black penis for his intended satire. For many viewers, a nude representation of the black body – and, more

specifically, a nude representation of the black body created by a white artist – was synonymous with hurtful colonial and apartheid stereotypes of black bodies and of African sexuality. “It wasn’t the artist’s appropriation and recasting of Zuma as a latter-day Vladimir Lenin that caused my discomfort,” Sabelo Ndlangisa, for example, asserted at the time, “it was, no doubt, the depiction of Zuma’s penis that brought this uneasiness” (Ndlangisa). “Flawed as Zuma is as the [former] head of state,” S’Thembiso Msomi also wrote, “no one deserves to be humiliated in that way. Especially not in a country with a long and shameful history of publicly putting its black males in ‘a state of undress’” (Msomi). Given the exploitative and hurtful reality of South Africa’s past, it is not surprising that a representation of the nude black body created by a white artist would evoke the fraught legacies of both colonial and apartheid exploitation. For now, I want to emphasise the fact that both of the above-mentioned writers explicitly link their discomfort and anger at the portrayal of the president’s exposed genitals in *The Spear* to the history of Sara Baartman’s exploitation and humiliation. Indeed, of all the writers who publically documented their pain and distress at seeing *The Spear*, Simphiwe Dana put it most emphatically. People who were upset by Murray’s portrayal of the president’s exposed genitals, Dana insisted, “felt ‘Sarah Baartmanised’” (Dana).

I make no attempt to diminish the emotional weight and value of these sentiments, nor do I deny the deep pain that these writers put into words. Colonial discourses that pathologised black sexuality, as well as South Africa’s history of institutionalised racism, mean that Murray’s painting can most certainly and justifiably be interpreted as emblematic of a continued and hurtful colonial gaze. It is the fact that all three of the above-mentioned writers specifically link their arguments to Sara Baartman’s history and, more particularly, the use of phrases such as “Sara Baartmanisation” and “Sara Baartmanised”, which frames my point of departure for this study. While I acknowledge the validity of these writers’ arguments, it is their particular deployment of the “Baartman trope” which I find telling. It highlights the relative ease and regularity with which Sara Baartman’s symbolic body is “cast” – to borrow Meg Samuelson’s key term (*Remembering* 85) – in the service of postapartheid nationalism.

Samuelson uses the trope of casting to refer both to the literal plaster cast in which Sara Baartman's body was "fixed" by nineteenth-century science and, "more obliquely, to Judith Butler's understanding of gendered identity as performative practice" (*Remembering* 87). She argues that nineteenth-century science not only cast Sara Baartman's body in plaster, but consequently also "cast" her as the "icon of black female sexuality within the imperial theatre" (*Remembering* 87). Through the trope of casting, Samuelson examines the diverse roles in which Sara Baartman's body has been "cast", as well as the various effects that are produced through such performances. For Samuelson, Sara Baartman's "body – already cast as 'sexualised savage' – was re-cast and re-covered in service to the project of legitimating the 'new' South Africa, as it traversed from the imperial stage of the early nineteenth century to the nation-building theatre of the transitional era" (*Remembering* 85). Drawing on her use of the trope of casting, I argue that Sara Baartman's symbolic body is so frequently "cast" in service to such a wide variety of popular, scientific, academic and political discourses, that her very name, at times, is reduced to a trope.

This is why I find the use of a phrase such as "the Sarah Baartmanisation of the black body" (Dana) so unsettling. In a certain sense, this concept noun also contains an embedded verb: namely, to "Sara Baartmanise" something or someone, or to turn something or someone into "a" Sara Baartman. When Simphiwe Dana invokes Sara Baartman's name in this way, her use of Baartman's name as a concept noun is clearly intended as a critical mechanism with which to denounce the public humiliation of the naked black body. However, the invocation of Sara Baartman's name as a form of shorthand with which to condemn problematic representations of black bodies – which can, seemingly, be applied to any given black body in any given context – dislodges Sara Baartman's embodied specificity from her identity. In the preface to the 2015 edition of *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sara Baartman*, Natasha Gordon-Chipembere makes a similar argument in relation to the "Sara Baartman cake" mentioned in the opening pages of this thesis. Gordon-Chipembere argues that the media's criticism of the art installation, by referring to the cake as "the 'Hottentot Venus' cake", was "highly problematic for its assumptive appropriation of Sarah Baartman as a trope for all

things Black, female and victimised” (xi). In this way, the “Baartman trope” reduces Sara Baartman’s embodied specificity to nothing more than a trope, and by “casting” such a trope in the service of a postapartheid nationalist discourse, the highly problematic description of former President Jacob Zuma as “a” contemporary Sara Baartman is made possible. This highlights the extent to which Sara Baartman’s symbolic body is still colonised by discursive practices of racial and gender stereotyping. Most of all, it signals the extent to which colonial stereotypes of race and gender are still central to the imagining and institutionalising of postcolonial nationalism.

It is hardly a new insight to claim that nationalisms are gendered. Indeed, that nationalisms are gendered has become an accepted truism within feminist postcolonial studies. Taking Benedict Anderson’s now-famous phrase describing nations as “imagined communities”<sup>6</sup> as a point of departure, a number of feminist scholars have convincingly shown that the nation is most often imagined through gendered tropes. “All nations depend on powerful constructions of gender,” Anne McClintock, for example, writes in *Imperial Leather* (353). Nations, she argues, have “historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalisation of gender *difference*”, where the “gender difference between men and women serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men” (*Imperial Leather* 353-354). According to Elleke Boehmer, within the “symbolic economy of nationalism”, male gender roles are metonymic, while female gender roles are metaphoric (“Motherlands” 233). Boehmer argues that the “new postcolonial nation is historically a male-constructed space,” which is “narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers,” and in which “women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition” (*Stories* 22). Writing specifically about postapartheid South African nationalism, Samuelson investigates how narratives of remembering, recovering and reconciliation, which marked both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the discourse of a “new” South African “rainbow nation”, shape women “into the ideal forms that reflect the desired

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. However, as Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tétreault point out, Anderson omits gender entirely from the theoretical framework underlying *Imagined Communities* (see “Gender and Nationalism” 11).

national body” (*Remembering* 2). This leads Samuelson to argue that women, rather than men, “bear the symbolic weight of nationalism; their bodies are the contested sites on which national identities are erected and unity is forged” (*Remembering* 2).

Colonial identities, like national identities, are also often imagined and maintained through gendered tropes. Ann Laura Stoler writes in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* that the “salience of sexual symbols as graphic representations of colonial dominance is relatively unambiguous and well established” (44). Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), one of the founding texts of postcolonial studies, established postcolonial theory as a discipline in which scholars regularly interrogate colonial representations of sexualised female bodies in order to illustrate how gender and sexuality become the organising tropes with which to imagine imperial power relations. In brief, Said argues that colonial representations of the Orient draw on gendered tropes of femininity and sexuality in order to portray it as both feminised and sexualised, until the trope of female sexual subjugation “fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled” (6). Female bodies therefore bear the symbolic weight not only of postcolonial nationalism, but also of colonial subjugation, as the female body comes to stand for the feminised and sexualised land inviting imperial domination and control.

While postapartheid nationalism is indeed imagined and maintained through gendered tropes, the particular tropes of gender, race and sexuality which underlie postapartheid nation-building discourses often propagate stereotypes of black feminine sexuality reminiscent of colonial discourses. Indeed, representations of gendered and racialised bodies are often utilised to serve both imperial and postcolonial nationalist projects. Samuelson has convincingly shown how “decolonising, nation-building discourses depend on gendered representations previously employed to support the colonial endeavour” (*Remembering* 85). She argues that these representations “enable us to trace continuities in the exploitation and abuse of women’s bodies, from the colonial past to the post-apartheid present” (*Remembering* 91). For Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, the very process of “constructing a nationalist anti-colonial symbolism” is entangled with

practices of “female stereotyping” (3). Following Lewis and Mills, I would go so far as to argue that when it comes to contemporary South African postapartheid nationalism, the gendered tropes through which nationalism is imagined are almost exclusively represented as stereotypes.

However, I am not suggesting that contemporary postapartheid nationalism simply invokes and deploys the stereotype of the “Bartman trope” in exactly the same way that colonial discourses and systems of power would have done. While it is possible to clearly trace continuities in the representation of gendered and racialised bodies from the colonial past to the post-apartheid present, I am more interested in the ways in which particular colonial stereotypes – like those underpinning the “Bartman trope” – are uncritically invoked to serve new purposes. Following Achille Mbembe’s work on the complexities of postcolonial signification, I aim to highlight three closely interrelated points: first of all, that the postcolony often repeats the same systems of signification first entrenched by the colony; secondly, that many of the same problematic tropes underlying colonial representations of gendered, racialised and sexualised female bodies are re-imagined and reconstituted in the postcolonial imaginary; and, thirdly, that the tendency of colonial systems of signification to endure yields tremendous ambivalence and instability within postcolonial representations.

In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe argues that the construction of a colonial imaginary is not necessarily exclusive to the colonial context. The postcolony, Mbembe argues, does not simply follow on and thus replace the colony. Indeed, the postcolony often repeats colonial systems of signification and self-representation. According to Mbembe, Africa still remains one of the central metaphors through which the West “represents the origin of its own norms” and “develops a self-image”, but then also integrates this same image into the “set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity” (2). Therefore, since Africa both was and remains the “fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it thinks it signifies”, Africa is not merely part of the West’s “imaginary significations” (2). Paradoxically, it *is* one of those “imaginary significations” (2). In highlighting this paradoxical signification, Mbembe

illustrates the immense difficulty in delineating the “colonial” from the “postcolonial” moment. The postcolony would still have to signify an imagined African “Other” in order for the West to be able to imagine itself as “West”, while, at the same time, the postcolony attempts to imagine a new self-representation that is no longer tied to its representation in and by the West. Therefore, according to Mbembe, every age, be it colonial or postcolonial, “is in reality a combination of several temporalities”, while every age contains “contradictory significations to different actors” (16).

It is thus near impossible to identify a single, fixed or unified point that could be identified as either “the colonial” or “the postcolonial” moment. Mbembe’s notion of the postcolony highlights a “variety of trajectories” that are “neither convergent nor divergent”, but are “interlocked” and “paradoxical” (16). In this way, by highlighting the complexities of postcolonial narratives, politics and culture, Mbembe problematises the very idea of trying to pinpoint “the” postcolony. Drawing on Mbembe’s insights, I argue that the South African postcolony consists of a number of interlocked, non-convergent and non-linear trajectories, all variously and simultaneously contributing to the inevitably fissured and complex reality of postcolonial politics, culture and signification.

Mbembe’s work highlights one reason why the term “postcolonial” has been, and remains, fraught.<sup>7</sup> According to Gabriella Mazzon, the term “postcolonial” is often seen as problematic “due to its connection with the temporal meaning of post-, allegedly also implying the end of the influence of the ideology of colonialism” (705). However, as Colleen Mack-Canty eloquently puts it: “The ‘post’ in postcolonialism does not indicate that colonialism is over but, rather, that colonial legacies continue to exist” (164). It is for this reason that I use the terms “postapartheid” and “postcolonial”, rather than their hyphenated forms. The hyphen, in visually separating the prefix “post” from the rest of

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<sup>7</sup> The term “postcolonial” is especially fraught in the case of South Africa, given that the Union of South Africa, founded in 1910, only gained nominal independence from Britain. It still functioned as a dominion of the British Empire until 1934, when the Union of South Africa became an independent sovereign state and thus gained formal independence from Britain. Postcolonial South Africa could therefore refer to the founding of the Union in 1910, to the formal end of colonial rule in 1934, or it could refer to the founding of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 and the country’s subsequent withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Yet the South African apartheid state of 1948 to 1991 can be read as a different, but on-going example of an oppressive, neo-colonial power, further complicating the notion of the South African postcolony.

the term, overemphasises a linear narrative trajectory of historic moments, one following after the other, which finally culminates in a narrative of liberation, of change, of a clear break between the past and the new era of the “post”. Bill Ashcroft, on the other hand, insists upon the hyphenated form, as he believes that the hyphen “puts an emphasis on the discursive and material effects of the historical ‘fact’ of colonialism, while the term ‘postcolonialism’ has come to represent an increasingly indiscriminate attention to cultural difference and marginality of all kinds, whether as a consequence of the historical experience of colonialism or not” (*Post-colonial Transformation* 10). For Ashcroft, the hyphenated form “has a very great deal to say about the materiality of political oppression”, while he finds the unhyphenated form to be guilty of “unfocused, abstract [...] poststructuralist theorising” (*Post-colonial Transformation* 10). However, I would argue that the hyphen, in marking the “post” as a clear prefix, suggests that such a prefix merely functions as a historical marker following the substantive term, thereby inadvertently turning either apartheid or colonialism into the marker of “proper”, determining history. While Anne McClintock uses the hyphenated term “post-colonialism” in her essay “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” she nevertheless questions the “post”-ness of postcolonialism. “[I]n its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism,” she writes, postcolonial theory “runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power” (88).

By not separating the prefix “post” from either “postapartheid” or “postcolonial”, I want to draw particular attention to the continuities and discontinuities of both colonial and apartheid legacies within the postcolony, which, as Mbembe points out, are neither convergent nor divergent, but are simultaneously interlocked and paradoxical (see Mbembe 16). I do so for three reasons. First of all, I want to highlight the fact that the “discursive remnants” of the colonial context, as Sara Mills describes it, are clearly still present in the postcolony (“Discontinuity” 75). As a result, Mills argues that “the” postcolonial moment should never be “considered [as] a period or condition which is marked off from the colonial in a clear way” (“Discontinuity” 75-76). Secondly, I want to draw particular attention to Mbembe’s claim that the internal coherence of the postcolony

rests on a system of signification in which colonial stereotypes are re-formed. Mbembe argues that while systems of signification within the postcolony consist of a variety of paradoxical legacies, it nonetheless has an “internal coherence”, which rests on a “specific system of signs”, and, more importantly, on “a particular way of fabricating simulacra or *re-forming stereotypes*” (102, emphasis added). Therefore, following Mbembe, I argue that many of the same stereotypes that were first produced as part of a nineteenth-century colonial imaginary are re-imagined and reproduced in the postcolony, where they are both re-cast in service to current nationalist narratives and uncritically invoked to serve new purposes. This brings me to my third point; given this variety of paradoxical and interlocked temporalities, Mbembe points out that the postcolony is often “chaotically pluralistic” (102). Since the postcolony consists of several contradictory temporalities at once, postcolonial representations tend to draw on a number of contradictory significations and discourses at the same time. I find Mbembe’s description of the postcolony as “chaotically pluralistic” (102) particularly useful, given that postcolonial representations can be assenting, disruptive, ambiguous, paradoxical and syncretic, all at the same time.

This, however, does not mean that colonial discourses and systems of signification are all that we have, and are all that we ever will have (see Mills “Discontinuity” 86). Rather, this highlights the inevitably fissured and hybridised nature of representing race, gender and sexuality within the South African postcolony. Throughout this thesis, the textual analysis in many of the chapters to follow will illustrate the resulting instability in representation when attempting to trace the continuities and discontinuities of “the colonial” within “the postcolonial”. In Chapter Three, for example, the textual analysis of Olive Schreiner’s early, proto-nationalist vision of a future South Africa in *From Man to Man* highlights the ambiguities inherent in Schreiner’s fictional attempts to both challenge and displace essentialist colonial stereotypes. Schreiner’s text imagines a future South Africa where racial and gendered equality is possible, while, at the same time, the novel represents the figure of Clartje as both stereotypically sexualised and racialised. The resulting novel is a “chaotically pluralistic” representation of its black female

characters, reasserting colonial stereotypes even as the author consciously tries to challenge and subvert these stereotypes through her writing.

For now, to return to my discussion of *The Spear*, I find Mbembe's theorisation of the postcolony crucial to understanding why former President Zuma's statement deliberately invoked the "Baartman trope" in order to dismiss *The Spear* as an unsophisticated continuation of colonial racism, as well as his suggestion that the painting's portrayal of his person would run counter to postapartheid nation building. In an official statement to the press, ANC spokesman Jimmy Manyi stated that *The Spear* "goes against the grain of African morality, culture and the spirit of *Ubuntu*, as well as nation building" (Manyi, emphasis added). In the statement, Manyi calls explicitly upon "the media" to be "more circumspect in what they publish as we rebuild a South Africa that was ravaged by apartheid" (Manyi). This point is carried even further in former President Zuma's own address. According to Zuma's speech, it is precisely because "[w]e are building a new nation out of the ashes of colonialism and apartheid" that "we [do not] want to re-open the wounds of the humiliation of Sara Baartman" (Zuma). This argument first reminds its audience of the colonial exploitation and dehumanisation of the black body by evoking the affective memory of Sara Baartman's suffering. Zuma specifically reminds his audience that Sara Baartman's genitals were "stored in a pickle jar", thereby drawing attention to a colonial obsession with the supposedly hypersexualised black female body (Zuma). This subtly draws a parallel between Sara Baartman's exploited body and the portrayal of the president's genitals in *The Spear*. Then, by claiming that a painting such as *The Spear* can, to use former President Zuma's rather clichéd phrase, "re-open the wounds of the humiliation of Sara Baartman" (Zuma), it suggests that the ruling party's censoring of the painting will save and protect the nation from the pain that the colonial, dehumanising gaze would inflict upon the wounded – and now suddenly female – symbolic national body. This particular deployment of the "Baartman trope" suggests that colonial eroticisation is still viewed as a metaphoric feminisation, which is managed through the symbolic site of the black female body. Even when a painting such as *The Spear* is decried as a racist example of colonial "othering" for its attempts at parodying the symbolic body of ruling patriarchy, it can only be vilified by referring to the colonial

eroticisation of the black female body. In other words, even a painting depicting the symbolic phallus of a patriarchal leader becomes a “Sara Baartmanisation” of the black body, for then the humiliation caused by the colonial gaze remains contained within the symbolic site of the black female body.

Furthermore, this particular nationalist discourse appropriates a colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body for its own advantage; by claiming that a painting such as *The Spear* can revive the suffering of Sara Baartman, the colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body is institutionalised in the rhetoric of postapartheid nationalism, and, as a result, any attempt to challenge this discourse could be vilified and dismissed as an instance of colonial racism. This is not to suggest in any way that the painful legacies of colonial racism are no longer present in the postcolony. What my analysis of Zuma’s speech does show, is that while his argument draws heavily on a sense of outrage at the colonial eroticisation and exploitation of African bodies, it acknowledges neither the explicitly gendered dimension to the colonial gaze, nor the subtle ways in which the former president’s own argument both relies on and thus propagates the very colonial stereotype that he is holding up as an affront to postcolonial nationalism.

This, however, does not imply that exactly the same damaging colonial stereotype of Sara Baartman’s hypersexualised body is simply being perpetuated through postcolonial nationalist discourse. Indeed, the “Baartman trope” is deployed very particularly by evoking the painful history of Sara Baartman’s exploited body and the accompanying trope of victimhood. It is precisely because the majority of South Africans respond to the history of Sara Baartman’s suffering with genuine empathy that the “Baartman trope” can be cast so effectively in the service of postcolonial nationalism. Furthermore, while contemporary nationalist imaginings of race, gender and sexuality are certainly reminiscent of colonial practices, I am certainly not suggesting that exactly the same colonial denigration of the black female body is simply being perpetuated in the postcolony. This, I would argue, is what contemporary nationalist rhetoric is erroneously trying to assert; for example, when former President Zuma claims that *The Spear* can “re-

open the wounds of the humiliation of Sara Baartman, who was painfully exhibited in London and Paris” (Zuma), he is positing an uncritical equivalence between the colonial denigration of Sara Baartman, the woman, and the ruling party’s uncritical re-appropriation of the “Baartman trope” to serve their own political interests. Throughout this thesis, I interrogate the discourses through which colonial stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality are uncritically invoked to serve new purposes, particularly in the service of a postapartheid nationalist rhetoric.

The colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body has been central to the (re)imagining of race and gender in the “new” South Africa since the final days of apartheid. In an article titled “The Politics of Feminism in South Africa” (1996), Desiree Lewis recalls the first South African conference on Women and Gender, held at the University of Natal (today the University of KwaZulu-Natal) in 1991. The conference was attended by 300 delegates from southern Africa, western Europe, Britain and the United States. According to Lewis, the conference “posed a significant challenge to the hegemony of patriarchal scholarship in South Africa” (“Politics” 91). While Lewis does not elaborate on the historical significance of hosting South Africa’s first conference dedicated to women’s and gender issues in 1991, she does note the enthusiasm of the conference delegates, particularly that of South African exiles, at having the conference in South Africa at the time, as well as the “novelty” (“Politics” 91) of hosting an international academic forum on women and gender in South Africa after many years of academic and cultural isolation.

Given that the early 1990s heralded the end of apartheid in South Africa, the conference delegates would very likely have seen South Africa as a country offering radically new and optimistic possibilities for social change. One year after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, the 1991 conference took place in the same year that former President F.W. De Klerk signed a national peace accord promising to end all apartheid legislation. It was also the same year in which the ANC held its first National Conference inside South Africa since 1959. These radical political changes are crucial to understanding the enthusiasm of the conference delegates, as South Africa’s changing political landscape

would have seemed an ideal arena for rethinking oppressive patriarchal, racist and sexist stereotypes.

Lewis, however, specifically recalls the logo that was printed on the Natal conference delegates' folders.



Fig.1 "Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa" (Lewis "Politics" 95).

The logo represents the silhouette of a black woman as "a tiny-headed, naked, burdened, bent-over Other, 'present' only as object for scrutiny by the self-defining, theorising subject" (Lewis "Politics" 94). Lewis describes the image on the conference folders in the following way:

Balancing precariously on one leg, head poised in an attitude of appeal, her arms plaintively outstretched as she grips something enigmatically "ethnic", this construct of black womanhood begs her deliverance. The image also feeds into sexist and racist associations of blackness and womanhood with exaggerated sexuality and bodiliness. ("Politics" 95)

Lewis argues that the representation of black womanhood on the delegates' folders is symptomatic of a larger problematic, universalising discourse that was present throughout the conference. Local conference delegates, representative of a very small group of the women of southern Africa, "were unproblematically speaking for [...] the majority of women of the region" ("Politics" 95). Cheryl de la Rey recalls the 1991 conference as a "landmark event" in many respects; not only as the first conference in South Africa dedicated solely to women's and gender studies, but also as one of the first academic events where black southern African feminists publically expressed concerns about the dominance of white women's voices (6). While Lewis's and De la Rey's analyses point to the troubling lack of awareness of positionality within the South African feminist academy of the mid-1990s, I would like to focus on the material production of the image on the 1991 conference folders, especially when taking the historic significance of the moment of its production into account.

When one considers the material production of this particular image, Mbembe's argument that colonial stereotypes form an integral part of the postcolony's self-representation rings especially true. This is a clear example of how systems of signification within the postcolony re-form colonial stereotypes; the image on the conference delegates' folders very obviously re-inscribes a colonial stereotype of a primitive, animal-like, hypersexualised, racialised and degenerate black female figure – a stereotypical example of the "Bartman trope", in other words – in the key transitional moment of 1991. The image on the conference folders suggests that a very particular colonial stereotype of the black female body became a central metaphor for imagining race and gender in the postapartheid South African nation state. Indeed, the very fact that feminist scholars would reproduce a colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body at such a crucial historic moment poses important questions with regard to the construction of racial and gendered stereotypes in the postapartheid South African national imaginary.

In this way, the logo of the 1991 Natal conference serves as a concrete example of how the cultural debris of colonial histories continued, in the early 1990s, to shape and control

contemporary and supposedly postcolonial ways of thinking, tropes and practices, long after the colonial state and its policies have been dismantled. The gendered and racial stereotypes underpinning this particular construction of black womanhood recalls an Enlightenment discourse of “scientific” racism, which depicted the black female body in terms of hypersexuality and exaggerated corporeality. Lewis comments on the revealing similarities between the representation of the black female body on the conference folders and nineteenth-century European eugenics, noting how the “physiognomy and sexuality [of black women] were projected as the incarnation of primitiveness, [as] the antithesis of nineteenth-century [white] superiority” (“Politics” 96).

One aspect that Lewis does not mention is the fact that the image on the conference folders deliberately evokes Southern African Khoesan rock art. This mimicking of Khoesan art might suggest the representation of an “authentic”, precolonial African womanhood. However, the smallness of the woman’s head in relation to the rest of her body, particularly with regard to the exaggerated prominence of her buttocks, not only calls to mind nineteenth-century Europe’s obsession with Khoesan genitalia and so-called “steatopygia”. It also firmly casts the black female body in the realm of hypersexuality and corporeality, as opposed to the scientific rationality of the colonial metropolitan subject. The figure’s sagging breasts, which are completely out of proportion to the rest of her body, draws on nineteenth-century stereotypes about black women’s supposedly deviant, primitive and animal-like sexuality. In placing a naked, rounded, sexualised, female Khoesan figure – in other words, a stereotypical representation of the “Bartman trope” – on the Natal conference’s folders, the organisers re-inscribed a colonial stereotype of African women’s bodies and sexuality during the first South African conference dedicated to women’s and gender issues. Lewis specifically notes the “revealing similarities” between the “Othering display of black women on the folders of the Natal conference delegates” and visual depictions of Sara Baartman (“Politics” 95). The Natal conference’s folders thus offer a concrete example how a very specific colonial stereotype of black feminine sexuality was uncritically re-inscribed and reproduced in the transitional moment of 1991, when South African scholars could have imagined race and gender in new and liberating ways.

Twenty-seven years have passed since the 1991 Natal conference. Today, the very fact that *The Spear* can be described as a “Sara Baartmanisation” of the black body, as well as the fact that former President Jacob Zuma can be described as a twenty-first century Sara Baartman, suggests that colonial stereotypes of the black female body still underpin contemporary nationalism, and that the essentialist “Baartman trope” is uncritically invoked and deployed in the service of postapartheid nation-building discourses. When a painting such as *The Spear* challenges the symbolic body of ruling patriarchy, or the rhetoric of postapartheid nationalism, the black female body remains the symbolic site where the discourses of colonialism and postapartheid nationalism are both played out and rigidly maintained.

In the course of this thesis, I interrogate a wide range of literary texts, as well as a number of different scenes of representation, that simultaneously challenge, perpetuate, draw on, refute and complicate essentialist and stereotypical representations of the black female body. Ranging from early South African proto-nationalist narratives to current postapartheid nationalist discourses, these different scenes of representation show that the same problematic tropes underlying colonial representations of gendered, racialised and sexualised black female bodies are more often than not re-imagined and reconstituted in the postcolonial imaginary. However, the fact that colonial systems of signification still underpin and influence postcolonial representations, albeit in new ways and to different purposes, highlights the inevitably hybridised nature of representing race, gender and sexuality in the South African postcolony.

My discussion is divided into three main sections. The first section comprises Chapters One and Two, and introduces both the main argument and the methodology. Chapter Two, the next chapter in this introductory section, outlines the theoretical approach. My main methodological challenge centres on offering a critique of the reductive modes of representation which underlie the “Baartman trope” without, first of all, propagating the same essentialising discourses that would reduce Sara Baartman’s embodied specificity to a mere discursive trope, or, secondly, perpetuating the “Baartman trope” in an attempt to substantiate my own argument. I aim to disrupt essentialist and universalising

discourses by drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and on the representational category of intimacy as two ethical scholarly approaches to the politics of representation.

The term "intimacy" invokes a number of closely related, yet distinct concepts: love, desire, passion, affect, friendship, care, family life, familiarity, personal connection and the private. Even as a scholarly term, "intimacy" does not have a single or fixed meaning. As Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, editors of *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time* (2012) point out, feminist approaches to the intimate have distinguished a number of different rubrics within the sphere of intimacy (5). They summarise the current field of queer and feminist intimacy theory by highlighting the diversity of scholarly approaches to the intimate: from Wendy Brown's feminist politics of *ressentiment*, to Michal Hardt's influential term *affective labour*, to Patricia Clough's focus on the "affective turn" within feminist scholarship, to Eve Sedgwick's differentiation of affect as both *feeling* and *attachment*, to Sara Ahmed's work on intimate attachments (see Pratt and Rosner 5-7). The realm of the intimate is therefore not only an area of investigation within feminist and queer scholarship, but also a method or an approach to scholarship itself (see Pratt and Rosner 8). It is in this sense that I employ intimacy throughout this study; I see intimacy as an ethical approach to scholarship, as well as a category of representation that insists upon relationality and reciprocity, and thus resists universalising assumptions. The intimate, as Pratt and Rosner writes, directs us to "an ethical stance toward the world – namely, an approach that neither simplifies nor stereotypes, but is attentive to specific histories and geographies" (20).

The connection between intimacy and performativity theory might not be immediately apparent, given that performativity theory is, broadly speaking, an account of the performative and discursive role of language, whereas the idea of intimacy immediately invokes materiality, embodiment and lived experience. However, both performativity theory and intimacy are fundamentally concerned with the discursively constructed power relations that govern the ways in which subjects become eligible for recognition. Performativity, according to Judith Butler, has everything to do with who "can become

produced as a recognisable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth sheltering and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning” (“Performativity” xii). Gender norms therefore determine how and in what way people can negotiate both public and private spaces. Gender norms, while discursive constructs, nevertheless determine whose performance of their gender will be upheld and whose will be publically denounced, whose most intimate relations will be recognised as worthy of protection and whose will be vilified, and, finally, whose humanity will be recognised as such, and whose will not. In this way, the performativity of gender has intensely intimate consequences.

Simply invoking the category of “the intimate” as an ethical response cannot, of course, unsettle entrenched power relations. Intimacy, after all, is itself equally caught up in a variety of relations of power, and can thus take on different political, social and cultural meanings depending on location and context. Intimacy, like gender norms, has its own performative dimension, and is also expressed through language. Still, when not privileging nor universalising certain structures of intimacy within scholarship, the realm of the intimate can offer feminist scholarship both a language and an approach with which to disrupt essentialising discourses.

In this way, I find that both performativity theory and the representational category of intimacy offer certain discursive strategies for disrupting essentialist stereotypes. I will argue this point more fully in the next chapter, but, in brief, performativity theory illustrates that there is no reason why a discursive construct such as the “Bartman trope” necessarily has to correspond to any given material body, thereby disrupting essentialist representations of “difference”. Performativity theory can thus disrupt the widespread tendency to reproduce, rather than dispute, essentialist discourses that still reify the “Bartman trope” as somehow being about particular “differences”, even when scholars and writers deliberately set out to challenge essentialist colonial stereotypes. As a category of representation, intimacy offers an ethical approach to the politics of representation by insisting upon relationality and reciprocity. It recognises “difference”

very differently from the way it is coded in colonising discourses of race and gender, thereby signalling a radically different way of seeing and representing bodies.

The second section, comprising Chapters Three to Five, is titled “Proto-nationalisms and the Politics of Representation”. It focuses on late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literary and visual texts in South Africa. These chapters explore some of the earliest South African literary and visual texts to re-entrench, challenge, disrupt or complicate the perpetuation of nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes of the supposedly hypersexualised black female body. These chapters do not focus explicitly on the “Bartman trope”, but rather interrogate different ways in which a very particular colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body figured in the newly-emerging proto-nationalist discourses of the early twentieth century, as “South Africa” was first envisioned as a nation state. This not only serves as a useful point of departure for an analysis of contemporary representations of the “Bartman trope” which follows in the third section, but is also crucial in order to fully understand the impact that colonial stereotypes of the black female body have had, and still continue to have, on contemporary postcolonial South African literary and visual imaginings.

Chapter Three examines some of the earliest South African novels in English, interrogating ways in which a particular colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body became entrenched in the South African literary imaginary through the organising trope of motherhood. I begin by looking at H. Rider Haggard’s popular Victorian adventure romance, *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), one of the earliest English novels set in South Africa. My reading focuses on the novel’s implicit anxiety when confronted with nineteenth-century colonial assumptions about the supposed hypersexuality of African women. Haggard’s novel specifically avoids this stereotype *because* of the threat that the black female characters’ sexuality and generative power pose to the success of the novel’s highly masculinised imperial adventure.

I then trace the perpetuation of a colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body through early twentieth-century South African novels in English, focusing on Sarah

Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924) and Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* (1926). Both novels draw on nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes of the hypersexualised black female body in their respective attempts to imagine a new South African national identity. In this way, both novels engage with nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes in order to assert an early South African nationalist vision, though in very different ways.

In the case of *God's Stepchildren*, Millin locates her project of literary realism and her emerging literary nationalism within a discourse of scientific racism. However, Millin locates the events in *God's Stepchildren* in nineteenth-century British colonial South Africa. The novel thus consciously re-inscribes a colonial stereotype of the black female body in the emerging nationalist fiction of the 1920s.

Unlike both Haggard's colonial romance and Millin's early nationalist novel, Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* does not merely revert to colonial stereotypes. Instead, Schreiner grapples with the real complexities of racial and gendered power hierarchies in the South Africa of her time. Schreiner's depictions of intimacy in *From Man to Man* gestures towards an attempt to move beyond essentialist colonial stereotypes, and imagines a very different political future for South Africa than the one exemplified by Millin's novel.

Chapters Four and Five examine some of the earliest South African literary and visual texts to subvert nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes. Chapter Four explores Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's novel *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (1930). Plaatje utilises the genre of the colonial romance novel to counter a literary tradition of colonial stereotypes of African women, while drawing on nineteenth-century history to offer a vision of a different political future for South Africa. Plaatje's emphasis on female-centred narratives of political agency offers a radically new imagining of gender roles in the emerging South African nation. In this way, Plaatje's novel subverts the colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body and offers a profoundly different literary representation of black femininity.

Chapter Five explores one of the earliest public instances of South African visual representation to disrupt the colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body. It examines the first photographic beauty contest in *Bantu World*, a weekly newspaper, in which entrants were required to send in photographs of themselves. The entrants' fashioning of themselves as desirable and eroticised objects marks a very important shift from colonial, hypersexualised representations of African women, to the entrants' self-representation of their femininity as both fashionable and desirable. At the same time, it examines the paradoxical complexities of the photographic beauty contest, since the same contest also discursively disempowered female entrants as male editors sought to re-establish control over the kinds of representations of African female bodies they would allow in print.

The third section, titled "Postapartheid Nationalisms and the Politics of Representation", comprises Chapters Six to Eight. It focuses on contemporary, postapartheid South African representations of black female bodies that either disseminate or challenge the "Baartman trope", especially when confronted with the very particular deployment of the "Baartman trope" in service to current postapartheid nationalism. This section serves as the apotheosis of the thesis.

Chapter Six explores contemporary imaginative strategies that refuse to perpetuate the "Baartman trope". Following Pumla Dineo Gqola, I argue that acknowledging the very "unknowability" of Sara Baartman's life can more fully signal her humanity ("Sarah Bartmann" 102). I examine three postapartheid South African texts that refuse to portray Sara Baartman as either the silent victim of imperial racism and sexism, or as the postapartheid "national mother", namely Diana Ferrus's poem "I Have Come to Take You Home" (1998), K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000). All three texts – in different ways, and to very different effects – signal the "unknowability" of Sara Baartman, while drawing attention to the very particular deployment of the "Baartman trope" in the service of postapartheid South African nationalism.

Chapter Seven explores the 2009 gender controversy surrounding South African athlete Mokgadi Caster Semenya. It examines the particular form that the South African media's passionate defence of Semenya took. In comparing the global media's fascination with Semenya's gender and embodiment to the colonial humiliation of Sara Baartman, sympathetic media commentators deliberately evoked a powerful affective response in Semenya's defence. However, the media's support for Semenya was represented through conservative gendered tropes, which allowed a number of local politicians to appropriate media representations of Semenya's sex, gender and embodiment in order to promote a very specific nationalist, anti-imperial rhetoric. I argue that, in this particular case, both the media's passionate defence of Semenya and local politicians' appropriation of this defence were made possible by evoking the "Baartman trope" as a theoretical and emotive anchor.

The final chapter turns to the photographic work of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi in order to suggest one possible way of reading and representing the black female body which does not need to invoke the ghost of Sara Baartman's dissected body. Muholi's photographic portrayals of intimacy, embodied experience and self-definition effectively counter the over-determined and essentialising colonial stereotypes of black feminine sexuality inherent to the "Baartman trope". Muholi's work signals a possible way of both representing and looking at the black female body that is not overburdened by the weight of colonial visual history's essentialist representations. By drawing on both the representational categories of nudity and intimacy, I suggest a possible strategy for representing the black female body that would no longer depend on essentialist categories of representation as exemplified by the "Baartman trope".

## Chapter 2

### Postcolonial Feminism and the Politics of Representation

In 1988, Nadine Gordimer said in an interview: “There may be a particular connection between sexuality, sensuality, and politics uniquely inside South Africa. Because, after all, what is apartheid all about? It’s about the body. It’s about physical differences” (quoted in Munro *South Africa* xii). I find Gordimer’s claim about bodies and difference a compelling point of departure, even if I do not agree with it. For, if one logically extends Gordimer’s claim that apartheid is about the body, about actual physical differences, then one could likewise claim that colonialism is about bodies, about actual physical differences. If extended even further, this particular way of reasoning suggests that the colonial stereotype underpinning the “Baartman trope” is about a certain material body, about particular physical “differences”.

This illustrates the subtle, insidious ways in which colonial racism can continue to influence how people think about bodies and “difference” in the postcolony, long after the colonial state has been dismantled. For, even though apartheid, or indeed colonialism, can be said to be about bodies, it is not, contrary to what Gordimer claims, about real, material, physical differences. It is, firstly, about the appropriation of what people *think* about physical “difference” and, secondly, about the discursive processes that *create* these supposed differences through signification and representation. It is about ideological discourses that simultaneously draw on symbolic markers of supposed bodily “difference” and then produce bodies as “different” through discursive acts of representation. Finally, it is about the very real ways in which symbolic discourses about “difference” can impact the material, lived realities of physical bodies.

As Zimitri Erasmus argues in *Race Otherwise* (2017), race does matter, but it only matters because of “the meanings we give to it” (xxii). The human, Erasmus writes, “is not ontologically given in a way that is independent of the mind” (xxii). Race is therefore “neither *on* nor *in* the body, but [rather] lives in the words and the meanings that surround

it” (xxiv, emphasis in original). However, given that all human beings are “embedded in a racialised word”, no one can be “outside, above, or beyond race” (xxiii). In a similar way, the particular colonial stereotype underpinning the “Baartman trope” is not an ontological given in any way that is independent of the mind; it only matters because of the discursive meanings that are ascribed to it. The “Baartman trope” does have a complex correlation to embodiment, insofar as stereotypes can have an impact on embodied reality in tangible and damaging ways. However, stereotypical representations of “difference” are only very superficially about bodies. The very act of stereotyping actively denies embodiment, since every person’s particular embodied reality is physically, culturally, temporally and historically specific, whereas stereotypes are by definition reductive and essentialist.

Throughout my critique of the “Baartman trope”, I am therefore not primarily interested in representations of bodily “difference”. A great number of postcolonial scholars have already investigated ways in which graphic representations of the racialised and hypersexualised “Other” were constructed and produced in order to legitimise colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> I am more interested in the decidedly reductive mode of representation which makes a stereotype such as the “Baartman trope” possible in the first place. This mode of representation enacts a kind of violence in itself, even when it appears to be marshalled in the service of nationalist narratives about the renewal of the nation and the restoration of justice in the aftermath of colonial and apartheid injustices. The previous chapter highlighted ways in which the “Baartman trope” was uncritically invoked by a very particular nationalist discourse which hoped to dismiss *The Spear* as an unsophisticated continuation of colonial “othering”. The very fact that former President Jacob Zuma could be described as *a Sara Baartman* clearly illustrates the violently reductive nature of the “Baartman trope” as a mode of representation. Throughout this study, I not only offer a critique of the “Baartman trope” itself, but also aim to disrupt the decidedly reductive

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Sander Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies” (1985), Londa Schiebinger’s *Nature’s Body* (1993), Elleke Boehmer’s “Transfiguring” (1993), Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* (1995), Yvette Abrahams’ “The Great Long National Insult” (1997), Ann Laura Stoler’s *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002), Gabeba Baderoon’s “This is Our Speech” (2011) and Desiree Lewis’s “Representing African Sexualities” (2011).

mode of representation which makes an essentialist stereotype such as the “Baartman trope” possible.

The symbolic violence inherent in this reductive mode of representation is not quite the same as what Gayatri Spivak terms “epistemic violence” (280), even though the two are linked. The clearest example of epistemic violence, Spivak writes, is the “heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. The project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (280-281). I want to highlight Spivak’s use of the term “precarious” here, as I will turn to Judith Butler’s work on precarity and intimacy more fully in the course of this chapter. In short, epistemic violence occurs when scholars do not acknowledge or draw attention to their own positions of privilege and their own self-interest when it comes to the production of knowledge. Spivak highlights the dangers of false “transparency” (279) in the work of feminist scholars who disavow their own role in both speaking for and representing women as the subjects, and sometimes as the objects, of their own research. For J. Maggio, it is precisely through such an “act of epistemic knowing/violence” that the “essentialisation of the other” is always seen as “the reinforcement of the menace of empire”, and is never viewed as a direct result of representation by Western feminist intellectuals (see Maggio 420).

I take this caution against an “essentialisation of the other” in feminist scholarly representation very seriously. Throughout this study, my main argument challenges representations of the black female body that either rely on or re-inscribe the “Baartman trope”. However, I am immediately and critically aware that this very phrase – representations of “the” black female body – itself presupposes an essentialising narrative, one which could easily revert to the same reductive representations of bodies that I am setting out to critique.

Moreover, I am acutely aware that my own scholarly criticism of the “Baartman trope” runs a very real risk of once again turning Sara Baartman’s embodied specificity into an essentialist symbol. Zine Magubane has criticised the “veritable theoretical industry” of

scholarship on Sara Baartman (“Bodies” 817), which more often than not represents Sara Baartman’s embodiment as an essentialist symbol of racial and sexual “difference”. Considering how often scholarly and cultural discourses are guilty of reducing Sara Baartman’s embodied specificity to *the* symbol of colonial hypersexualisation and exploitation of “the” black female body, Spivak’s argument about epistemic violence issues an unavoidable challenge to all feminist scholarship, including my own.

Furthermore, as a white South African feminist who is arguing against uncritical appropriations of the “Baartman trope”, I am mindful of the problem of representation within the particular context of the South African feminist academy. Referring to the same 1991 Natal conference mentioned in the introductory chapter, Jill Arnott asks the pertinent question: “What does it mean to be represented or to represent yourself?” (86). She notes that “the question, raised again and again at the Women and Gender conference, [was] of the relationship between oppressed black women and the (predominantly white) feminist academics who [were] attempting to investigate and theorise their situation” (77). Cheryl de la Rey succinctly summarises the debate which emerged at the 1991 conference as: “Can white women represent black?” (9).

Pamela Ryan writes that white women “occupy an uncomfortable position in South Africa”, and that white feminist scholars have to be “aware that we (inevitably) ‘produce’ the third-world woman” when using a discourse of Western feminism that codifies “others as non-Western” (1). “A South African feminist practice,” Ryan argues, “might then begin by trying to avoid a we/them approach by ensuring that we do not colonise the already twice colonised, the black woman” (1). However, a mere avoidance of a “we/them approach” would be equally problematic, given that such an approach is strongly reminiscent of the essentialism inherent in a second-wave feminist “sisterhood is global” argument. Second-wave feminism has already been widely criticised for its failure to acknowledge the privileged position from which Western scholarship is produced. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, for example, highlight the “unthinking racism” (5) of second-wave Western feminism for simply assuming that “white concerns were the concerns of women everywhere” (4). For Margaret Daymond, the “bland” claim to

sisterhood is “positively dangerous” in the South African context, given South Africa’s history of apartheid and “how race [still] determines the degrees of power that women may be granted” (xix). A more productive way of challenging the inherent essentialism of second-wave feminism would then require that feminist scholars – and white South African feminist scholars, in particular – not refuse or deny the reality of ideological and material structures of privilege. The ethical responsibility of the critic, as Spivak argues, is “to read and write so that the impossibility of such interested individualistic refusals of the institutional privileges of power bestowed on the subject is taken seriously” (280). Indeed, a mere refusal of the structures of privilege would not only be an empty gesture, but would actively conceal, and thus perpetuate, the reality of privilege-defined inequalities.

My main methodological challenge thus rests on three crucial concerns. First of all, I aim to critique the reductive mode of representation which makes the “Baartman trope” possible, without propagating the same essentialising discourses that would reduce Sara Baartman’s embodied specificity to a symbol or a stereotype. Secondly, I aim to ensure that I do not – even unwittingly – perpetuate the “Baartman trope” in an attempt to substantiate my own argument. Thirdly, in writing about representations of “the” black female body, my theoretical approach cannot limit itself to criticising discourses that reduce “the” black female body to an essentialist discursive tool. I must also – “and the *must* here is the ethical moment”, as Drucilla Cornell insists (101, emphasis in original) – confront the ideological structures through which my own writing is produced, as well as the ways my own writing shapes and represents the “precarious Subjectivity” of others (Spivak 281).

In the remainder of this chapter, I address the methodological challenges that I have outlined above. I begin by highlighting the centrality of questions surrounding the politics of representation in all scholarship on Sara Baartman by drawing on one of the foundational postcolonial feminist texts, namely Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). I then offer a brief overview of the problem of essentialist representation, particularly in relation to the field of academic representations of Sara

Baartman. I offer this overview not only to trace the important intellectual antecedents that have shaped this body of scholarly work, but also to illustrate how I locate my own argument in relation to established feminist postcolonial scholarship on the politics of representation. More importantly, I argue that the standard model of critical engagement with colonial stereotypes too often reproduces the very same essentialising discourses it sets out to critique. I consider Sander Gilman's theoretical treatment of Sara Baartman in his (in)famous essay, "Black Bodies, White Bodies" (1985), as one example of well-established scholarship that unintentionally reverts to an essentialising discourse.

I go on to show how both performativity theory and the representational category of intimacy can offer a more nuanced critical approach to the problem of representation, since both performativity theory and intimacy offer certain discursive strategies for disrupting essentialist stereotypes. In brief, I argue that performativity theory shows that there is no reason why a discursive construct such as the "Baartman trope" necessarily has to correspond to any one particular material body. In this way, performativity theory can disrupt the tendency to read the "Baartman trope" as somehow being about a particular body, about particular "differences", even when scholars and writers deliberately set out to challenge essentialist colonial stereotypes. I argue this point more fully in the course of this chapter.

In the final section of this chapter, I turn to intimacy as a serious ethical response to the politics of representation. According to Judith Butler, when we are truly and intimately confronted with the face of the "other", no representation can succeed, since representation is precisely the means for the capture, effacement or appropriation of the "other". Butler argues that the face of the "other" is that which is beyond representation, and that any attempt to represent it would be to lose it. For Butler, an ethical representation of the "other" would thus mark the very failure of that representation in the first place. Drawing on Butler's theory, I explore the "unknowability" of Sara Baartman as one possible strategy for an ethical feminist representational politics. I also gesture towards the work of South African photographer Zanele Muholi in order to suggest a possible way in which Butler's theory can be further deepened through the

representational category of intimacy. Muholi's emphasis on mutual exchange, presence and reciprocity between herself, as photographer, and the participants in her work offer a very different understanding of the ethical imperative of being confronted with the face of the "other" than that of Butler's theory. In Muholi's work, there is no confrontation with the face of the "other"; rather, there is a face-to-face relation which confronts the shared precarity of mutually constituted subjects. In Muholi's photographs, intimacy, as a category of representation, radically changes the relationship between both the photographer and the subject, as well as the subject and the viewer, to a moment of reciprocity between two mutually constituted subjects. It no longer marks a relation of "self" and "other", but rather acknowledges the relationship between two subjects, or, to use Muholi's own preferred term, the relationship between two *participants*. In this way, representations of intimacy disrupt essentialist representation by insisting upon relationality and reciprocity. It recognises "difference" very differently from the way it functions in essentialist stereotypes of race and gender, thereby signalling a radically different way of seeing and representing bodies.

### **Sara Baartman and the Subaltern**

The story of Sara Baartman has been inextricably bound up with the politics of representation from the start. Very little is known about Sara Baartman, the woman. As Pumla Dineo Gqola reminds us, any "tale that begins with [Sara Baartman] cannot be one with narrative certainty" ("Sarah Bartmann" 56). Her story is always mediated by others' interpretation of her life and her history. We know that she was a Khoesian woman who lived in the Cape Colony during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. We know her as Sara Baartman, but she would have had an entirely different name in her mother tongue, one which will remain forever unknown. She came from a community of people that were dispossessed by colonial occupation and "decimated by Dutch commandoes in their colonising of the Cape" (Gordon-Chipembere 3). She lived in Cape Town, where she worked as a servant for the Cesars family (variously recorded as Cesar,

Cesars, Caesar or Cezar).<sup>9</sup> Following Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, I too read and position Sara Baartman as a slave, rather than an indentured worker, because “regardless of legal definitions of slavery within South African historical studies, the Khoisan were exposed to conditions that would clearly be defined as slavery” (Gordon-Chipembere 3; also see Qureshi 235, Gqola *What is Slavery to Me?* 15). She was, as Gordon-Chipembere emphasises, *taken* to England in 1810 by Cesars and Dunlop, who exhibited her at 225 Piccadilly Circus as the now-infamous “Hottentot Venus”. In 1814, she was taken to Paris, where she died of disputed causes in either 1815 or 1816. After her death, her body was dissected by Georges Cuvier, who also made a plaster cast of her body. Her skeleton, bottled genitals and brain remained on display in the Musée de l’Homme until the late twentieth century. Her bodily remains were repatriated to South Africa in May 2002, and finally interred on 9 August 2002.

In November 1810, Sara Baartman was involved in a court case after Zachary Macaulay, an antislavery campaigner for the African Association, saw her on display in London. During the trial, Macaulay testified that he found Baartman “unhappy in her situation”, that she was “under the restraint and controul [sic] of her exhibitor” and that she was “deprived of her liberty” (quoted in Strother 44).<sup>10</sup> During the same trial, Baartman was questioned under oath in Dutch. The scribe who recorded Baartman’s affidavit wrote that “this deponent also asked said Saartjie Baartman whether she preferred either to return to the Cape of Good Hope or stay in England and that she replied – Stay here” (quoted in Strother 48). This one piece of evidence – mediated and translated by other voices – is the closest we come to hearing Sara Baartman’s voice. However, as Gordon-Chipembere points out, the historical record nevertheless contains the voices and the written words of Sara Baartman’s “European translators and owners”, and therefore remain “questionable

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars who write about the history of Sara Baartman employ a number of different naming conventions when referring to the man who, along with the naval surgeon Alexander Dunlop, took Baartman to England. Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully use the name Hendrik Cesars (“Race and Erasure” 301; *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus* xiii). Both Meg Samuelson and Sadiah Qureshi use Cezar (Samuelson *Remembering* 86; Qureshi 235). Natasha Gordon-Chipembere also refers to Hendrik Cezar (7). Z.S. Strother prefers Henrick Caesar (41), but also notes the use of the name Henrich Cesar in the transcripts of the 1810 court case in England (44).

<sup>10</sup> See the Appendix to Z.S. Strother’s “Display of the Body Hottentot” for transcripts of the court case (41-48).

in regards to agenda and intent” (4). This, as Meg Samuelson points out, “demonstrates a central feature of Baartman’s textualisation and iconography: she is always represented by others” (*Remembering* 86).

Spivak’s landmark essay on the politics of representation, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, highlights the implicit power relations in all representation. Spivak’s argument is well-known and well-established within feminist postcolonial scholarship, so I only offer a brief summary. She famously quotes from Karl Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in order to highlight the double meaning of the word “representation”: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (see Spivak 276). Spivak draws attention to the difference between political representation, in the sense of “speaking for” a person or a group of people, and theoretical, cultural or artistic representations, as in “re-presentation”. She argues that to confuse representation and re-presentation – in other words, to erroneously believe that you can represent someone without also re-presenting them or, indeed, believing that you can represent someone by re-presenting them – blurs the distinction between representation and re-presentation. For Spivak, “running [representation and re-presentation] together” in this way, “especially in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act, and know for themselves, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics” (272). In other words, confusing representation and re-presentation leads to the assumption that there exists some form of essential, fixed and stable “subaltern” identity beyond representation that can speak, act, and know for themselves. As J. Maggio points out, the amalgamation of these two notions of representation/re-presentation “establishes a silencing of the subaltern. They can never speak because they are both being ‘stood in for’ and ‘embodied’ by others in the dominant discourse” (422).

Jorunn Gjerden, Kari Jegerstedt and Zeljka Svrljuga find the figure of Sara Baartman “exemplary” in this regard: “entangled with questions of representation from the beginning,” they argue, the figure of Sara Baartman “has always been steeped in power relations” (283). Indeed, questions about representation and power have always been central to the archive of scholarship on Sara Baartman: from discussions of nineteenth-

century medical and artistic constructions of black female sexuality (Gilman 1985), to debates surrounding the constructed nature of race and sexuality, and the role of scholarship itself re-commodifying Sara Baartman as an object of this research (Magubane 2001, Qureshi 2004), to more recent debates on the ethics of representing Sara Baartman (Gqola 2010, Baderoon 2011). Whereas earlier scholarship produced during the late twentieth century tended to foreground Sara Baartman's victimisation in order to convey the tragedy of her life and the dehumanisation she suffered (Abrahams 1997), a number of more recent accounts of Baartman's history have placed great emphasis on agency in their efforts to portray her as more than the quintessential victim of colonial racism and sexism (Holmes 2007, Crais and Scully 2009).<sup>11</sup>

One example of such an increased scholarly emphasis on questions surrounding Sara Baartman's agency can be found in Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully's description of the 1810 trial in *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus* (2009). According to the authors, Sara Baartman was "certainly a victim of race, class and gender... [but] whatever the conditions of her life, by 1810 Sara Baartman had become a worldly woman in her thirties, not an innocent child recently brought from Africa's interior" (*Sara Baartman* 57). They subtly, yet notably, change the historical record of the 1810 trial by adding inverted commas to Baartman's recorded testimony:

Finally the notary asked the simplest of questions. Did she want to go back to the Cape of Good Hope or stay in England?

"Stay Here." (*Sara Baartman* 100)

The addition of two seemingly minor punctuation marks radically changes the historical record; by giving Sara Baartman a direct speaking voice, the authors grant the subaltern the capacity to speak. Indeed, Crais and Scully interpret Baartman's response during the trial as a complex subaltern resistance (see Lewis "Baartman's Agency" 116). "In saying

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<sup>11</sup> I only offer a very brief linear overview of extant scholarship on Baartman here. For a more extensive discussion of the shift in scholarly focus from Sara Baartman's victimisation to questions surrounding agency and human complexity, see Desiree Lewis's "Writing Baartman's Agency: History, Biography and the Imbroglios of Truth" in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (101-102).

she was content to exhibit herself for money in London,” Crais and Scully write, “Sara Baartman refused what was to become one of the most potent sites of self-representation for the British public in the early nineteenth century, that of liberators of black women from the abuses of slavery” (*Sara Baartman* 101).

Desiree Lewis, on the other hand, disagrees with Crais and Scully’s interpretation of the trial. She argues that by stressing agency in this way, and by privileging agency over the social structures in which it occurs, will obscure “why and how certain structures define what we understand by choice, freedom, independence, passion, attachment, affection, intimacy – the feelings and actions that [Crais and Scully] often associate with Baartman” (“Baartman’s Agency” 116). According to Lewis, this kind of argument assumes that the subject is, in the first place, a “proper self-possessed individual”, and not “a social subject who has not only never been ‘autonomous’, but whose value as a driving force in history and society is itself culturally constituted” (“Baartman’s Agency” 117).

These two very different interpretations of the 1810 trial highlight the centrality of questions of power and subjectivity when it comes to the politics of representation. Furthermore, it begs the question as to Sara Baartman’s status as a subaltern figure. While Lewis’s and Crais and Scully’s different interpretations of the 1810 trial seem to agree that Sara Baartman is, indeed, a subaltern figure, the resulting questions as to whether or not she can “speak”, and what might therefore be said on her behalf, holds direct ethical implications for all scholarship attempting to represent Sara Baartman in one way or another.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak argues that all representation is steeped in power relations. Rosalind Morris offers a useful and succinct summary of Spivak’s definition of subalternity as the “structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed” (8). This reveals Spivak’s question as to whether or not the subaltern can speak as not truly a question as to what the subaltern really said, or really wanted to say, or even a question as to what might thus be said on the subaltern’s behalf. Rather, it is a question which brings into focus the social conditions and structures of power that render

the subaltern's speech unintelligible. It is not a question that hopes to discover some final "truth" about the figure of the subaltern woman, but rather highlights the structures of power which obstruct any possibility of alternative voices or alternative histories emerging from other positions and locations. Spivak's theory of the subaltern illustrates how the discursively constructed power relations of colonial rule render the subaltern unintelligible, so that certain bodies under colonialism are no longer recognised as subjects, but instead become figured as the "other".

In a similar way, both performativity theory and intimacy are fundamentally concerned with the discursively constructed power relations that govern the ways in which subjects become eligible for recognition. According to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, dominant social discourses of normative heteronormativity render certain performances of gender unintelligible, and, as a result, some lives are no longer recognised as subjects. Butler writes that there are those

who have limited access to 'intelligibility', and there are others who epitomise its symbolic iconography, so the reproduction of gender norms within ordinary life is always, in some ways, a negotiation with forms of power that condition whose lives will be more liveable, and whose lives will be less so, if not fully un-liveable. ("Performativity" xi)

As a result, Butler insists that "some name must be reserved for those who do not count as subjects, who do not sufficiently conform to the norms that confer recognisability on subjects" ("Performativity" x). Within feminist postcolonial studies, this "name" could be that of the subaltern woman.

In the remainder of this chapter, I draw on performativity theory and on intimacy as a category of representation as two scholarly approaches that can disrupt the essentialist, colonialist binaries and hierarchies that underpin the "Bartman trope". I argue that performativity theory can disrupt the widespread tendency to reproduce, rather than dispute, essentialist discourses that still reify the "Bartman trope" as somehow being

about particular “differences”, while the representational category of intimacy offers an ethical approach to the politics of representation by insisting upon relationality and reciprocity. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, simply invoking the category of “the intimate” as an ethical position will not and cannot unsettle such entrenched hierarchies and binaries. Furthermore, simply invoking the category of “the intimate” will not magically grant us access to some form of “true” subjectivity when attempting to represent Sara Baartman. I do not invoke the idea of “the intimate” as some imagined “true” antidote to the discursive nature of performatively constituted subjectivities. Rather, I employ performativity theory and intimacy as two discursive strategies that both recognise “difference” very differently from the way it is coded in colonising discourses of race and gender, and which can thereby gesture toward a radically different way of seeing and representing bodies.

### **The problem of essentialism**

According to Desiree Lewis, the “legacy of colonialism endures in essentialist attitudes toward African sexuality and corporeal difference” (“African Sexualities” 200). By the nineteenth century, Lewis points out, “Africans were deemed innately, biologically different and degenerate. And central to this essentialist belief were ideas about their distinctively pathological sexuality” (“African Sexualities” 200). “In the colonies”, Anne McClintock also writes, “black people were figured, among other things, as gender deviants, the embodiment of prehistoric promiscuity and excess” (*Imperial Leather* 44). Colonial stereotypes such as these are, as Michael Herzfeld argues, “insidious” discursive weapons of power; they “always [mark] the absence of some presumably desirable property in [their] object”, even as they “actively [deprive] the ‘other’ of a certain property” (157). However, such stereotypes are even more insidious when their discursive nature is not acknowledged. Both Lewis and McClintock draw attention to the fact that essentialist stereotypes about African sexuality were seen as expressions of embodied identity. Lewis points out that African sexuality was seen as *innately* and *biologically* “different”, while McClintock argues that African bodies were seen as the *embodiment* of sexual excess. What this means in terms of the construction of colonial

stereotypes is that the colonising subject would assume that the body of the “other” was inherently and ontologically different to his or her own body, even prior to being *made* “other” through the discursive, symbolic markers of “difference”. Furthermore, the colonising subject would also assume that the “other” could never represent themselves, and that representations of the colonised “other” therefore only recorded already existing corporeal “differences”, rather than creating these supposed “differences” through the process of representation. It is clear how this particular mode of representation would posit a colonial stereotype such as the “Baartman trope” as somehow being about certain bodies and about particular “differences”.

“Given the enduring role of past imperial strategies in the present,” Lewis argues, we must question the meanings that are “inscribed on African bodies, even as they are dislocated and reconfigured by other contexts” (“Scripted Bodies” 195). Lewis goes on to ask: “[W]hat languages, critical methods and theories can we now use to analyse these bodies?” (“Scripted Bodies” 195) As a possible answer to Lewis’s question, I look to performativity theory, as set out in Judith Butler’s ground-breaking study, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). I will briefly summarise Butler’s theory of gender performativity before going on to illustrate the implications that her theory holds for a more nuanced understanding of how discursive meanings are ascribed to material bodies.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is the “cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (*Gender* 6). For if, as Butler argues, the constructed status of gender is theorised “as radically independent of sex”, then “man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (*Gender* 6). In this way, “*a* gender cannot be said to follow from *a* sex in any one way” (*Gender* 6, emphasis added).

Butler further argues that individuals appropriate cultural prescriptions of how gendered bodies are “supposed” to act and then perform these conservative sexual and gender norms at the level of the material body. Gender becomes an embodied cultural artefact

that is organised and maintained through normative heterosexuality. Individuals constantly have to perform these established gender norms at the level of the material body in order to escape social discipline. In the repetition of this performance, the *performativity* of gender is forgotten, which means that culturally constructed gender norms now become an expression of embodied identity. Butler thus argues that there is no material body outside of social inscription. Neither the material body nor gender can escape social inscription, as “the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualised repetition of norms” (Butler *Bodies* x). While the material body might appear as the “passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed” (*Gender* 8), the very idea of “the body” is itself a cultural construction. For, according to Butler, bodies cannot be said to have a “signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender” (*Gender* 8). To put it more simply, the very idea of “the” body can only be intelligible to us within the discursive framework of gender. Claiming that all bodies are culturally constructed does not, however, deny the materiality of the body. Performativity theory, when “properly construed”, as Karen Barad points out, is not an invitation to turn everything, including the materiality of the body, into words (802). Rather, performativity theory offers “a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real” (802). A more performative understanding of discursive practices would therefore, as Barad argues, challenge a “belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things” (802).

I now return to my earlier point that essentialist colonial stereotypes are even more insidious when their discursive nature is not acknowledged. By applying performativity theory to the problem of essentialism, and by using it to contest a belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things, a colonial legacy of inherent and *a priori* markers of bodily “difference” no longer holds true. For if, following Butler, “the” body is only intelligible in and through a particular discursive framework, and if there is no material body outside of social inscription, then there is nothing inherently “different” in the body of the “other”. Indeed, the very idea of “otherness” only becomes intelligible through discursive, symbolic markers of race, gender and sexuality. Performativity theory is therefore an indispensable strategy for opposing those “unexamined habits of mind” (802), as Barad puts it, which would see discursive stereotypes of “difference”, which are

ultimately the products of language and thought, as somehow synonymous with a corporeal body and its embodied experience. Performativity theory effectively highlights the discursive processes that first create supposed bodily “differences”, which are then repeatedly performed at the level of the physical body, until the very act of performance is itself mistaken for an expression of embodied identity. In this way, performativity theory can aid a better understanding of precisely *how* discursive practices can produce material bodies.

I would like to explore this point more fully with particular reference to the “Baartman trope”. Crais and Scully argue that Alexander Dunlop, the British naval surgeon in charge of the “othering” display of the “Hottentot Venus” in London in 1810, “clearly scripted Sara Baartman’s encounters with the British public” (“Race and Erasure” 304). They point out that Dunlop first presented Baartman as a “freak [...] of both nature and culture”, but, following a “public outcry about Baartman’s display”, re-presented and re-scripted the performance as “an educational opportunity, giving the public a chance to see a supposed ethnographic example of the Khoekhoe from the southern tip of Africa” (“Race and Erasure” 304). In both cases, they argue, Sara Baartman “had to learn to act the part of the Hottentot Venus” (“Race and Erasure” 304). She had to “erase aspects of her personal history, experience, and identity in order to make her performance of the Venus creditable to the audience that was staring at her” (“Race and Erasure” 304). The performance of the “Hottentot Venus,” Crais and Scully point out, was an act that was “most successful when it appeared natural” (“Race and Erasure” 304). This recalls Meg Samuelson’s use of the trope of casting, mentioned in the previous chapter. Even a cursory reading of Crais’ and Scully’s argument suggests that Sara Baartman was literally “cast” as an actress in the role of “Hottentot Venus”. By repeatedly performing the act of the “Hottentot Venus”, the scripted nature of this performance was eventually taken for an expression of Sara Baartman’s embodied identity. In this repeated performance, Sara Baartman’s body was discursively produced as that which would, in time, come to stand for the “Baartman trope”.

Furthermore, drawing on performativity theory to deepen an understanding of the constructed nature of the “Baartman trope” itself reveals that there is no reason why a discursive construct, such as the “Baartman trope”, necessarily has to correspond to any one particular material body. In the same way that Sara Baartman was repeatedly “cast” as the “Hottentot Venus”, any other material body could potentially have been scripted in a similar manner. This has radical implications for the proliferation of scholarly and cultural representations of the “Baartman trope” that persistently posit Sara Baartman’s body as the foremost essentialist icon of “difference”. In this way, performativity theory disrupts the widespread tendency to reproduce, rather than dispute, essentialist discourses that still reify the “Baartman trope” as somehow being about a particular body, about particular “differences”, even when scholars and writers deliberately set out to challenge essentialist colonial stereotypes.

Indeed, the standard model of critical engagement with colonial representations too often falls into the trap of the very same essentialising discourses that it sets out to deconstruct. Sander Gilman’s widely anthologised – if equally widely criticised – article, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature” (1985) offers a clear example. In this article, Gilman is interested in the “ideologically charged iconographic nature” of both artistic and scientific representation (“Black Bodies” 204). He argues that discursive acts have endowed material bodies with cultural meanings. However, Gilman then tries to substantiate his argument by investigating the centrality of representations of Sara Baartman’s supposed corporeal “difference” in nineteenth-century representational systems. “In the course of the nineteenth century,” Gilman argues, “the female Hottentot comes to represent the black female *in nuce*” (“Black Bodies” 206). “While many groups of African blacks were known to Europeans in the nineteenth century,” Gilman continues, “the Hottentot remained representative of the essence of the black, especially the black female” (“Black Bodies” 206). Gilman infamously substantiates this argument by claiming that “Sarah Bartmann’s sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century”, as her “genitalia and buttocks summarised her essence for the nineteenth-century observer”

("Black Bodies" 216). Thus, according to Gilman's most often quoted claim, "[t]he antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the Black, and the essential Black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot", where "[t]he physical appearance of the Hottentot [becomes] the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the Black" ("Black Bodies" 231).

In this way, Gilman's argument falls prey to the very essentialising discourse it purports to deconstruct. He tries to illustrate how nineteenth-century discursive strategies posited Sara Baartman's racialised and hypersexualised body as an essentialist symbol of "difference". However, Gilman's own argument locates the reductive and essentialising markers of race and sexuality within Sara Baartman's material body, rather than illustrating *how* these discursive stereotypes are culturally produced. A more performative understanding of representation would have drawn attention to the discursive processes that create supposed bodily "difference". However, Gilman's argument instead reproduces troubling, highly invasive and essentialising images of Sara Baartman's sexualised body as proof of his argument, thereby reproducing the same essentialising discourse that reduces embodied materiality to signs and symbols.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Gilman's argument first reduces Sara Baartman's embodiment to an essentialist stereotype, which he then uses to prove his own point about the "essential iconographic nature of all visual representation" ("Black Bodies" 205).

Gilman's article has been criticised by a number of feminist scholars, most notably by Zine Magubane and Sadiya Qureshi, both of whom offer more nuanced and historically situated discussions of nineteenth-century perceptions of the category of "blackness". For Qureshi, Gilman's "unfortunate" emphasis upon "female genitalia and [his] use of

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<sup>12</sup> In the 2010 critical anthology *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her 'Hottentot'*, edited by Deborah Willis, Gilman offers a revised version of his essay, here retitled "The Hottentot and the Prostitute". The revised essay does not reproduce the offending images of Baartman's sexualised body and is also offered with an attempt at greater textual sensitivity. To give only one example, Gilman's highly problematic claim about the "*similarity* between the black and the prostitute – as bearers of the stigmata of sexual difference and, thus, pathology" ("Black Bodies" 137, emphasis added) now reads as follows: "The Other's pathology is revealed in her anatomy, and the black and the prostitute are both bearers of the stigmata of sexual difference and thus pathology" (27). While broadly the same argument, it is nevertheless presented with an attempt at greater textual sensitivity. Still, Gilman's continued use of the offensive phrase "the black" leaves the reader with a deep sense of discomfort, even after the removal of the degrading images of Sara Baartman's sexualised body from the essay.

explicit visual material with little supporting discussion” can, in itself, be read as a “voyeuristic” perpetuation of assumptions about supposed black female hypersexuality (234). One of Magubane’s central criticisms is based on Gilman’s erroneous assumption “that Khoikhoi people were considered broadly representative of Africans as a whole” (“Bodies” 822). This, according to Magubane, allows Gilman to make “much broader claims about perceptions of African people as a whole”, and allows him to argue that “Baartmann ‘represented blackness *in nuce*’” (“Bodies” 822).

Magubane challenges Gilman’s article by asking “why *this* woman has been made to function in contemporary academic debates as *the* preeminent example of racial and sexual alterity,” especially given that “Sarah Baartmann was one of thousands of people exhibited and transformed into medical spectacles during the course of the nineteenth century” (“Bodies” 830). According to Magubane, it is Gilman’s own analysis, as the “genesis of a veritable theoretical industry”, which repeatedly reproduces “Baartmann as an example of racial and sexual difference” (“Bodies” 817). By focusing “obsessively on [her] body and its difference”, Magubane argues, Gilman’s article only ends up “valoris[ing] the very ground of biological essentialism [he] purports to deconstruct” (“Bodies” 817). Magubane concludes that there is no doubt that scholarship on Baartman has “aimed to critique racism and biological essentialism” (“Bodies” 824). She therefore questions “why the theoretical orthodoxy has reproduced the very assumptions it purports to destabilize?” (“Bodies” 824)

As a possible answer to Magubane’s question, I turn to performativity theory. It is clear that Gilman’s article intended to illustrate how categories of “difference” are socially constructed, and how nineteenth-century representational systems produced Sara Baartman’s body as an example of racial and sexual alterity. However, in spite of this, Gilman’s argument repeatedly draws attention to Sara Baartman’s supposedly “inherent” biological markers of “difference”. He writes that her “physiognomy, her skin colour, the form of her genitalia label her as *inherently* different” (“Black Bodies” 213, emphasis added). He insists that “the female Hottentot comes to represent the black female *in nuce*” and that “the Hottentot remained representative of the *essence* of the black, especially the

black female” (“Black Bodies” 206, emphasis added). These quotations are highly unsettling, not only because of Gilman’s offensive use of language, but also because Gilman clearly locates the idea of racial and sexual “difference” as something that is “essential” and “inherently” different. Firstly, by positing Sara Baartman’s body as the foremost essentialist icon of “difference”, and, secondly, by focusing solely on essentialist representations of her sexuality, Gilman’s article reproduces the very same essentialising discourse he sets out to critique. A more performative understanding of representation, on the other hand, would make the discursive processes that create supposed bodily “differences” explicit. In this way, it would counter essentialising discourses that would posit culturally constructed ideas about “difference” as expressions of embodied identity.

Though Magubane is absolutely right in arguing that uncritical scholarship on Sara Baartman runs the risk of turning her into the foremost icon of bodily “difference”, Gabeba Baderoon rather ironically points out that even Magubane’s own vital and pertinent critique of Gilman “has once again made Baartman one of the most visible women in African history” (“Our Speech” 215). Gqola further highlights Baartman’s “paradoxical hypervisibility” in feminist scholarship, when feminist intellectuals symbolically put Baartman’s body on display so that they can critique colonial displays of her body (“Sarah Bartmann” 68). “Any project that engages with Baartman’s life,” Baderoon therefore insists, must – again, I would add that “the *must* here is the ethical moment” (Cornell 101, emphasis in original) – acknowledge the “risk of complicity with ways of knowing that continue the violating practices they set out to contest” (Baderoon “Our Speech” 215). This is a serious and crucial challenge, and one which no scholar writing about representations of Sara Baartman should take lightly.

As one possible response to the challenge above, I will not include any images of Sara Baartman in this thesis. Including the all too familiar, infamous images of Sara Baartman’s sexualised body can only reassert the “Baartman trope”, thereby once again reducing Sara Baartman’s embodiment to an essentialist stereotype. However, having said that, I am conscious of the fact that in tracing the line of the development and

perpetuation of the “Baartman trope”, this thesis does perform a similar labour; I might not be reproducing offensive and essentialist images of Sara Baartman’s body, but my scholarly focus on representations of this trope does highlight, and thus perpetuate the trope to some degree. The title of this thesis, for example, gestures towards new ways of seeing and representing bodies, which could finally dislodge the tendency of essentialist colonial stereotypes to endure, and finally move beyond the “Baartman trope”. Nevertheless, naming, and thereby reproducing, the concept of the “Baartman trope” in the thesis title does perpetuate the very trope I aim to disrupt. This suggests that any form representation will enact a symbolic violence on the body of Sara Baartman. It also raises larger questions for the scholarly archive for studying Sara Baartman, and for the ethics of knowledge production. I address this challenge in the final section of this chapter.

### **A feminist ethics of representation**

Baderoon’s own approach to the challenge of representing Sara Baartman is rooted in the notion of the private and the intimate. Following Gqola, Baderoon insists that scholars should admit that there is a limit to what we can know about Sara Baartman’s life. For both Gqola and Baderoon, a feminist ethics of representing Sara Baartman would recognise that she is “ultimately unknowable, and that to accept this unknowability is [one] way to accept her full humanity” (Baderoon “Our Speech” 216). For Baderoon, the “unknowability” of Sara Baartman is directly linked to the realms of the private and of the intimate. After being subjected to a “notorious level of visibility” both during her lifetime and after her death, Baderoon sees the return journey of Sara Baartman’s body from France for burial in South Africa in 2002 as a “stubbornly *private* one” (“Language” 81, emphasis in original). For Baderoon, Baartman’s humanity is restored through this symbolic and material withdrawal from the public sphere to that of the private. This, Baderoon argues, restores Sara Baartman as “a subject with an interior that is inviolable and *private*” (“Baartman and the Private” 72, emphasis in original).

According to Lauren Berlant, the politics of citizenship has in itself “extraordinarily *intimate* public consequences” (“Intimate Public Sphere” 292, emphasis added). Berlant’s

work interrogates the politics of citizenship, asking who will count as “the people”, and questioning how the social membership of citizens will be measured and assessed (see Berlant “Intimate Public Sphere” 292). Judith Butler questions the politics of citizenship in a manner very similar to Berlant’s. Butler writes about vulnerability and mourning as possible conditions for finding a basis for political community. Like Berlant, Butler asks: “Who counts as human? Whose counts as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?” (“Violence, Mourning, Politics” 10). Butler argues that some bodies are produced as “less precarious in relation to those who are rendered more precarious”, and that this raises important questions regarding “whose life is grievable and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrivable, or [only] marginally or episodically grievable” (quoted in Puar 170).

Baderon also argues that the “possibility of burial and mourning marks a crucial boundary of the human”, given how we can “measure those who are counted as human by how their bodies are treated after death – whether they are buried, displayed, or left unmarked” (“Language” 81-82). Baderon thus sees the shift from the public humiliation of Sara Baartman’s exploited body to the restoration of Baartman’s humanity through her interment as a movement – both symbolic and material – from the realm of the public to that of the private and the intimate. An ethics of representing Sara Baartman would, according to Baderon, acknowledge this privacy by signalling the ultimate “unknowability” of Sara Baartman, the woman. Following Baderon’s insight, an ethical representation of Sara Baartman’s embodiment would therefore have to signal the very impossibility of ever truly representing Sara Baartman in the first place.

I will return to this point more fully in the remainder of this chapter. For now, I want to point out that my main argument is not necessarily concerned with representations of Sara Baartman, the individual woman – especially given the “unknowability” of Sara Baartman. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, I am more interested in the decidedly reductive mode of representation which makes a stereotype such as the “Baartman trope” possible. Still, if we adopt Baderon’s ethical stance towards representations of Sara Baartman – as I do – then the very “unknowability” of Sara

Baartman does raise important questions as to what we are talking about when we talk about representations of Sara Baartman, especially if we regard her “unknowability” as an acknowledgement of her full humanity. This ethical approach seemingly suggests that any form representation will enact a symbolic violence on the body of Sara Baartman, and that the only ethical form of representing Sara Baartman would have to draw attention to its own failure to ever represent her in the first place.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler makes a broadly similar argument. Butler argues that the symbolic violence of representation happens precisely *through* the representation of the face of the “other” (see 144). According to Butler, it is commonly assumed that those who “gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanised, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all” (*Precarious Life* 141). However, she goes on to show that the paradoxical nature of representation means that the mere fact of being represented does not always humanise one. Taking Baderoon’s point about the “invasive visibility” underlying the proliferation of representations of Sara Baartman’s hypersexualised body into consideration, it is immediately clear that the mere fact of representation did not humanise Sara Baartman as a subject, but rather repeatedly figured her body as an essentialising sign of “difference”. The violence inherent to these modes of representation can therefore mean that some bodies, some lives or even some deaths either remain wholly unrepresentable, or become represented in ways that “can only effect their capture” (Butler *Precarious Life* 147). The first case, Butler argues, is an “effacement through occlusion; the second is an effacement through representation itself” (*Precarious Life* 147). In the case of the “Baartman trope”, Sara Baartman’s embodiment is effaced through the violence of representation.

As an example, Butler considers the “triumphalist photos” on the cover page of the *New York Times* which showed the unveiled faces of Afghan women for American viewers. She notes how the face of the “other” was “finally bared” for the American viewer, and how the face of the “other” thus became, “in a flash, a symbol of successfully exported

American cultural progress”; “not only did our cameras capture it,” she writes, “but we arranged for the face to capture our triumph, and act as the rationale for our violence”, for the “deaths of civilians” (*Precarious Life* 147). This photographed face of a neo-colonial “other”, Butler continues, seemed to actively “conceal or displace” the face of the human, since it conveyed no “sense of the suffering of war”, no “grief or agony”, no “sense of the precariousness of life” (*Precarious Life* 142). This is because the face of the “other” is appropriated through representation and made to personify someone else’s ideological agenda; “we personify... military triumph through a face that is supposed to be, to capture, to contain the very idea for which it stands” (*Precarious Life* 145). In this case, Butler argues, the representation of the face of the “other” actively masks “human suffering” and the “proximity we might have to the precariousness of life itself” (*Precarious Life* 145). Butler therefore draws on the philosophical and ethical notion of the face of the “other”, as introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, in order to show how the “human *cannot* be captured through representation” (*Precarious Life* 145, emphasis added).

I now return to my point that an ethical representation of Sara Baartman would acknowledge her “unknowability” by signalling the very impossibility of such a representation in the first place. Following Levinas, Butler argues we can clearly see “the loss of the human” when it is “captured” by representation (*Precarious Life* 145). This means that when we are truly confronted with the precariousness of the life of the “other”, no representation can be said to succeed, since representation is precisely the means for the capture, effacement or appropriation of the “other”. Butler therefore argues that the face of the “other” is that which is *beyond* representation, and that any attempt to represent it would be to lose it. She writes that there is “something unrepresentable” in the face of the “other” that we “nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (*Precarious Life* 144). This does not mean that Butler entirely abandons the idea of representation; rather, she insists that an ethical representation of the “other” would visibly show its failure to ever truly represent another person’s embodied precarity. In other words, Butler argues that the only ethical form of representation of the “other” is one which marks its own failure. She writes that an ethical

representation of the “other” must not only “fail to capture its referent, but [it must] *show* this failing” (*Precarious Life* 146, emphasis added).

Butler’s use of the word “capture” is crucial, as the very “capture” of the referent, the “capture” of the face of the “other”, already hints at the violence of representation. The word “capture” suggests the violence of imprisonment, seizure and appropriation. The violence of representation is made abundantly clear when one considers how the “other” is represented in ways that “can only effect their capture” (Butler *Precarious Life* 147). At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that Spivak sees epistemic violence as the “asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of [the] Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (280-281). Butler’s discussion of Levinas clearly shows how the violence of representation can lead to the obliteration of the precarious subjectivity of the “other”, when the face of the “other” is represented in ways that “can only effect their capture” (*Precarious Life* 147). It is for this reason that an ethical mode of representation must show that it does not – and, indeed, *cannot* – fully “capture” the precarity of the “other”.

This paradox may not be immediately reconcilable with a common understanding of what ethical responsibility entails, since failure is not the common hallmark or condition of an ethical response to the problem of representation. For example, Butler argues that to truly have “an understanding of the precariousness of the Other”, is what “makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics” (*Precarious Life* 134). Therefore, the failure of representation to convey the precarious life of the “other” may make it seem as if something regarding the humanity of the “other” is lost when representation fails to convey their full humanity, or fails to render their full humanity visible. However, Butler takes great care to show that the face is not “effaced” in the failure of representation, but is actually “constituted in that very possibility” (*Precarious Life* 144). In this way, the precarious subjectivity of the “other” is not lost in the failure of representation, but actually “indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible” (*Precarious Life* 144). This has crucial implications for the one who seeks to represent, as the very uncertainty of the representational act disrupts the possibility of

success, which may have underpinned a symbolically violent appropriation of the “other”.

However, when talking about the notion of “unknowability”, it is important to also recognise that that which is not known is not always unchangingly the same, in all contexts, for all viewers, and under all gazes. The very idea of “unknowability” itself depends on relationality, on positionality, and on different registers of knowledge, intimacy and experience. In the final chapter of this thesis, I turn to the work of South African photographer Zanele Muholi, whose photographic representations of intimacy signal a different way of seeing and representing bodies. I want to briefly introduce Muholi’s work here, even though I will only discuss her work at length in the final chapter, because Muholi explicitly invokes the name and the memory of Sara Baartman in reference to her contemporary photography. However, there is a very different dynamic at play when Muholi invokes Sara Baartman’s memory in reference to her work than that which is found in Levinas’ notion of the face of the “other”, as well as Butler’s argument that an ethical representation of the “other” must show its failure to ever truly convey the precarity of another life.

Muholi’s work insists that both the photographer and the subject are equally present in the act of representation. In Muholi’s work, there is no confrontation with the face of the “other”; instead, there is a face-to-face relation between mutually constituted subjects. This, however, does not imply that the viewer suddenly and miraculously has full access to and knowledge of the interiority, the precarity and the full humanity of the subjects in Muholi’s photographs. Furthermore, it does not mean that invoking the name of Sara Baartman in relation to Muholi’s intimate contemporary photography will suddenly reveal some “true” representation of Sara Baartman’s subjectivity. The portrayal of intimacy in Muholi’s work does not signal a *failure* of representation, in the same sense in which Butler, following Levinas, writes about it. Instead, it suggests that, even when portraying intimacy, there are registers of experience and subjectivity to which the viewer does not, and will not, have access.

In this way, when Muholi invokes Sara Baartman's name in relation to her work, it deepens an understanding of the "unknowability" of Sara Baartman. If one acknowledges the "unknowability" of Sara Baartman not as the complete failure of representation to "capture" the "other", but an act of intimacy which recognises Sara Baartman's right to privacy, then the "Baartman trope" will no longer be the organising trope through which to read representations of the black female body. I will return to this point in the course of this thesis.

In the next section, I begin my broadly chronological interrogation of a number of different scenes of representation that either challenge, perpetuate or complicate essentialist and stereotypical representations of the black female body. The three chapters in the next section focus specifically on South African literary and visual texts of the 1920s and 1930s. In these chapters, I explore some of the earliest South African literary and visual texts to either entrench or challenge the perpetuation of a very particular nineteenth-century colonial stereotype of the supposedly hypersexualised black female body in the South African national imaginary. These chapters examine different imaginative strategies through which colonial stereotypes of hypersexualised black female bodies were positioned, complicated, re-entrenched or disrupted in the newly-emerging proto-nationalist discourses of the 1920s and 1930s, as "South Africa" was first envisioned as a nation state.

## **SECTION 2**

### **Proto-nationalisms and the Politics of Representation**

### Chapter 3

#### Constructing the Colonial Stereotype in Early South African Novels in English

An examination of the colonial past not only serves as a useful point of departure for an analysis of contemporary issues, but is, in fact, crucial in order to fully understand the impact that colonial stereotypes of the black female body have had, and continue to have, on South African literary and visual imaginings. Gabeba Baderoon writes that one first has to examine colonial history in order to fully comprehend the impact of hypersexualised stereotypes of the black female body in South Africa, as it is “[t]he colonial period,” Baderoon argues, that “is the primal scene for understanding images of Black bodies in South Africa” (“Our Speech” 213). Desiree Lewis further argues that the “desire for control and mastery”, first inscribed on African bodies during the colonial period, directly connects the “colonial to nationalist and post-colonial narratives and myth-making in the years after formal decolonisation” (“African Sexualities” 202-203).

This chapter therefore offers an overview of the literary processes by which a very particular colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body became entrenched in the South African literary imaginary. I begin my discussion with H. Rider Haggard’s popular Victorian adventure romance, *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), one of the earliest English novels set in South Africa. *King Solomon’s Mines* became the formative South African imperial romance (see Chrisman “Imperial Romance” 227), thereby exercising a considerable influence on popular assumptions surrounding African women’s sexuality at the turn of the twentieth century. I then turn to Sarah Gertrude Millin’s early nationalist novel, *God’s Stepchildren* (1924), and finally to Olive Schreiner’s anti-imperial novel, *From Man to Man* (1926).

All three novels explicitly draw on nineteenth-century colonial assumptions about the supposed hypersexuality of African women in the construction of their respective African female characters. All three novels are also fundamentally concerned with the supposed “threat” of interracial sexual relationships in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century South Africa. Furthermore, all three novels, to greater and lesser degrees, attempt

to discursively control female sexuality through the organising trope of motherhood. In the case of *God's Stepchildren* and *From Man to Man*, both novels invoke the “threat” of “miscegenation” in their respective attempts to imagine an early, proto-nationalist South African identity, though in very different ways. Still, since both novels clearly rely on nineteenth-century colonial assumptions about the supposed hypersexuality of African women in order to assert their respective early proto-nationalist visions, I examine how both novels in fact reiterate this stereotype through early South African proto-nationalist discourses.

Given all three novels’ implicit anxiety when confronted with colonial assumptions about the supposedly hypersexual African “other”, I interrogate the construction of stereotypes of race and gender in these three novels through the organising trope of motherhood. In all three of the novels, the idea of “otherness” is explicitly linked to racist colonial assumptions about sexual “difference”, as well as to colonial fears about the “threat” of “miscegenation”, which are then either challenged or maintained through the symbolic site of motherhood. I therefore begin by offering a brief theoretical overview of the construction of this particular colonial stereotype.

### **Constructing the colonial stereotype**

The majority of literary and visual stereotypes of African bodies produced in colonial South Africa were fundamentally concerned with the supposed “threat” of interracial sexual relationships. At the Cape Colony, first under Dutch and later under British colonial rule, “control over sex was central to definitions of race” (Baderon “Our Speech” 213).<sup>13</sup> In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Laura Stoler argues that the very categories of the “coloniser” and the “colonised” were “secured through forms of sexual control” (42). However, Stoler is quick to point out that sexual control in colonial

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<sup>13</sup> The Cape Colony underwent four distinctly different periods of colonisation. The first was the Dutch Cape Colony, established in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company, followed by the British Cape Colony in 1795. The colony was briefly returned to Dutch rule in 1802, but then re-occupied by the British in 1806. For a discussion of different models of colonial domination in South Africa, see John Comaroff’s “Images of Empire, Contests of Conscience: Models of Colonial Domination in South Africa”, *American Ethnologist* 16(4), 1989: 661-685.

settings is more than just a convenient metaphor with which to represent and understand colonial domination. For Stoler, the colonial politics of “inclusion or exclusion required regulating the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of both European colonials and their subjects” (43). Ultimately, Stoler insists, sexuality was a “fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power” (45). Control over sex in colonial settings was therefore “central to the making of race”, where European colonials’ fears and assumptions around the idea of racial alterity “were often represented in sexual terms” (Baderoon “Our Speech” 213-214). It is therefore “unsurprising”, Baderoon argues, that “Black bodies in South Africa have been imbued with unsettling sexualised meanings” ever since the colonial period (“Our Speech” 214).

According to Cecily Lockett, even the earliest South African literary representations of the black female body have their origin in an “unstated but implicit social disapproval of miscegenous sexual relations between black women and white men” (21). Lockett writes that representations of the black female body first appear in English writing about South Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. “It was in this period of exploration and travel writing,” she continues, that “two dominant [literary] stereotypes were established – types that were to become part of the literary consciousness of [South Africa] and would be carried into nineteenth- and twentieth-century South African writing” (21).

Lockett summarises these colonial literary stereotypes as the “unattainable” and the “untouchable” (21). “The untouchable stereotype,” Lockett writes, “is an animal-like, degenerate and stupid figure, and, it is implied, any white man who consorts with such a woman debases himself” (21). The “unattainable” stereotype was established in the eighteenth century by writers “under the influence of Rousseau and the ideology of the ‘noble savage’”, writing for an audience “receptive to Romantic ideology” (Lockett 22-23). “In this idealised scenario”, Lockett writes, “the beautiful black woman returns the love of the white man, but the relationship is never formalised; it cannot be, for the social barriers of race and miscegenation are insurmountable obstacles” (23). Both these stereotypes, she concludes, continued into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “as

a subtle means of entrenching the social taboos on miscegenous sexual relations between black women and white men” (23).

Lockett’s article identifies these dominant colonial literary stereotypes, and notes that “race and gender are important factors in the formulation of [...] stereotypical depictions” (21), but the scope of her argument does not leave any room for questioning *how* these stereotypes function in South African literature. Following Lockett, I too identify the stereotypes of the “untouchable” and the “unattainable” as they manifest in the novels under focus in this chapter. However, it is worth unpacking these stereotypes more fully before going on to show how they are invoked through the trope of the (m)other in all three of the novels in question. In the next section, I interrogate the ways in which these particular stereotypes function in early South African novel in English.

### **Contending the colonial stereotype**

The particular conceptualisation of “otherness” which underpins both the stereotypes of the “unattainable” and the “untouchable” fundamentally rely on colonial assumptions about the supposed “threat” of “miscegenation”. In this way, the discursive category of “otherness” not only signifies bodily “difference”. It also assumes that this “difference” must be inherently and overtly sexual. The construction of both of these stereotypes therefore relies on another colonial stereotype – that of the hypersexualised black female body – as somehow innate, and as an ontological given.

As Sander Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies” makes a very similar assumption, I offer it as an example to better illustrate my contention that the dependence on stereotypes to explain colonial constructions of “difference”, even in scholarly work, has the effect of entrenching, rather than debunking, myths of bodily “difference”. Gilman argues that the salience of nineteenth-century sexual symbols of the bodily “difference” of the “other” developed primarily as an expression of European fears about bodily “difference”. In his article, Gilman substantiates his main argument that Sara Baartman’s stereotypically hypersexualised body “serve[s] as the central image for the black female

throughout the nineteenth century” by positing that it is the “inherent fear of the difference in the anatomy of the Other which lies behind the synthesis of [such] images” (“Black Bodies” 216, 237). To put it another way, Gilman’s argument suggests that nineteenth-century discourses constructed Sara Baartman’s body as the foremost icon of “difference” *because* of nineteenth-century fears about sexual “difference”. He goes on to claim that “the ‘white man’s burden’ thus becomes his sexuality and its control, and it is this which is transferred into the need to control the sexuality of the Other, the Other as sexualized female” (“Black Bodies” 2237). According to this remarkably circular piece of logic, nineteenth-century discourses represent the “other” as essentially hypersexualised. This results in the “inherent fear”, as Gilman puts it, of the nineteenth-century observer when confronted with the hypersexualised “difference” of the “other”, which culminates in nineteenth-century discourses representing the “other” as essentially hypersexualised. In this way, one stereotype is first taken as a given in order to explain the construction of another stereotype. As soon as stereotypes are mistaken for ontologically given facts, their true discursive natures are obscured.

In the previous chapter, I argued that essentialist colonial stereotypes are most dangerous when their discursive nature is not acknowledged. In my discussion of Gilman’s argument in the previous chapter, I drew on performativity theory to reveal how the very idea of inherent bodily “difference” is discursively constructed. Given that performativity theory can successfully contest a belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things, the colonial legacy of inherent markers of bodily “difference” no longer holds true. I now extend my earlier argument to include assumptions about the supposedly inherent sexual “difference” which makes a stereotype such as that of the “untouchable” or that of the “unattainable” possible. According to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, sexuality, like gender, is constructed discursively. Butler writes that to “claim that the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualised repetition of norms is hardly a self-evident claim” (*Bodies* x). She acknowledges that “sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences”, but, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, she points out that the category of sex is, “from the start, normative”; it not only “functions as a norm, but [it] is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it

governs” (*Bodies* 1). Sexual “difference” is therefore “both marked and formed by discursive practices” (*Bodies* 1). Lewis succinctly summarises this argument in claiming that “sexuality is not so much a fact or biological given as it is a social practice and product of discourse” (Lewis “African Sexualities” 203).

Given that sexuality is itself discursively constructed, it cannot serve as an “inherent” proof of sexual “difference”. A careful analysis of the “untouchable” and “unattainable” stereotypes therefore reveals that the underlying “threat” of sexual “difference” is as much an essentialist and colonial stereotype as the very idea of bodily “otherness” itself. Such misrepresentations of black women’s bodies and their sexuality “persist in the present,” particularly when one considers how the policing of black women’s bodies still takes “the form of neo-imperial constructions of their [supposed] sexual excess” (Lewis “African Sexualities” 206). A close examination of the colonial trope of the (m)other thus proves crucial in order to fully comprehend the impact that colonial stereotypes of the hypersexualised black female body have had, and continue to have, on the South African literary and visual imaginary.

The South African imperial romance, for example, was a major cultural phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chrisman “Imperial Romance” 226). According to David Bunn, in the first six months after its publication in 1885, more than 31 000 copies of H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* were sold, thereby “making it one of the most popular documents of the late nineteenth century” (9). The massive popularity which *King Solomon’s Mines* enjoyed at the time of its publication implies that Rider Haggard’s highly stereotypical representations of African femininity would have had a significant impact on commonly-held assumptions surrounding African women’s sexuality in nineteenth-century popular and literary culture. In the next section, I trace the literary construction of a very particular colonial stereotype of African femininity in *King Solomon’s Mines*, before going on to show how this stereotype both influenced and became re-entrenched in early twentieth-century South African literary production and cultural politics.

## Constructing the colonial stereotype in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*

Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* opens with a dedication "to all the big and little boys who read it" (4). In this way, the novel immediately assumes an all-male readership, which, as a result, inscribes both the novel and its subject matter – namely, the coloniser's quest to acquire wealth in the colonies – in a masculine realm of imperial and patriarchal power. "The narrative of the novel," Bunn writes, "therefore seeks out a narrowly constituted male audience, and one can talk usefully about the shared ideological assumptions of such an audience" (10).

Indeed, all the characters in the novel are stereotypically gendered and racialised; the white male imperialists are portrayed as brave and resourceful heroes, while representations of the African women are typical of Lockett's "untouchable" and "unattainable" stereotypes. Laura Chrisman locates the novel's ideological assumptions in the "particular racial and national inflections of British imperialism, which glorify the British as the epitome of bravery and humane paternalism" (Chrisman "Imperial Romance" 226). She argues that Haggard's imperialist outlook utilises the romance genre to project "an ideal British subject composed of a cross-generational alliance of landed gentry, colonial trader and naval officer", as well as an "ideal African subject, a pastoral-military hybrid people through which the British realise themselves as the proper subjects of imperial narrative" (*Rereading* 47).

Anne McClintock, on the other hand, reads *King Solomon's Mines* as an allegory for the colonial appropriation of women's reproductive and physical labour. She argues that imperial success, wealth and power were dependent on controlling women's bodies. *King Solomon's Mines*, McClintock writes,

was in large part an attempt to negotiate contradictions in the colonial effort to discipline female sexuality and labour, both in the European metropolis and in the colonies. The conflicts between male and female generative power, and between domesticity and imperialism, were not only the

obsessive themes of Haggard's work but also a dominant preoccupation of his time. Much of the fascination of Haggard's writing for male Victorians was that he played out his phantasms of patriarchal power in the arena of empire, and thus evoked the unbidden relation between male middle- and upper-middle-class power in the metropolis and control of black female labour in the colonies. (*Imperial Leather* 233)

Chrisman does not agree with McClintock's reading that the female characters' productive and reproductive labour pose an inherent threat to the novel's male imperialists (see *Postcolonial Contraventions* 40). "McClintock," she argues, "presents a version of women's reproductive capability in which women are menacingly powerful regardless of whether they exercise any material control over the reproductive and productive activities of themselves or others" (*Postcolonial Contraventions* 40). While Chrisman believes that the genre of the imperial romance can itself be seen as originating "from a desire to dominate and police women, or to symbolically control their reproductive power" ("Imperial Romance" 233), she argues that McClintock's reading of the character of Gagool as an embodiment of threatening female generative power is based "on the slenderest of linguistic evidence, the 'mother' word" (*Postcolonial Contraventions* 41). She does, however, concede that *King Solomon's Mines* "carefully stages its presentation of threatening black females, not only containing the threat, but also rendering it a means to reinforce its racial and patriarchal-familial agendas" ("Imperial Romance" 236).

### **Constructing the "unattainable" and "untouchable" stereotypes in *King Solomon's Mines***

While my reading is informed by Chrisman's claims about the novel's pro-imperial ideology, as well as by McClintock's argument about the threat that female generative power pose to the imperial project, my own reading focuses on the novel's implicit anxiety when confronted with nineteenth-century colonial assumptions about the supposed "hypersexuality" of African women. I aim to show that Haggard's novel avoids

this stereotype precisely *because* of the threat the black female characters pose to the success of the novel's imperial adventure. According to Stoler, the "salience of sexual symbols as graphic representations of colonial dominance is relatively unambiguous and well established" (44). Therefore, the very fact that Haggard's novel does not locate the "otherness" of the African female characters in a colonial assumption regarding their supposed hypersexuality highlights the extent of the "threat" of the trope of (m)other in this novel. McClintock's reading that female reproductive power threatens to destabilise the imperial order is convincing. However, Haggard's novel specifically *denies* his female characters access to the symbolic site of motherhood in order to render this threat harmless.

In the novel, readers encounter the stereotypically beautiful, but "unattainable" Foulata, and the powerful, yet grotesquely animal-like and "untouchable" Gagool. Neither of the two female characters is ever represented in sexualised terms. In contrast, the novel opens with a highly sexualised and feminised map of the South African landscape that, when inverted, resembles the rough outlines of a spread-eagled and truncated female body with outstretched arms, where the "only parts drawn are those that denote female sexuality" (McClintock *Imperial Leather* 3). The African landscape can thus be read as a stereotypically hypersexualised female "character", open to the mastery of the male colonists who plunder the symbolically feminised landscape for material wealth.

A number of critics, such as McClintock, Bunn and Chrisman, have already written thorough and convincing analyses of Haggard's discursive feminisation and sexualisation of the African landscape. My reading rather focuses on the way in which Haggard's two female characters are *not* represented as sexualised in the least. I argue that while the colonial romance novel's implicit efforts to discipline female sexuality and labour are maintained through complete mastery of the overtly sexualised landscape, Haggard does not portray the bodies of the two female characters in the same fashion, precisely so that the narrative can thwart any potential sexual relationship between the white British men and the black African women. This covert colonial sexualisation of the two female characters is much more insidious and controlling than the overtly hypersexualised

feminine landscape that the white male colonialists seem to master and plunder with relative ease.

*King Solomon's Mines*, in short, begins when Allan Quatermain, a hunter and trader, is approached by an aristocrat, Sir Henry Curtis, and his friend, Captain John Good. The two men ask Quatermain to help them find Sir Henry's missing brother, who was last seen travelling north on a quest to find the fabled diamond mines of King Solomon. Quatermain agrees to lead the expedition, in exchange for a share of the treasure. On a mountainside known as Sheba's Breasts, the three men discover the remains of a Portuguese trader, Jose da Silvestre, who had drawn a map showing the way to the mines in his own blood. The map also comes with the charge to first kill Gagool, the powerful "old mother", "the evil genius of the land" (416) and the "mother of evil" (429), before gaining entry to the diamond mines. During their adventures, the three men save a beautiful young woman, Foulata, from being sacrificed by the cruel Kukuana king, Twala. Their guide, Ignosi, is revealed as the rightful Kukuana king and they help him overthrow Twala and Gagool's tyrannical rule. They capture Gagool and force her to lead them to the diamond mines. When Gagool attempts to trap the men in an underground cave and leave them to die, Foulata attacks Gagool to save the three men. Both women die in the caves, while the three white men emerge triumphant with the wealth they had been searching for.

In the opening pages of the novel, Quatermain informs the reader that "there is not a petticoat in all of history" and most certainly "not a woman in [his story] – except Foulata" (17), thereby completely ignoring the powerful Gagool, because, according to Quatermain, "she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable, so [he does] not count her" (17). Foulata is, of course, also not "marriageable" in Quatermain's eyes, simply by virtue of being an African woman. Haggard ensures that her character dies a gruesome death before any of the British heroes can change their minds about the supposedly "unmarriageable" status of African women. Indeed, the fact that only "marriageable" women "count" as real women in Quatermain's eyes clearly illustrates the novel's preoccupation with control over female sexuality, especially when it comes to the

novel's three British heroes and their interactions with African women. When the men first encounter both Foulata and Gagool, King Twala offers the three British men any of the Kukuana women they might desire. Quatermain, as narrator of this scene, is very adamant in his refusal of the offer on behalf of all three of the men: "Thanks, O king, but we white men *wed* only with white women like ourselves. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us!" (303, emphasis added). Quatermain's use of the word "wed" immediately recalls his opening remarks about what constitutes a "marriageable" woman. It implies, firstly, that no African woman is "marriageable" in the eyes of a white man and, by extension, that African women therefore cannot truly "count" as women. I read Quatermain's easy dismissal of both female characters on the grounds that they are supposedly not "marriageable" as the novel's attempt to contain the threat that both women actually pose to the success of the male imperial project, as I will go on to show in my discussion of Foulata's and Gagool's respective characters.

### **Constructing the "unattainable" stereotype in *King Solomon's Mines***

Foulata's character is a typical representation of the "unattainable" stereotype. Her remains completely one-dimensional throughout the novel. She is only described through conventional gendered markers of physical beauty, subservience and nurturing femininity. Still, descriptions of her body and her physical beauty are hardly ever sexualised, but comment on her grace and elegance instead. Quatermain, Good and Curtis first encounter Foulata when she is dancing for the cruel Kukuana king, Twala, as part of a ceremonial ritual. Foulata's first appearance in the novel marks her as a "flower-crowned girl", "singing a sweet song", "waving delicate palms and white lilies" and "looking faint and spiritual and the soft, sad light of the risen moon" (304). Since she is dancing as part of a ritual that will culminate in human sacrifice, the religious connotations in this description are not unexpected, yet the entire scene is marked by a sense of innocence and purity. Foulata is singled out when

a beautiful young woman sprang out of the ranks and began to pirouette in front of [the three British men] with a grace and vigour which would have

put most ballet girls to shame. At length she retired exhausted, and another took her place, then another and another, but none of them, either in grace, skill, or personal attractions, came up to the first. (148)

From the outset, Foulata's beauty is not described in sexualised terms, but instead draws attention to her grace and accomplishments. During the ritual dance, Captain Good inadvertently sentences Foulata to death when Twala asks him to choose the most beautiful woman present. Good picks Foulata and, as a result, she is singled out as a human sacrifice. She begs Good for mercy and is rescued by the three British men. When Good is injured in battle, Foulata devotes all of her time to his care, sacrificing her own comfort in order to nurse him back to health. Quatermain remarks that "day and night she watched him and tended him", noting that "her face, weary as it was from her long vigil", was "animated by a look of infinite compassion" (418). Quatermain is initially surprised that Foulata can nurse Good "with as fine an instinct as that of a trained hospital nurse", but does concede that without Foulata's "indefatigable nursing" (417), Good would have died.

During his convalescence, Good and Foulata fall in love. When Good wishes to thank Foulata after his recovery, he has to ask Quatermain to translate for him. "I interpreted," Quatermain tells the reader, "and under her dark skin she actually seemed to blush" (422). "I retired from this little interview sad at heart," Quatermain continues, for "I did not like Miss Foulata's soft glances" (423). Quatermain's use of the word "actually" suggests that he did not expect sexual modesty from someone like Foulata. Coupled with the text's emphasis on her "dark skin", this passage implicitly refers to commonly-held nineteenth-century assumptions about African women's supposed hypersexuality, further highlighting Quatermain's surprise that Foulata would appear bashful. However, the mere suggestion that Foulata, for all her seemingly chaste and subservient modesty, might be sexually attracted to Good, immediately causes Quatermain to start worrying about their relationship. It is especially telling that Quatermain is never troubled by the fact that Good is attracted to Foulata, easily dismissing his desire as the "amorous propensities of

sailors in general” (423), but the mere suggestion that Foulata’s “soft glances” could imply sexual desire for a white man immediately troubles his “sad heart”.

As a beautiful, refined, nurturing and subservient woman, Foulata’s character appears to be the epitome of what a Victorian male audience would expect from a “marriageable” woman. Whereas the “witch-mother”, Gagool, is depicted as a threatening and powerful force, precisely because her character does not conform to accepted female roles of subservient domesticity and motherhood, Foulata’s character “threatens” the future of the British imperial project precisely because she *would* make an exemplary wife and, more tellingly, mother. It is therefore not surprising that Haggard would use the hero of his Victorian adventure romance to champion the imperial injunction against “miscegenous” relations. Quatermain, as Haggard’s narrating voice, becomes the vehicle through which the novel asserts the imperial injunction against a relationship between an African woman and a white colonial male.

Towards the end of the novel, even Foulata’s character is suddenly and surprisingly revealed as inherently pro-imperial, as she affirms the imperial injunction against sexual relations between a black woman and a white man in her own words. Foulata sacrifices herself in order to thwart Gagool’s attempt to kill the three men. As she lies dying in the diamond caves, her broken body in close proximity to the incredible wealth the British characters desire above all else, Foulata begs Quatermain:

[B]e my tongue for a moment, I pray thee... before I go into the darkness – I would speak a word. Say to my lord... that I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as me, for the sun cannot mate with the darkness, nor the white with the black. (478)

Foulata’s death scene highlights a number of important points. Firstly, the colonial encounter deprives Foulata of the agency to speak for herself, in that she has to ask Quatermain to represent her to her beloved and to speak on her behalf. The fact that she has to ask Quatermain – the very character that embodies the imperial injunction against

their relationship – to translate her declaration of love for Good, means that she is still symbolically silenced; her voice becomes a further affirmation of imperial control over black women's bodies and sexuality. Indeed, with Quatermain's narrating voice speaking through the character of Foulata, black feminine sexuality is represented as something "dark" that can only "cumber" the life of a white colonial male. In this way, Haggard represents the imperial injunction against their relationship as a "natural law" that should never be transgressed; just as the sun and the darkness cannot exist together, the novel suggests, so a relationship between a white man and a black woman would be "wrong" and "unnatural".

Secondly, this scene represents Foulata's body, her life and her death as nothing more than an imperial asset. As she lies dead in the diamond caves, the food parcel she had carried into the cave with her ensures the continued survival of the three British heroes. Her body becomes a useful object that provides nourishment and strength, now that Haggard has removed the "threat" of Good's romantic feelings for her through her own sacrifice. Foulata thus remains the human sacrifice she was initially going to be. However, instead of being sacrificed to maintain the reign of an African leader, her death now not only enables the three British men to emerge rich and triumphant from the diamond mines, but also, as Chrisman argues, "safely transforms sexual threat into an affirmation of empire" ("Imperial Romance" 237).

The precise nature of this sexual threat is important, though. It is not merely the fact that Good and Foulata are attracted to each other, or even their love for each other, which bothers Quatermain. "Good," Quatermain notes, "was never quite the same after Foulata's death, which seemed to move him very greatly" (511). Quatermain, on the other hand, "consider[s] her removal... a fortunate occurrence, since, otherwise, complications would have been sure to ensue" (512). While the novel does not explain what these "complications" would entail, it is clear from the context of the passage that Quatermain would view any children born out of a relationship between a white man and a black woman as "complications". The real "threat" of Good and Foulata's relationship is thus revealed as the "threat" of "miscegenation" and motherhood. Recalling Lockett's

argument about the stereotype of “unattainable” black woman, it is clear that Haggard’s representation of this stereotype functions as a discursive prohibition against “miscegenous” sexual relations precisely because of the potential “threat” of children born out of a mixed-race union.

Furthermore, the fact that Good was “never quite the same” after Foulata’s death suggests the real depth and scope of his feelings for her, which Quatermain hardly acknowledges. Given that Quatermain narrates the whole of novel, the reader never gains access to intimate moments between Good and Foulata that are not mediated by Quatermain, who, as the narrator of the novel, embodies the novel’s imperial injunction against their relationship. Once Good and Curtis have returned to England, Curtis sends Quatermain a letter which informs him that Good “is still down on his luck about Foulata” (547). “He told me”, Curtis reports, “that since he had been home he hadn’t seen a woman to touch her, either as regards her figure or the sweetness of her expression” (547). This is the only moment in the novel where Foulata is described without the mediation of Quatermain’s narrating voice. It is telling that this one passage highlights Foulata’s “figure”, which is the closest the novel ever comes to representing her as a remotely sexualised character.

The suggestion that Good might truly have loved Foulata only seems to add to Quatermain’s relief that she is out of the way and that no “complications” can ensue. Haggard takes great care to never describe the relationship between Good and Foulata as one of reciprocal intimacy, for the representational category of intimacy has the potential to radically change the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, the “same” and the “different”, the “self” and the “other”. Instead, Quatermain takes great pains to assure “all the big and little boys” that

[t]he poor creature was no ordinary native girl, but of great, I had almost said stately beauty, and considerable refinement of mind. But no amount of beauty or refinement could have made an entanglement between Good and herself a desirable occurrence; for, as she herself put it, “Can the sun mate with the darkness, or the white with the black?” (512)

According to Quatermain, Good, “like most sailors, is of a susceptible nature” (302), suggesting that this would be the only reason why Good could have fallen in love with someone like Foulata. At times, it is almost as if the text “punishes” Good for being so “susceptible” by portraying him as ridiculous; regularly ridiculed for always fussing with his physical appearance, Good’s pride is dealt a blow when he is forced to make the journey to the Kukuana stronghold without his trousers, causing the other men to tease him for displaying his “beautiful white legs” (203). The novel seems to suggest that the only white male character ridiculous enough to journey through the African savannah without trousers, would also be the only white male character to be susceptible to Foulata’s charms. In the same letter in which Curtis reports that Good now finds that the figures of white English women compare unfavourably to that of Foulata’s, the novel once again mocks Good for his “beautiful white legs”; Curtis informs Quatermain that he has had the story published “in a Society paper” and that Good is “furious” about this public humiliation (546). In this way, the novel suggests that Good will continue to be ridiculed by British society at large as long as he persists in his belief that there is no woman in England who can surpass Foulata.

Furthermore, in insisting that Foulata was no “ordinary native girl”, Quatermain seems anxious to convince his readers that Good would never have fallen in love with an ordinary black woman, but that her great beauty and extraordinary qualities excuses Good’s love for her as a rare and atypical occurrence. When Haggard’s novel puts the words of the imperial injunction against their relationship in Foulata’s mouth, it suggests that Quatermain’s prejudice is a part of a “natural order” that is acknowledged even by Foulata herself. Foulata’s character thus uses images of powerful forces of nature to claim that “the sun cannot mate with the darkness” (512), implying that she too agrees that her relationship with Good would be against the “natural order” of things.

### **Constructing the “untouchable” stereotype in *King Solomon’s Mines***

The second female character in the novel, Gagool, is represented as a grotesque example of “untouchable” femininity, monstrous and animal-like. Quatermain describes her as “a

withered-up monkey” (236) with a “bald vulture-head” (248) that creeps around on all fours, robbing her of almost all human qualities.

Set in the wrinkles was a sunken slit that represented the mouth, beneath which the skin curved outwards to a point. There was no nose to speak of; indeed, the whole countenance might have been taken for that of a sun-dried corpse had it not been for a pair of large black eyes, still full of fire and intelligence, which gleamed and played under the snow-white eyebrows, and the projecting parchment-coloured skull, like jewels in a charnel-house. As for the skull itself, it was perfectly bare and yellow in hue. (248)

Descriptions of Gagool often draw on images of corpses, graves, skulls and death, foreshadowing her plan to trap the three men and her own demise in the caves. The description of the “jewels in a charnel-house” in particular foreshadows Gagool’s attempt to kill the three British men in the diamond mines. Still, even though Quatermain finds her menacing and repulsive, he nevertheless notes the “fire and intelligence” in her eyes. The novel portrays her as monstrous and death-like precisely *because* of her keen intelligence and her political power. Gagool’s character poses a very real threat to the success of the male characters’ quest for wealth and their imperial order. Gagool, significantly, is the only person in the entire Kukuana stronghold who is not deceived by the three white men’s claims to be godlike visitors from the stars with strange and supernatural powers. “What seek ye, white men of the stars – ah, yes, of the stars?” (252) Gagool asks them, her subtly ironic repetition of “ah, yes, of the stars” clearly indicating that she knows this to be a lie. “I have seen the white man,” she further informs them, “and know his desires” for “the bright stones”, the “stones that shine” and the “yellow metal which gleams” (253). This suggests that Gagool is also the only character to truly understand the three white men’s material greed and their quest to acquire colonial wealth.

The material greed of the three British heroes is most clearly highlighted when they take their leave of Ignosi after helping him to overthrow Twala. When he begs them to stay

with him, they refuse, no matter what comforts he offers them. “Now I do perceive”, said Ignosi,

bitterly, and with flashing eyes, “that it is the bright stones that ye love more than me, ye friend. Ye have the stones; now ye would go to Natal and across the moving black water and sell them, and be rich, as it is the desire of a white man’s heart to be. Cursed for your sake be the white stones, and cursed he who seeks them. Death shall it be to him who sets foot in the place of Death to find them. I have spoken. White men, ye can go.” (521)

The novel, however, never truly condemns its three heroes for their obsession to find the diamond mines, at whatever cost – even at the cost of losing a friend. Quatermain quickly and easily refutes this accusation of white greed by claiming that they merely long for their own homes and that their “hearts turn to [their] land and to [their] own place” (521). Ignosi’s character immediately has to agree that “now as ever [their] words are wise and full of reason,” since “the white man loves not to live on the level of the black or to house among his kraals” (521). Since Ignosi himself calls Quatermain’s prejudice and racism “wise and full of reason” (521), the novel contains the threat that this powerful and well-loved African leader, the “rightful king” of Kukuanialand, could pose to the colonial project by, once again, having an African character affirm the imperial order.

The novel’s most powerful, if unwitting, condemnation of the British characters’ material greed takes place in the diamond caves, when Gagool, with delicious irony, urges the three men to feast on the diamonds they so love:

“Hee! hee! hee!” went old Gagool behind us, as she flitted about like a vampire bat. “There are the bright stones that ye love, white men, as many as ye will; take them, run them through your fingers, *eat* them, hee! hee! *drink* them, ha! ha!” (473)

This short passage inadvertently rebukes the British characters for their material greed, for shortly after Gagool urges the three men to take as many diamonds as they can eat and drink, the men discover that they are trapped in the caves. Suddenly, edible foodstuffs hold more importance for their continued survival than diamonds; the diamonds that they cannot, after all, eat or drink, now suddenly hold no value. They ignore their precious diamonds and, in an even greater condemnation of their greed, they also ignore poor Foulata's broken body in their haste to secure the basket of food that she had carried with her (482). It is only after they have eaten this small amount of food that the three men spare a thought for her dignity and carry her corpse into the treasure chamber, laying her to rest next to the diamonds that are now worthless in comparison to actual foodstuffs that they can eat and drink (482). Gagool's laughter seems to foreshadow this moment, as if she knows that the diamonds will not save the three men from their fate in the caves.

Gagool's intelligence threatens the continued survival of the three male characters from their very first encounter.<sup>14</sup> As already mentioned, the three men pretend to be godlike visitors from the stars with magical powers in order to trick Twala into letting them go. When the three men seize upon the occurrence of a lunar eclipse as an "example" of their godlike powers to control the heavenly bodies, Twala and his warriors stand in awe and fear, whereas Gagool remains unimpressed and unconvinced of their supposed supernatural abilities, indicating that she understands the scientific reasons behind the eclipse. "It will pass," she cries to the terrified warriors, who are "petrified with dread" (315). "I have often seen the like before; no man can put out the moon; lose not heart; sit still – the shadow will pass" (316).

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<sup>14</sup> Writing about the intense anxiety of colonial settlers at the Cape about the "unknowable minds and often indeterminate bodies" of slaves, Baderon notes that "the knowledge held by slaves was both sought after and feared" ("Baartman and the Private" 74). "For instance," she writes, "there was the mythology about slave-women in the kitchen who could 'gool' (bewitch) or poison their owners" ("Baartman and the Private" 74). While Rider Haggard lived in the Colony of Natal during his time in South Africa, not in the Cape Colony, it is still possible that he may have heard stories about the power of slave-women to 'gool' settler men. Gagool's name and character could be drawn from this fear that slave-women possessed knowledge which their colonial masters did not, and which the women could use to harm white male colonists.

The eclipse scene and Foulata's dying remarks that "the sun cannot mate with the darkness" (478) offer similar textual attempts at containing the threat that the female characters pose to the success of the white men's quest for wealth. Both scenes draw on powerful natural images of light and dark to suggest an "unnatural" state that should be avoided. It is also important to note that moon is feminised in the eclipse scene. Twala tells Quatermain: "[I]t is a wonderful thing that ye promise, to put out the moon, the *mother of the world*, when she is at her full" (296, emphasis added). In the eclipse scene, the three white men threaten Twala with the "unnatural" darkening of the moon, pretending that they can control the heavenly bodies. By offering the eclipse as "proof" of their superiority, the text subtly locates the three white men as "rulers" over the "natural" world of the colony. Ignosi firmly believes that "English 'gentlemen' tell no lies" (298). "[H]ad ye not been Englishmen," he informs the British heroes, "I would not have believed it" (298). Ignosi's unquestioning belief, together with Twala and his warriors' fear, suggests that the male inhabitants of Kukuanaaland would all have fallen for the British men's ruse and the assumption that British imperial supremacy is part of the "natural order" of the colony. Only Gagool remains unconvinced by their trickery, making her the only character to actively oppose the three British men through her attempts to thwart their quest to find the diamond mines. Therefore, by also claiming to control the moon as the "mother of the world", the novel attempts to contain the power of Gagool, the "old, old mother", to thwart the British men's quest for imperial wealth. This scene clearly highlights the novel's anxiety about controlling the threat that the female characters pose to the success of the imperial project; Foulata through the implicit sexual "threat" of "miscegenation", and Gagool through the threat of her superior knowledge.

McClintock argues that it is Haggard's fear of female generative labour and reproductive power that animates the character of Gagool (see *Imperial Leather* 246, 254). In her reading, the three men kill the figure of the archaic mother in the symbolic womb of the cave, finally emerging "in an extraordinary fantasy of male birthing" out of a dark tunnel, clutching diamonds as large as pigeon eggs as the fertile symbols of their new reproductive order (*Imperial Leather* 248). Chrisman disagrees, writing that "there is nothing in the text to associate Gagool with either literal or symbolic motherhood"

(*Postcolonial Contraventions* 41). In my own reading, both of the female characters are denied the symbolic space of motherhood in order for the novel to contain the respective threats they pose to the British men's imperial adventure. While Foulata's character is described through the conventional gendered markers of physical beauty, subservience and nurturing femininity, the text scrupulously positions her as a "girl" and a "maiden"; descriptions that repeatedly enforce the imperial injunction against "miscegenation". It is precisely Gagool's refusal to submit to such stereotypically feminine roles of subservient domesticity that results in the novel's portrayal of her as monstrous, depraved and death-like. Gagool, the "witch-mother", and her *isanusis*, the "witch-smellers", represent the antithesis to the normative femininity of Foulata and the other dancing maidens. In the dance scene, Foulata is described in terms of her beauty, grace and innocence, while the *isanusis* are described as "awful figures", their hair "ornamented with small bladders taken from fish", their faces "painted in stripes of white and yellow", with "snake skins" down their backs and "human bones" around their waists, "while each held a small forked wand in her shrivelled hand" (274-275). They have the power to "smell out" people suspected of crimes in the Kukuana stronghold, particularly that of treason against King Twala, and sentence them to death, thus aligning their considerable political power with forces of death, rather than domesticity and reproductive power. Gagool, in particular, is associated with death, yet she herself suggests that she cannot die. She tells Ignosi that she has been alive for ten generations and that she was responsible for the death of Jose da Silvestre (432). As the "mother" of the terrifying *isanusis*, Gagool can decide who lives and who dies. She is a "member of a class that publically controls feminine activities," as Chrisman argues, "instead of participating in them" (*Postcolonial Contraventions* 42). As this power would pose a considerable threat to imperial efforts to control women's bodies and reproductive power, Haggard represents Gagool as a monstrously "unfeminine" figure who has transgressed the "natural" patriarchal order, thereby representing her as the opposite of Foulata's normative feminine beauty.

Whereas the "unattainable" and "untouchable" stereotypes would commonly represent black female characters as overtly hypersexualised in order to emphasise the "threat" of "miscegenation", neither of the female characters in *King Solomon's Mines* are

sexualised in the least. In terms of Foulata's character, this signals the novel's refusal to dwell on, or even tolerate, the suggestion of true and reciprocal intimacy between a white man and a black woman, despite Good and Foulata's evident attachment to each other. This far more covert and insidious colonial sexualisation of Foulata's character illustrates the extent to which the novel attempts to discursively contain the "threat" of supposedly hypersexual African femininity. In this way, Haggard's textual attempts to remove both women from the symbolic sphere of motherhood reveal the depth of the colonial romance novel's underlying anxiety about the "threat" of black feminine sexuality in the colonial period.

The colonial stereotypes of the "unattainable" and "untouchable" black female body did not simply disappear from South African visual, cultural and literary production after the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the country's nominal independence from British colonial rule. In the remainder of this chapter, I trace the continued prevalence of colonial stereotypes of hypersexualised black female figures in two early twentieth-century South African English novels, namely Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* and Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man*. Both authors invoke colonial stereotypes of hypersexualised black female bodies in order to posit their respective views of an emerging South African proto-nationalism in the literature of the early twentieth century.

In the next section, I first turn to Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924). I argue that Millin appropriates a very particular colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised African female body as the quasi-scientific base for her efforts to produce a realist novel about South African national and political identity. Given that Millin represents the bodies of all of the female characters in the novel as essentialising colonial stereotypes of innate bodily "difference", her representation of different, and differing, bodies is revealed as a discursive tool in her novelistic attempts at both literary realism and literary nationalism.

## **Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* and emerging proto-nationalisms**

In an essay titled "The South Africa of Fiction", published in 1912, Sarah Gertrude Millin "drew attention to the absence of a coherent tradition of realist fiction in South Africa" (Cornwell "South African Novel" 77). In this essay, Millin claimed that

there are many South Africas in fiction: the romantic South Africa of Rider Haggard; the Black South Africa – allied to the romantic – of Bertram Mitford; the Dutch South Africa of Perceval Gibson; the Pioneer South Africa of Sir Percy Fitzpatrick; the Emotional South Africa of Olive Schreiner; and the South Africa of the War, as Richard Dehan sees it. There is also, of course, the real South Africa, which may be any or all of these. ("South Africa" 29)

Millin hoped to establish a literary tradition of realist fiction in South Africa. However, the unfortunate vehicle which she chose for her realist literary project is the discourse of scientific racism; that "rationalisation *par excellence*", as Gareth Cornwell describes it, "of imperialism, colonialism, of apartheid itself" ("South African Novel" 75). Even though Millin's half-baked notions of Social Darwinism hardly seem worthy of a realist literary project today, ideas like these, J.M. Coetzee reminds readers,

were viable intellectual currency for a long time, and were based on a great deal of what passed for scientific research. They formed part of one of the dominant myths of history from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the myth that Western Europeans were biologically destined to rule the world. (42)

"From our point of vantage," Cornwell writes, "the systematic racism in Millin's fiction betokens a sad failure of the imagination, a monument to the mentality of the colonial enclave... [but] to Millin herself, it was an aesthetic breakthrough leading to a liberating affirmation of [national] identity" ("South African Novel" 77). "In a South Africa

hitherto defined in terms of the adventure romance or ‘exotic novel’”, Cornwell concludes, “[Millin’s] tragedy of colour intervenes as conscientious ‘domestication’ – as an attempt to win the privilege or moral seriousness for the embryonic national novel tradition” (“South African Novel” 76). “Any view of Millin as a woman imbued with the racial prejudices of white South African society,” Coetzee generously points out, also has to take into account “a view of her as a practising novelist adapting whatever models and theories lie to hand to make writing possible” (58).

In her most famous novel, *God’s Stepchildren* (1924), Millin appropriates a colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised African female body as the quasi-scientific base for her efforts to produce a realist novel about South African national and political identity. Given that Millin represents the bodies of all of the female characters in the novel as essentialising colonial stereotypes of innate bodily “difference”, her representation of different, and differing, bodies is revealed as a discursive tool in her novelistic attempts at both literary realism and literary nationalism.

### **Constructing the colonial stereotype in *God’s Stepchildren***

*God’s Stepchildren* traces the progeny of the Reverend Andrew Flood, a white British missionary who comes to the Cape in 1821 and marries a Korana girl named Silla.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the novel, Millin draws explicitly on the colonial stereotype of the “untouchable”, hypersexualised African woman and the accompanying imperial prohibition against “miscegenous” sexual relations between black women and white men. *God’s Stepchildren* is obsessed with organising physical attributes into a eugenicist hierarchy of racial stereotypes. The novel has been widely decried as “notoriously racist” (Dorothy Driver “Afterword” 227), as a “prejudiced, ignorant and vulgar piece of work”

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<sup>15</sup> During Flood’s journey to the mission station, ironically known as Canaan, he “realise(s) that there were different kinds of Hottentots” (34), even though he never differentiates between any of the Khoe or San characters in the novel and labels them all with the derogatory epithet “Hottentot”. Still, whether or not Flood’s character ever acknowledges them as such, the text identifies the inhabitants of Canaan as “Korannas” (34). The Korana people, a Khoekhoe clan, originally inhabited the Liesbeek valley (recorded in documents of the time as Gorachoqua) before they were driven away by settlers of the Dutch East India Company around 1658 (see Parsons 2). In this chapter, I will use the clan name Korana, rather than the text’s original and offensive term “Hottentot”, to refer to the inhabitants of Canaan.

that serves as a “vindication of white supremacy and racial segregation” (Tony Voss 11-12), and as “a kind of fiction-clad propaganda for racism” (Robert Ross 61), with the author herself cast as “the avatar of white supremacy” (Stephen Gray quoted in Ross 62).

The four sections of the second part of the novel are named after the four generations of Flood’s descendants; Deborah (1824), Kleinhans (1842), Elmira (1872) and Barry (1890). The main theme of the novel is the supposed “threat” of “miscegenation”; the plot is therefore organised around the supposed “purity” (66) and “superiority” (127) of the white race, arguing that the colonial context jeopardises the “purity” (66) of the white colonial male’s blood by bringing him into contact with stereotypically hypersexualised and promiscuous African women. In this way, *God’s Stepchildren* constructs a hierarchy of race where the “lowest rung” clearly recalls Sander Gilman’s arguments about the salience of nineteenth-century sexual representations of Sara Baartman’s body; this “lowest rung” is, once again, the Khoesan body, here simply referred to as the “aboriginal”:

Lena [Kleinhans’ wife] herself showed in her delicacy of feature and clear yellowish skin her ancestral superiority over Kleinhans. For all she had the straight, coarse, black hair and shadowed black eyes of the Cape girl, it was quite obvious that she was *further removed from the aboriginal* than he was. The Hottentot blood in him expressed itself in his heavy, triangular-shaped face and wide nose; but she had the thin little nose, the well-cut mouth and oval cheek-line of her Malay grandmother, her German blood showed in her paler skin, and her voice, too, was light and gentle where that of Kleinhans was *heavy with nearness to the African earth*. (127-128, emphases added)

Millin’s racist, eugenicist stereotypes makes for uncomfortable reading. Throughout the novel, her characters figure as essentialist stereotypes of the supposedly *a priori* embodiment of bodily “difference”, which she organises through a rigid mind/body dualism. For Millin, the embodiment of the African body clearly signifies “nearness to the African earth”, thus reiterating colonial assumptions about the supposedly

“primitive”, “uncivilised” and “degenerate” qualities “inherent” to African bodies. In this way, African bodies in the novel are invariably described as hypersexualised, degenerate and racist stereotypes that are represented solely in bodily terms.

White bodies in the novel, on the other hand, are not really described in bodily terms at all, but are rather represented in terms of “purity”, rationality and intellectual superiority. Barry, the fourth generation of Flood’s descendants, is born with light skin, but still “could not hold his own against white competition. He had not the brain, the persistence or the temperament” (249). Barry notably feels that “no man could really be at ease when there was something latent *in his body* which it was necessary for him and the world, in a kind of conspiracy, to ignore” (251, emphasis added). This leads Barry to think that the “minds of pure-bred white boys might, nevertheless, be of different fibre – of superior quality – to his own” (251). This short excerpt very clearly highlights Millin’s highly racist mind/body dualism, given that the character of Barry believes the minds of white men to be superior to his own, and blames his mixed-race ancestry for a supposed “lack”, which he tellingly locates as an inherent aspect of his material, biological body. The very phrase “in his body” clearly highlights the way in which Millin first constructs discursive and essentialist categories of racial “difference”, but then presents such universalising and racist descriptions as examples of inherent bodily attributes. Even the most cursory understanding of performativity theory would completely disrupt Millin’s racist mind/body dualism, revealing that there is no such thing as “inherent” biological “difference”. Indeed, performativity theory shows that the very idea of “difference” can only become intelligible through discursive, symbolic markers of race, gender and sexuality.

Millin’s racist hierarchies are even more troubling if one considers the fact that she offered these discursive categories of supposed racial “difference” as an example of realist fiction. Even at the time of *God’s Stepchildren*’s publication in 1924, the South African reading public seemed uneasy – though, one would assume, for differing reasons – with Millin’s portrayal of race in South Africa. In an article published in 1926, Millin defended her representation of race by writing that

[t]here are people in South Africa who complain because South African authors choose to write about colour. And they complain with justice when those who have never been genuinely stirred by the dark profundities of race presume to make vulgar and superficial play with it. Colour can be treated as cheaply as nationality, sociology or sex. But when they think that the subject is in itself unpleasant then their mentality shows like that of morons. Race is of all themes in the world the greatest. The distinctions between white and black are of all human problems the most poignant. (quoted in Cornwell “South African Novel” 78)

Cornwell highlights two aspects of this extraordinary statement, which he terms “a decisive moment in the history of the South African novel.” The first, he writes, “is that it is in the name of *realism* that Millin trumpets her queasy excitement about the literary possibilities of race; the second is that her essay constitutes one of the most emphatic statements of literary nationalism we have on record” (“South African Novel” 78). Through Millin, he argues, the colonial South African tradition of the English novel “articulates its discovery of a national life major enough to measure up to the demands of the imported form of the realist novel” and discovers in the theme of race “a moral vindication, a source of social and political identity with the emerging nation-state, a sense of independence from European cultural and intellectual traditions” (“South African Novel” 79).

However, it is crucial to point out that both Millin’s literary realism and her emerging literary nationalism ultimately depend upon the perpetuation of a very particular colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body. In the same 1926 article, Millin denounces writers like Rider Haggard “for their ‘romantic’ or ‘childish’ treatment of ‘the native’ in presenting him for the consumption of those ‘who are, and remain, boys at heart’” (quoted in Cornwell “South African Novel” 79). With this pithy reference to Haggard’s dedication to “all the big and little boys” who read *King Solomon’s Mines*, Millin seemingly wants to claim two different points. Firstly, she seemingly indicts a reading public that would take the colonial romance’s stereotypical representation of

black feminine sexuality and corporeality as truth, and, secondly, seemingly claims that her own “realist” representation of the black female body is not, like Haggard’s, “childish” or “romantic”. Ironically, though, throughout *God’s Stepchildren*, Millin employs the very same discursive stereotype of colonial “otherness” that she dismisses as “childishness” in Haggard’s fiction, and turns this construct into the quasi-scientific base for her own efforts to produce a realist novel about South African national and political identity.

In *God’s Stepchildren*, Flood’s initial “civilising mission” seems superficially cast in terms of racial tolerance and equality. Motivated by a sermon he attends in England on the “essential equality of all human beings” (24), he decides that his life’s work is to travel to South Africa and “[lead] the souls of his poor black brothers to God” (23). However, as soon as he sets foot on South African soil, the novel’s underlying racism is immediately focalised through Flood’s character. He describes the Korana inhabitants of the mission station as “little yellow, monkey-like people, with their triangular faces”, their “peppercorned heads”, their “little keen black eyes” (28) and their “little monkey-like babies” (54). According to Flood, “[t]hey were, in the main, stupid and indolent”, “quite savage and *Hottentot-like*” (39, emphasis added). Millin’s strange, derogatory adjective signals the extent to which her novel is informed by a pervasive colonial stereotype of the Khoesan body, to such a degree that merely being Khoesan somehow becomes an insult in itself.

Millin’s characterisation of Flood is clearly informed by the stereotype of the “untouchable” black female stereotype and the implicit assumption that “any white man who consorts with such a woman debases himself” (Lockett 21). Flood is described as a pathetic and ridiculous figure. He is a “tall, bony man, with hollow blue eyes” and with “teeth [that] projected slightly, so that he had difficulty in closing his mouth. [H]is chin, strained with the effort of assisting his lips to meet, was pricked with little holes” and “his light brown hair was thinning upwards in a point on each side of his high, narrow forehead” (21-22). The novel also informs readers that Flood “was not a clever man and he knew people did not consider him clever” (22). By highlighting Flood’s physical

shortcomings and his lack of intelligence, Millin excludes his character, as a white male in the colonial context, from the typically “masculine” sphere of Cartesian rationality, and thereby inscribing him, along with the female “Other”, in the sphere of bodily “degeneracy”.

On the ship to South Africa, Flood falls desperately in love with the beautiful and unattainable Mary Keeble. Unlike the “unattainable” black woman in Haggard’s imperial romance, Millin represents Mary as a stereotype of white femininity. She has “dark blue eyes”, “delicate brows”, “fair hair” and “eyelids [that] were the eyelids of a Madonna” (21-25). Her Madonna-like features, coupled with her name, Mary, presents white femininity as chaste, pure, virginal and untouchable. Even the notably white muslin dress she habitually wears emphasises the construction of her character as a stereotype of virginal purity, so that Flood refers to her as “a little white flower” (25). However, as the novel’s representative of the pinnacle of white womanhood, Mary refuses to marry the awkward and bumbling Flood, who, in turn, chooses one of the Korana girls in the mission station as his wife. Mary thus poses a very different kind of “untouchable” stereotype of femininity; whereas Silla is “untouchable” because of the “threat” of the imperial injunction against interracial sexual relationships, Mary is “untouchable” because she is considered as far too good for the inept and weak Flood.

Flood is initially “shocked and embarrassed” (35) when confronted with the uncovered bodies of the women at the mission station. He largely ignores the women at first, hoping to find friendship and brotherhood among the male inhabitants. He has long, rhetorical debates with the older men of the mission station, led by their “ancient dialectician” (49), and not realising that they are making fun of him. When Cachas, one of the older women, tells him to marry, he tells her that “*no woman* will come to live here” (57, emphasis added). Flood’s character remains unaware of the hurtful irony that he is, in fact, addressing a woman, even as he speaks these words. This clearly illustrates that Flood, echoing Haggard’s earlier imperialist conceptualisation about what constitutes a “marriageable” woman in the colonies, does not think of the women at the mission station as “real” women. Flood first tries to win the trust and acceptance of the men through

language and rationality, but when all his efforts at being accepted into the community fails, he tries to force himself into the lives of the Korana by marrying one of the young girls at the mission station, thus using the African female body for his own social and political gain.

### **The representation of Silla and the trope of the (m)other**

If Mary represents a stereotype of virginal white femininity, then Silla, Flood's young wife, represents a typical nineteenth-century colonial stereotype of racial and sexual "difference". Described as "cheeky" (47), "provocative" (57) and "with [an] impudent little manner that was *naturally* hers" (56, emphasis added), as opposed to Mary's distant and virginal purity, Silla is immediately cast in the colonial trope of sexual excess. Millin's use of the word "natural" strengthens the mind/body dualism through which she posits her racist hierarchy of differing bodies, as part of an attempt to render a colonial, discursive stereotype of African female hypersexuality as "natural" and thus represent it as "inherently" true. In this way, the novel suggests that Silla's body is "inherently" hypersexualised and that she is "naturally" promiscuous. When Flood marries Silla,

she was only seventeen, and slim, and daintily shaped, as were most of the other young girls, with a small head whose brown scalp was visible through the peppercorn hair, set on a splendid neck. (47)

However, the novel describes her youthful beauty in very negative terms, namely as a "warning" that it will never last and that "[w]ith maturity she would no doubt achieve the grotesque development which was the Hottentot ideal of beauty" (47). Indeed, soon after Flood's marriage to Silla, Millin writes that

[w]ith *maternity* Silla was beginning to develop the typical Hottentot figure. All the Hottentot matrons were stout to malformation, although their men remained slim and wiry till death. And Silla's youthful liveness had disappeared so completely that the recollection of it seemed like an

impossible dream. She waddled when she walked, like an overfed goose. Her face had almost doubled in size, and all its youthful alertness was gone. She was fat – fat all over. Her years were exactly twenty. (67, emphasis added)

It is noteworthy that Millin uses the word “maternity”, instead of “maturity”, clearly associating bodily “degeneration” with the symbolic site of motherhood in a novel obsessed with “miscegenation”. Millin’s claim that “all matrons” were “malformed” suggests, firstly, that the novel associates the “typical Hottentot figure” with maternity and, secondly, posits the symbolic site of motherhood as the novel’s central trope of sexual and bodily “degeneracy”. This is further apparent when Flood cannot bear to name his first-born daughter after his first love, Mary, for “it was not for him to call a Hottentot child Mary” (66). This suggests three important things. It suggests, firstly, that Mary’s Madonna-like characteristics represent a very different conceptualisation of white motherhood than Silla’s “grotesque” (47) “maternity” (67). White motherhood, the novel suggests, is something otherworldly and disembodied, and quite removed from embodiment and sexuality. Millin thus constructs the supposedly chaste and virginal body of the white woman as too “pure” to be in any way associated with sex.

Secondly, this suggests that the symbolic body of the white mother can in no way be associated with a little Korana girl, thereby locating the body of the white woman outside of the novel’s “threat” of “miscegenation”. Flood, however, manages to name the girl child after his *own* mother, further strengthening the novel’s negative racial associations with the symbolic site of motherhood. Flood views his marriage to Silla and the children she bears him as a terrible “sacrifice” (66) on his part, since he believes that “[h]e had sacrificed his coming child’s white heritage – if not his body, the purity of his blood” (66). In this way, the white male body is figured as something that can be lost in the colonial encounter with the black female body if the prohibition against “miscegenous” sexual relations is not maintained.

Thirdly, the novel's prohibition against "miscegenation" is so powerful that it results in Flood's complete alienation from his own child, as he cannot seem to call the little girl his daughter, but merely refers to his own daughter as "a Hottentot child" (66, emphasis added). In this way, Millin's literary representations of bodies reduces all embodied materiality to essentialising colonial stereotypes of supposedly innate bodily "difference".

According to Peter Blair, the first "anti-miscegenation" law was passed in 1685 by officials of the Dutch East India Company, forbidding marriage between white colonial settlers and Africans. In 1902, when South Africa was under British colonial administration, extramarital sex between African men and white women – but not, interestingly enough, between white men and African women – was made illegal and punishable by law (see Blair 586). "The asymmetry of this latter law," Blair writes,

attested to the perception of a "black peril" threat, a perception which was attacked by black South African writer and campaigner, Sol Plaatje, in a 1921 pamphlet [that] made a swingeing attack on the hypocrisy of whites who whipped up fears of "black peril" ... while ignoring "white peril" assaults by white men upon black women, with the complicity of courts delivering a "double standard of justice". (586)

In 1927, the South African parliament passed the so-called "Immorality Act", which forbade extramarital sex between white and black South Africans, irrespective of gender. The fact that *God's Stepchildren* was published in 1924, not too long before the "Immorality Act" was passed, suggests that the racist stereotypes and the accompanying prohibition against "miscegenation" in the novel enjoyed considerable currency in the South African national imaginary at the time.<sup>16</sup> It also suggests that questions surrounding interracial relationships were a big part of the political and social reality of Millin's time. Millin, however, does not locate the events of *God's Stepchildren* in her own contemporary moment, but in nineteenth-century British colonial South Africa. The text

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<sup>16</sup> The novel, interestingly enough, never sold very well in South Africa, though it enjoyed considerable popularity in the United States, where it was a best-seller (see Green "Blood and Politics" 4).

thus consciously re-inscribes a colonial stereotype of the black female body as part of Millin's efforts to inject South African literature with a new-found realism. Since Millin wrote *God's Stepchildren* as an attempt to establish a tradition of literary realism in South Africa, it is important to note how the novel repeatedly validates one particular colonial stereotype in its efforts to create a new South African literary tradition, and how this colonial stereotype is then re-inscribed in the postcolonial national imaginary. In this way, Millin's attempts at imagining a new South African national and political identity highlight one way in which a discursive stereotype of colonial "otherness" became entrenched in the South African literary tradition.

In the next and final section, I turn to Olive Schreiner's anti-imperial, posthumously-published novel, *From Man to Man* (1926). Unlike both Haggard's colonial romance or Millin's attempted realist fiction, *From Man to Man* does not merely revert to colonial stereotypes of hypersexuality. Instead, *From Man to Man* highlights the ambiguities inherent in Schreiner's fictional attempts to both challenge and displace essentialist colonial stereotypes. Schreiner's text imagines a future South Africa where racial and gendered equality is possible, while, at the same time, the novel's representation of its black female characters reasserts colonial stereotypes, even as the author consciously tries to challenge and subvert these stereotypes through her writing.

### **Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* and a new proto-nationalist vision**

In *From Man to Man*, Olive Schreiner, like Millin, imagines a new South African national identity by drawing on the colonial stereotype of the hypersexualised black female body and the accompanying "threat" of "miscegenation". Unlike Millin's novel, however, Schreiner's novel grapples with the real complexities and contradictions of raced and gendered hierarchies of power in the South Africa of her time, particularly in her treatment of the novel's white and black female characters. In a letter to her brother, William Philip Schreiner, dated 4 June 1908, Schreiner wrote:

In my small way I am doing what I can. If it were typewritten & easy to read I would you [sic] a chapter of my novel I'm just finishing. The colour question comes in quite naturally there, because one of the centre points of the story is that the wife has adopted & brings up as her own among the legitimate children a little half-coloured child who is her husbands [sic] by a coloured servant. He never suspects the child is his till the end of the book, when he attacks his wife with bringing up a coloured child with his white children. You will of course see this opens up the whole question of our relation to the unreadable ^darker^ races, & the attitude which says 'they are here for our interest for our pleasure, & to hell with them when they aren't that!' If only I could live to finish that book, I would feel satisfied, though it was perfect failure.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Schreiner locates the “centre point” of the novel in the figure of the “little half-coloured child” being raised by the novel’s white heroine foregrounds ways in which *From Man to Man* employs the tropes of “otherness”, “miscegenation” and motherhood in order to imagine a new South African racial and gender politics, one that is radically different to the racist ideology underlying Millin’s emergent literary nationalism in *God’s Stepchildren*. As Tony Voss writes in his preface to the 1986 AD Donker edition of *God’s Stepchildren*:

In 1926, two years after *God’s Stepchildren* had first appeared, Olive Schreiner’s life-work novel *From Man to Man* was posthumously published. That work too deals, in part, with miscegenation. The heroine’s husband fathers a daughter, named, with significant historical allusion, Sartje, with a coloured housemaid. The heroine (Schreiner’s spokeswoman) does not reject the daughter; rather, she takes the child into her re-

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<sup>17</sup> Olive Schreiner to William Philip ('Will') Schreiner, 4 June 1908, University of Cape Town Libraries Special Collections, Manuscripts & Archives, Olive Schreiner BC16/Box4/Fold1/1908/3.

constituted family. It is a gesture which Sarah Gertrude Millin was incapable of imagining. (15)

*From Man to Man* thus offers a very different representation of female sexuality and motherhood than either Haggard's colonial romance or Millin's nationalist realism. "By exploring with the utmost passion and integrity what it meant to be both colonised and coloniser in a Victorian and African world," McClintock writes, "Schreiner pushed some of the critical contradictions of imperialism to their limits and allows us thereby to explore some of the abiding conflicts of race and gender, power and resistance that haunt our time" (*Imperial Leather* 260).

Dorothy Driver suggests that it is perhaps due to *From Man to Man*'s status as "unfinished" that it is "generally dismissed" ("Copy Within" 124), given that the majority of scholarship on Schreiner's novels usually focus on *The Story of an African Farm*.<sup>18</sup> While *From Man to Man* is certainly not innocent of racist stereotypes or derogatory epithets for the novel's African characters, Schreiner nevertheless tackles the problem of racial and gendered inequality in the South Africa of her time with far greater nuance and sympathy than she does in *The Story of an African Farm*. In my discussion below, I will only focus on *From Man to Man* and, even more specifically, I will only focus on the character of Rebekah and her relationship to the African women in the novel.

The title of the novel, *From Man to Man*, points, firstly, "to the traffic in women, which for Schreiner occurred in two spheres: the socially sanctioned exchange by which women entered wedlock and the transactional sex work Victorian discourse marked as its antithesis" (Samuelson "Writing Women" 758). These spheres are illustrated through the lives of two sisters, Rebekah and Bertie. Rebekah marries an adulterous man who continually betrays her trust and fidelity, while Bertie is seduced against her will, runs away, and eventually becomes a kept woman in London. Secondly, the title also hints at a

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<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Driver offers an extensive overview of the lack of scholarly and critical attention generally paid to *From Man to Man* (see "Copy Within" 124).

letter Rebekah writes to her philandering husband, listing his many infidelities and begging him to speak openly and truthfully to her, as one man would to another man.

### **Constructing the colonial stereotype in *From Man to Man***

In the novel, a pregnant Rebekah has hired a “coloured servant-girl” for a year, “young enough,” Driver notes, “to be still under her mother’s care” (“Reclaiming” 116). The young servant is named Clartje in the 1886-1887 manuscript of the novel, but is only referred to as the “Hottentot girl” in the published version (see Driver “Reclaiming” 118). One night, Rebekah finds that her husband, Frank, is not in his bed. She goes outside, only to see him enter the young servant’s room. She stays up all night writing a letter to Frank, begging him to speak openly and honestly to her, and urging him to lead a life of integrity. She offers to help him achieve this goal and promises not to stand in his way as a jealous wife, as long as there is no deception between them. “I feel that tonight the end has come,” Rebekah writes,

and you and I must speak openly and sincerely to one another. I am not afraid of you. I am not a woman speaking to the man who owns her, before whom she trembles: we are two free souls looking at each other. (288) ... I do not ask you to love me, only to speak the truth to me, as you would if I were another man. (298)

It is telling that Rebekah only writes this letter after she sees Frank enter the servant girl’s room. The letter makes it clear that she has long been aware of Frank’s many infidelities, as Rebekah recalls his affair with the “cold and narrow” (256) Mrs Drummond, with her “refined face and graceful figure and beautiful dresses” (278). She also knows of Frank’s dalliance with a “stout” and pimply girl “of about fourteen or fifteen” in a “very short dress” (273). Rebekah has seen Frank with both of these women, yet has never told him what she saw, for she always hoped that he would be open and honest with her, and tell her himself. Even though Frank’s affair with the young schoolgirl fills Rebekah “with a creepy horror” (278), she only threatens him with the ultimatum of divorce when she

learns that he has been sleeping with a “coloured” woman. In this way, as Driver points out, “Schreiner’s feminist impulses, which might have allowed her to see [Clartje] as a victim, are overruled by racist impulses” (“Women and Nature” 469).

Frank, however, refuses even to read the letter, dismissing Rebekah’s anguish as “the silly little fancies” (305) of an irrational “mad woman” (250). In her distress, Rebekah suddenly turns to the “other” woman, hoping, perhaps, that if her husband refuses to speak to her as “from man to man”, she might speak openly and honestly to another woman in solidarity. In the novel, Rebekah asks herself:

Why are you agonising here? Are *you* the only creature in the world who has suffered wrong? If life has no value to you, are there not others weaker than yourself to whom you can make it of value? Because in your anguish you are alone and no hand comes to help you, can you put out your hand to none? Are you the only woman in the world who has suffered? (300)

Rebekah’s attempt to connect with the young servant girl marks a strikingly self-reflexive moment in the text, one which is crucial to understanding Schreiner’s attempts to portray the reality of racial and gendered inequalities of her time. In this self-reflexive moment, Rebekah tries to establish an intimate connection between two women across the colonial divide. She goes to Clartje’s room, fully acknowledging the precarity of the life of the “other”, and fully intending to forge an intimate and equal relationship between herself and the “other” woman. Thus, as Meg Samuelson argues, “while inter-gender relations are central to the plot, those between women, and the establishment or failure of communion across the colonial divide, also figure prominently” (Samuelson “Writing Women” 758).

However, Samuelson notes that it is when Rebekah goes to the servant girl’s outside room that the “markers of similarity and difference between women become fraught” (“Writing Women” 759). This moment in the novel thus marks Rebekah’s failure to connect with Clartje on an intimate and equal footing. Instead of creating a connection

with Clartje as “from woman to woman” – more specifically, as two women who have both been the victims of Frank’s treacherous infidelity and who are both pregnant with Frank’s children – Rebekah’s gaze suddenly lingers on racialising bodily markers. In this moment of confrontation, the novel describes the girl’s hair as “short black wool, with difficulty parted, [that] was combed out to stand in two solid masses on each side of her head”, notes her “small dark face” and “puckered forehead even a little blacker than the rest”, her “puny black arms and bare shoulders”, and her “thick black lips” (301). Clartje, as Driver argues, is suddenly positioned

as black in relation to this more powerful white woman, and Rebekah is positioned as the white woman that she did not want to be. Any potential solidarity or sympathy has dissolved. In this clash between idealism and realism in the novel, Schreiner shows us that Rebekah should have been able to behave in one way but in actuality behaves in another. (“Copy Within” 139)

Both Driver’s and Samuelson’s readings are convincing. I would add that the character of Clartje is not only racialised in the moment of confrontation, but she is also described as overtly sexualised. Rebekah notes Clartje’s “striped flannel petticoat”, her “crimson satin corsets, embroidered with little white flowers”, the “mass of frilled white lace” surrounding Clartje’s bare shoulders, the “white nightgown heavy with bows” lying on her bed next to the “serge dress she was just going to put on” (301). The rough, durable fabric of the plain serge dress marks Clartje as a servant in Rebekah’s household, while the more sensual crimson satin and lace highlight the sexual nature of the illicit affair taking place in the outside room. Clartje puts her hands on her hips when she confronts Rebekah and laughs at her, a laugh that is “intended to be defiant but with an undertone of fear” (301). Clartje’s hands on her hips thus suggest an implicit sexuality in her actions, as well as her full realisation of why Rebekah has come to her room in the first place. The only power she can claim over Rebekah in the moment of confrontation is that of her sexuality, which is also the cause of her fear that she will be turned out of her room

and sent away. In this way, Schreiner's text locates the figure of Clartje as both stereotypically sexualised and racialised.

It is this sudden and unexpected description of Clartje as a stereotypically hypersexualised and racialised figure which marks Rebekah's complete failure to forge an intimate connection to the "other". Even Clartje's fearful laugh, the most obvious reference to her vulnerability and precarity in relation to Rebekah's privileged position, becomes overtly and stereotypically sexualised. It is Rebekah's failure to connect with Clartje which marks the "other" woman as a stereotypical figure in the novel. Indeed, in this moment of failed intimacy, the face of the "other" is represented in such a way that representation can only efface the precarious subjectivity of the supposed "other". When Rebekah realises that "it was with that girl even as it was with herself that day" (301), and that Clartje is pregnant with her husband's child, she turns around and walks away without saying anything to the woman she had initially sought out in solidarity. Given the novel's emphasis on motherhood, the possibility of identification and empathy between two mothers is lost in the rupture of racist stereotyping. Rebekah dismisses the young girl and sends her away. Clartje's very name, rooted as it is in the Dutch word *klaar* (meaning "finished", "over" or "done"), is telling in this regard. After Clartje's departure, Rebekah equally tellingly "white-washes" (307) the room and takes her husband's illegitimate daughter, Sartje, into her own household. Whereas Rebekah failed to establish any kind of intimate relationship with Clartje, it is her adoption of Clartje's daughter that eventually allows for some of the most intimate moments in the text. Schreiner's intimate domestic scenes of motherhood also offer the novel's greatest challenge to essentialist stereotypes, as I will go on to illustrate in the remainder of this chapter.

### **The representation of Sartje and the trope of the (m)other**

Rebekah's adoption of her husband's illegitimate daughter and her role as mother signal both the most interesting and the most problematic moments in the novel. In *From Man to Man*, Schreiner employs the tropes of motherhood and "miscegenation" in order to imagine a different political future for South Africa. Where the unequal racial and social

positions of power between the Rebekah and Clartje could not be overcome in the passage above, Schreiner's novel opens up new possibilities for Rebekah to raise her sons with an alternative vision of a more equal racial and gendered politics in an as-yet unrealised future South Africa. This is done primarily through Schreiner's representation of Rebekah as a maternal figure and the inclusion of Sartje into the household, making motherhood and "miscegenation" two of the central tropes of the novel's redemptive imagery. "If the male colonial narrative is fatally corrupt," McClintock writes, then

Schreiner seems to suggest that civilisation can be redeemed through the self-sacrificial graces of white motherhood. However, there is no room for the black mothers in her fiction; once their role in providing children for the plot has passed, they disappear without trace. The white mother, it seems, can redeem African childhood, but only at the expense of the black mother. (*Imperial Leather* 272-273)

In McClintock's reading, when Rebekah adopts Sartje into her household, it is "so designed as to illuminate her spiritual largesse; nonetheless, she raises this 'daughter' to call her 'mistress'" (*Imperial Leather* 273). "The household, like the narrative," McClintock argues, "enfolds itself about the denial of the black mother, and the idea of the maternal is fissured by race" (*Imperial Leather* 273). McClintock's reading is convincing; first of all, the idea of the maternal is certainly fissured by race, and, secondly, Schreiner's novel clearly denies the figure of the black mother. As Driver points out, the text only "tells us (somewhat belatedly and cursorily)" that Rebekah adopts Sartje because her own mother did not want her ("Copy Within" 140). However, McClintock's reading also suggests that the novel only represents black mothers as incompetent and selfish. The only "two black children who are named", she writes, "are removed from their (drunken, uncaring and otherwise unfit) black mothers into the hands of kindly white women" (*Imperial Leather* 272). McClintock's reading ignores the two stories of remarkable black women, one of whom is a mother, which Rebekah remembers from her own childhood, and which she uses to teach her sons not to discriminate on grounds of race or gender. While these imaginary identifications with black women do

not surmount the real fissure of race in the novel, the symbolic site of motherhood does open up new possibilities in the novel to challenge the racist rupture which marked Rebekah's earlier encounter with Clartje.

One night, Rebekah's sons tell her that they refuse to walk in public with Sartje any longer, because other children have called her names. It is telling that it is her son Frank, as the bearer of his father's name, who tells Rebekah:

“Walking with a black nigger! I'll never walk with Sartje again; never, never, never!

[...]

“She *is* a nigger!” Frank burst forth, looking down glumly at his hands. “Father calls her that. I heard him say it to a man the other day.” (417)

Young Frank's racist outburst echoes his father's callous dismissal of both Clartje and Sartje, his own unborn child. “Whatever the girl might do and wherever she might go,” he thinks at the time, “it really did not matter” (307). He immediately rejects his unborn child, thinking: “A dirty, beastly, little nigger! – but perhaps it would never be born?” (307). Countering this extremely negative representation of white colonial masculinity is Rebekah's decision to raise her sons differently, so that, under her tutelage, young Frank will not grow up to be like his father. Rebekah thus offers the children two stories about the bravery and sacrifice of black women which are worth quoting at length. In the telling of these two stories, Rebekah's own racist confrontation with Sartje's mother is contrasted with a more positive vision of African motherhood. “When I was a little girl,” Rebekah begins,

I could not bear black or brown people... I always played that I was Queen Victoria and that all Africa belonged to me, and I could do whatever I liked. It always puzzled me when I walked up and down thinking what I should do with the black people; I did not like to kill them, because I could not hurt anything, and yet I could not have them near me. At last I made a plan. I

made believe I built a high wall right across Africa and I put all the black people on the other side, and I said, “Stay there, and, the day you put one foot over, your heads will be cut off.” I was very pleased when I made this plan. I used to walk up and down and make believe there were no black people in South Africa; I had it all to myself. (435)

Opposing this fantasy of imperial segregation is the young Rebekah’s vision of two remarkable black women. The first is a young female warrior, “her arms full of assegais”, who exhorts the male warriors to be brave and “not be afraid to die” (436). The bravery of the female warrior impresses the young Rebekah to such an extent that she stops pretending to be Queen Victoria and rather imagines herself to be the brave female warrior, calling to the men on the battlefield fight the colonisers (436). This scene marks a significant shift in young Rebekah’s imaginary identifications, as she shifts her alliance from Queen Victoria to sympathising with the African warriors fighting against colonial rule. It is the second story, however, about a black mother who jumped from a mountain with her two children tied to her body that leads to the young Rebekah’s first true empathic identification with a black woman, and, tellingly, a black mother.

Motherhood is of the utmost importance to Rebekah, even as a very young child.<sup>19</sup> On the day her sister Bertie is born, five-year-old Rebekah finds Bertie’s stillborn twin and assumes that the infant is only sleeping very soundly. She immediately casts herself in the role of mother and decides that this baby belongs to her. When she is chased away by “Old Ayah” she is inconsolable, but comforts herself with another fantasy about being “the little Queen Victoria of South Africa” (45). In this fantasy, Queen Victoria offers her an island where “no one will ever scold [her]” and on which she discovers a baby she can keep for herself (45-47). Carolyn Burdett offers an insightful analysis of the stories young Rebekah tells her imaginary baby, noting that “many of them evoke images of empire” (103). She argues that these “stories combine themes of mothering and of imperialism”

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<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that Schreiner’s own mother was named Rebekah. While I do not offer this as textual proof, it does suggest a strong connection between the character of Rebekah and the symbolic site of motherhood.

(103), but also notes Rebekah's "maternal capacity to reinvent her colonial upbringing for the education and future of her own children" (102).

Young Rebekah's empathic identification with the black mother who commits suicide is rather condescending and naïve. Rebekah hopes that perhaps the black woman "would have liked to think that, so many years after she was dead, a little white child came and sat there and felt sorry for her" (437). As an ethical response, merely "feeling sorry" does not anticipate any real social change. However, even as a child the young Rebekah is very aware of her own limitations in effecting social change. She invents a "little poem" for the dead woman and her children and sings it to them. "It was all I could do," the young Rebekah admits with defeat (437). This episode does, however, foreshadow the adult Rebekah's utter despair when her husband refuses to read her letter and she has to concede that he will never treat her as his equal. "She would go into the house," she decides, "and gather them all in her arms, those children born of lust and falsehood, and they and she and the unborn would pass away together!" (299). Rebekah's empathic identification with the black mother thus deepens and matures through the course of the novel from merely "feeling sorry" to truly understanding "the steps by which a woman's soul may pass, till it stands looking down into that awful abyss" (299). This intimate identification, firstly, counters colonial stereotypes that would have denied African subjects any interiority, and, secondly, starts breaking down the symbolic barrier of young Rebekah's colonial fantasy of segregation and exclusion. "And so you see," the adult Rebekah tells her children,

as I grew older and older I got to see that it wasn't the colour or the shape of the jaw or the cleverness that mattered; that if men and women could love very much and feel such great pain that their hearts broke, and if when they thought they were wronged they were glad to die, and that for others they could face death without a fear, as that young Kaffir woman with the assegais did, then they were mine and I was theirs, and the wall I had built across Africa had slowly to fall down. (437-438)

Rebekah's use of the phrase "the colour or the shape of the jaw" is a clear reference to colonial assumptions of bodily "difference", couched in the language of biological determinism. It is telling that Schreiner counters this colonial stereotype of "difference" by insisting on a shared affect of "love" and "great pain", thereby disrupting racial and gendered colonial stereotypes in the novel through an acknowledgment of shared precarity. Rebekah uses this story in the hope that she can teach her sons to grow up to not divide the world in terms of racial and gendered lines, and that, unlike their father, they will be able to reach out as "from man to man" to both women and black people. Motherhood, as Burdett eloquently argues, "is expressly set against the violence of a colonial imagination" (107). In addition to the trope of motherhood, the representational category of intimacy also disrupts the symbolic violence of the colonial imagination.

However, Judith Raiskin justly points out that both of the African women in Rebekah's stories are martyr figures. "By valorising and identifying with the martyr," Raiskin argues, "Schreiner can at once defuse the insurgent violence that threatens her as a colonist, disengage herself from the violence inherent in colonial rule and align herself with the oppressed and the marginalised" (86-87). This, Raiskin argues, "while providing a ground for objecting to colonial domination, also leads Schreiner into a galling paternalism that projects colonial ideology" (81). In her reading, "[b]ecause the white colonialist is not responsible for this death, the white child can grieve the passing" (81). She reads the scene as an example of "Schreiner's unexamined racism" (82), arguing that Schreiner's "conflation of racial and sexual domination does not challenge the Victorian hierarchies of race that inevitably placed white races above the black" (82). "Schreiner's purpose here," Raiskin concludes, "is to create an imaginary situation through which her white readers can sympathetically identify with Blacks. Schreiner does not ask her readers to challenge the terms upon which white domination of black Africans is based but to sympathise with and pity those who are dominated" (85).

While I concede that Schreiner's text kills off the only two African female characters that are singled out as remarkable examples of courage and sacrifice, I do not agree that Schreiner's novel does not challenge the Victorian hierarchies of race that "inevitably

placed white races above the black” (82). “I hope, I believe, I know,” Rebekah tells her sons, signalling her belief in an as-yet unrealised and future postcolonial South Africa, freed from racial and sexual domination,

that the day will come when you will regret utterly every slighting, every unkind word or act, that you have ever given place towards Sartje, and when you will be deeply grateful for every kind or generous thing you have done towards her. (439)

When young Frank tells his mother that he still refuses to walk with Sartje in public, and that he will only walk with her in “the pine woods or somewhere where people can’t see” (440), Rebekah responds:

Sartje is not a black child any more than she is pure white. It is not her fault that she is not white, any more than it is your virtue that you are not half black. (438)

This short speech disturbingly echoes Millin’s racist hierarchies in *God’s Stepchildren*. Even though Rebekah is speaking in Sartje’s defence, it is through her use of the words “fault” and “virtue” as opposites that she nevertheless ascribes a negative quality to blackness and a positive one to whiteness. As Raiskin argues, the long allegory which Rebekah tells to her children in an attempt to teach them not to discriminate on racial grounds “does not challenge the idea of difference but rather maintains the power relations between light and dark races” (84). Even descriptions of Sartje still note her “woolly hair” (412), “thick lips” (418) and “frizzled curls” (438), disturbingly echoing the text’s earlier racist rupture between Rebekah and Clartje.

However, the trope of “miscegenation” does not function as a “fault” or as a lack of “virtue” in *From Man to Man*, in the same way that it does in Millin’s novel. Rather, it highlights Schreiner’s understanding of the complexities of racial and gendered inequalities in society and the difficulty in trying to overcome these. Driver notes how, in

Schreiner's book *Closer Union*, her use of the word *interlard* "indicates that Schreiner did not exhibit the same kind of moral revulsion to 'miscegenation' that was being voiced by other social theorists of the time" ("Copy Within" 132). According to Driver, Schreiner saw "a social problem arising when intermarriage between the races arose in a situation of power differentials, for these power differentials were likely to produce in their children a complex of denial and repression which would not only perpetuate racism but also extend in insidiously internalised forms" ("Copy Within" 132). When Rebekah tells her sons that she will walk with Sartje herself, her eldest son, Charles, with eyes that "exactly repeated his mother's" (414), assures her that he "will never mind walking with Sartje" (443). "[F]or her own sake," Rebekah answers him, "I will not let her" (443). This suggests, firstly, Rebekah's wish to shelter Sartje from the realities of race and gender discrimination, until such a time where it would be possible for the children to walk together without fear of discrimination and hurt. Secondly, it is the fact that it is Charles, the child most like his mother, who freely offers to walk with Sartje in public which suggests that at least one of Rebekah's sons will grow up to realise Rebekah's hope for a different future.

Motherhood is therefore a productive focal point through which to read the novel's complex representation of the inequalities of race and gender. It marks Rebekah's failure to establish a connection with Clartje, even though both women are pregnant at that point in the text. Clartje's defiant, though frightened laugh can be read as a challenge to Rebekah's powerful position in the novel as the embodiment of "redemptive" white motherhood, especially given the fact that Rebekah adopts Clartje's daughter and "white-washes" the room in which the encounter took place. Still, the fact that Rebekah identifies so strongly with the story of the African mother in particular, and uses the stories of the two African women's courage to teach her children empathy across gendered and racial colonial divides, suggests a very different representation of black femininity than discussed thus far.

## The representation of Sartje and the “Baartman trope”

Unlike both Haggard’s colonial romance or Millin’s attempt at a South African realist fiction, *From Man to Man* does not merely revert to colonial stereotypes of hypersexuality. Instead, Schreiner grapples with the real complexities of racial and gendered power hierarchies in the South Africa of her time. However, not even the novel’s trope of redemptive white motherhood can quite overcome colonial assumptions about racial and sexual “difference” in the character of little Sartje. Raiskin reads the character of Sartje as

a sexualised figure – conceived illicitly and raised as the only girl with Rebekah’s four sons – and a victimised one, an abandoned black child, a conspicuous curiosity in a white family. Like the famous African young woman of the same name, Saartjie Baartman, who was displayed in London as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ from 1810 until her death in 1815 – and whose sexual parts are still on display in Paris<sup>20</sup> – little Sartje is a symbol of white men’s obsession with black women and the sexual as well as the racial imbalance upon which colonial life is grounded. (92-93)

In this way, Raiskin’s argument invokes the “Baartman trope” in order to read Sartje’s character as a stereotypically racialised and sexualised symbol. Since Sartje is indeed conceived illicitly in an encounter which marks the unequal power relations between Frank, as the white master of the house, and Clartje, a very young and vulnerable woman with no social, economic or financial power, little Sartje’s conception most certainly symbolises the sexual and racial imbalance of colonial life. Whether or not Schreiner wrote the character of Sartje as an allusion to the historical figure of Sara Baartman must, however, remain conjecture. I would therefore like to unpack a number of important points with regard to Raiskin’s deployment of the “Baartman trope”.

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<sup>20</sup> Raiskin’s argument was first published in 1996.

First of all, the novel describes Sartje as particularly babyish for a five-year-old child, especially when contrasted with the precocious and forward five-year-old Rebekah with her imaginary baby who imagines herself as the “little Queen Victoria of South Africa”. Even at the age of five, Rebekah’s character is already focalised through the organising trope of motherhood. Sartje, at the same age, is quiet, shy and gentle, with a “lisp... just like a baby” (417), always pressing her face “into the folds of Rebekah’s skirts” (418). In other words, the text positions Rebekah as a five-year-old girl child who *wants* a baby, while Sartje, at the same age, is positioned *as* a baby. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Sartje is indeed described through overtly racialised markers of “difference”, as the text specifically notes her “woolly hair” (412), “thick lips” (418) and “frizzled curls” (438). She is, however, never overtly sexualised. Rather, her character is explicitly infantilised.

I think it is important to highlight the fact that Schreiner does not consciously position the character of Sartje as a literary avatar for Sara Baartman. Rather, Schreiner takes great pains to represent Sartje as particularly childlike in relation to Rebekah, so that Rebekah’s character can function as the symbol of white redemptive motherhood within the text. This is a strikingly problematic aspect of *From Man to Man*. Schreiner’s white heroine, even at the age of five, has a very complex emotional interiority, which is already focalised through the trope of motherhood. Five year old Sartje, in contrast, is portrayed as remarkably infantile for her age. By positioning Sartje’s particular “difference” as infantile in relation to the organising trope of the (m)other, the text suggests that white womanhood can “save” African women from the suffering caused by colonial oppression. In my reading, Sartje’s character enables the novel’s symbolic representation of “redemptive” white motherhood’s as having the capacity to overcome the legacy of colonial sexual and racial oppression.

Still, given the enduring legacy of colonial stereotypes of hypersexualised black female bodies, the character of Sartje most certainly alludes to white men’s obsession with and control over black women’s bodies in colonial settings, as well as the sexualised and racialised imbalances within colonialism. In this more covert sexualisation, Sartje is thus

“cast” – again borrowing Samuelson’s key term (*Remembering* 85) – by the very history and discursive structures of colonialism as a stereotypically sexualised figure.

In an article titled “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa” (1998), Zoë Wicomb interrogates the affect of “shame”, and how it relates both to representations of Sara Baartman and the trope of “miscegenation”. Wicomb reads the figure of Sara Baartman as the “black woman as icon of concupiscence,” embodying “the shame of having had our bodies stared at,” the “shame invested in those (females) who have mated with the coloniser” (91-92). In Wicomb’s argument, the figure of Sara Baartman becomes the “locus for all the indictments of the colonial gaze for black women’s bodies”, particularly the “shame of sexual lasciviousness and responsibility for miscegenation” (Baderoon “Language” 81). A reading such as this would coincide with Raiskin’s particular deployment of the “Baartman trope” in terms of the novel’s covert positioning of Sartje as a sexualised figure, particularly through her status as the progeny of “miscegenation”. While Raiskin’s argument is certainly convincing, I nevertheless remain wary of invoking the personal history of Sara Baartman in order to explain the construction of the character of little Sartje. Sara Baartman’s name is too often and too easily invoked in service to a variety of discourses that may be very far removed from her personal experience or her particular history.

In this way, *From Man to Man* does not offer an easy solution to the problem of unequal gendered and racial colonial relations, nor does it offer a happy ending. The novel ends when Rebekah refuses to enter into a romantic relationship with the first man who has ever treated her as an intellectual equal, and who speaks with her as “from man to man”. Driver suggests that Rebekah refuses Drummond’s offer of a romantic and sexual relationship, because “truthful relations cannot exist between men and women until all society is founded on human equality” (“Copy Within” 140). Instead, Rebekah dedicates her life to the education of her children in the hope that they will be able to realise a society in which true gender and racial equality will be possible.

While Millin's *God's Stepchildren* consciously re-inscribes a colonial stereotype of a degenerate and hypersexualised black female body in the emerging nationalist fiction of the 1920s, Schreiner's *From Man to Man* does not merely revert to colonial stereotypes, but instead grapples with the real complexities of racial and gendered power relations in the South Africa of her time. As a novel, *From Man to Man* is not without racist stereotypes, most tellingly exemplified by Rebekah's failure to see Clartje as an equal, both as a woman and as a mother. In this moment of failure, Schreiner's novel reverts to racialised and sexualised colonial stereotypes. Even so, the symbolic site of motherhood does allow Schreiner to gesture towards a different future for South Africa, allowing her to suggest a very different nationalist vision than the one found in Millin's novel.

Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje's novel *Mhudi*, on the other hand, presents a radical intervention against both colonial "Haggardian ideology", as Laura Chrisman describes it, as well as the "white-centred feminism of Olive Schreiner" (*Rereading* 165). Plaatje utilises the genre of the colonial romance novel to counter a literary tradition of colonial stereotypes of African women, while drawing on nineteenth-century history to offer a vision of a different political future for South Africa, especially in terms of gender roles. In *Mhudi*, Plaatje does not rely on representing women's political power through the organising trope of motherhood. Plaatje's emphasis on female-centred narratives of political agency offers a radically new imagining of race and gender in the emerging South African nation, which represents Mhudi, the novel's eponymous heroine, as a political agent in her own right. In this way, Plaatje's novel radically subverts colonial stereotypes of black South African women, as I will show in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Reimagining the Colonial Romance

Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje's novel *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* is widely acknowledged to be the first English novel written by a black South African. Even though *Mhudi* was not published until 1930, it had already been completed by 1920. It is therefore commonly accepted as the first South African novel in English written by a black author, even though it was only published two years after the publication of R. R. R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (see Mzamane 188). Written in broadly the same historical period as Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924) and Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* (1926), Plaatje's novel represents black South African women in a way that both challenges and radically disrupts colonial stereotypes of African femininity. Unlike both Millin and Schreiner, Plaatje's emphasis on female-centred narratives of political agency offers a radically new representation of race, gender and sexuality in the emerging South African nation. Furthermore, unlike Schreiner's redemptive figure of the white mother, Plaatje's literary project does not rely on the representation of women's political power through the organising trope of motherhood. The novel represents the title character, Mhudi, as an astute political agent in her own right.

In *Mhudi*, Plaatje both draws on and explicitly writes back to the Haggardian romance tradition. In a letter to Silas Molema, written in 1920, Plaatje wrote:

I am still busy writing two books. One is a novel – a love story after the manner of romances; but based on historical facts. The smash-up of the Barolong at Kunana by Mzilikazi, the coming of the Boers and the war of revenge which smashed up the Matabele at Coenyane by the Allies, Barolong, Boers, and Griquas when Halley's Comet appeared in 1835 – with plenty of love, superstition, and imaginations worked in between the wars. Just like the style of Rider Haggard when he writes about the Zulus. (quoted in Walter 11)

While Plaatje draws on Haggardian romance elements, as his letter to Molema suggests, he simultaneously utilises and counters the colonial romance tradition. Through *Mhudi*, Plaatje radically subverts the stereotypically gendered, racialised and hypersexualised representations of black women's bodies discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, even though *Mhudi* is written in the romance tradition employed by Rider Haggard, Plaatje's novel appropriates the conventions of the colonial romance for two concurrent nationalist literary projects.

Firstly, Plaatje draws on the history of nineteenth-century colonial South Africa in order to offer a political allegory of twentieth-century white domination in South Africa. Secondly, *Mhudi* offers a very different representation of race and gender than the colonial stereotype of black feminine hypersexuality commonly found in early twentieth-century South African fiction. Through his representation of the novel's eponymous female character, Plaatje imagines a new South African gender politics where women are not excluded from political power. Thus, as Brain Walter argues, in contrast to Haggard's colonial romance novel, Plaatje uses "romance to reflect on, not only the 'historical facts' of Barolong history, and upon the way Africans have been portrayed in colonial South African literature, but also upon the political future as seen from his time" (17).

Like Haggard, Plaatje sets his novel in early nineteenth-century colonial South Africa, but he radically subverts the traditional romance genre's emphasis on masculine action. Furthermore, Plaatje actively constructs the character of Mhudi to counter a South African literary tradition of colonial hypersexualised stereotypes of black women's bodies. According to Cecily Lockett, later South African English writing, particularly by black male authors, tried to counter the negative colonial stereotypes of the "untouchable" and the "unattainable" figures by elevating the qualities of courage, strength, pride and, most importantly, maternal love in the "Mother Africa" figure (see Lockett 32). While the "Mother Africa" figure generally offers a positive image of black women, Lockett argues that

it is based on biological or sexual functions, and draws its strength from an ideology that views women as the property of men and glorifies motherhood as the highest aspiration of all women. It seldom allows for any role other than wife or mother for the black woman, who continues to be a prisoner of gender, defined only in terms of black men. (Lockett 35)

According to Florence Stratton, the “Mother Africa” trope entails the “embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman” (39). She notes how the “sexual imperatives” which this particular trope encodes “is deeply entrenched in the male literary tradition” (39). In her reading, the “Mother Africa” trope “operates against the interests of women, excluding them, implicitly if not explicitly, from authorship and citizenship” (40).

According to Lockett, the first “Mother Africa” figure in South African literature was “created by Sol T. Plaatje in his historical romance *Mhudi*” (32). I strongly disagree with Lockett’s argument that Plaatje constructs the character of Mhudi as a “Mother Africa” figure, as Plaatje most certainly does not construct Mhudi as an over-determined stereotype. Interestingly, especially when compared to *God’s Stepchildren* and *From Man to Man*, the novel devotes almost no attention to Mhudi’s role as a mother. Mhudi’s children are hardly mentioned at all, there are no scenes glorifying motherhood, nor are there any scenes depicting the relationship between mother and children. Mhudi is not once described in terms of biological or sexual functions. Instead, her character is portrayed as physically beautiful, highly intelligent, politically astute, brave, loyal and as a devoted wife. While Mhudi is indeed dedicated to her husband, the novel does not describe her in terms of her nurturing or domestic qualities. The novel instead repeatedly draws attention to her bravery and her intelligence. For Stratton, the “Mother Africa” trope

reproduces in symbolic form the gender relations of patriarchal societies. The trope elaborates a gendered theory of nationhood and writing, one that excludes women from the creative production of the national polity or identity and of literary texts. Instead, woman herself is produced or

constructed by the male writer as an embodiment of his literary/political vision. (51)

Even though Stratton's argument does not specifically mention Plaatje's *Mhudi*, her reading of the "Mother Africa" trope offers a more compelling argument for reading the character of Mhudi as a potential "Mother Africa" figure. Mhudi is indeed produced, in Stratton's terms, as the "embodiment of [Plaatje's] literary/political vision" (51). However, even in Stratton's terms, it remains clear that Plaatje's emphasis on Mhudi's political agency disrupts a potential reading of her character as a "Mother Africa" stereotype. Plaatje does not exclude his eponymous heroine from the "creative production of the national polity or identity" in his novel (Stratton 51). Rather, Mhudi is an active political agent and is included in every politically significant scene in the novel. In this way, Plaatje utilises the genre of the colonial romance novel not only to counter a literary tradition of colonial stereotypes of African women, but also to draw on nineteenth-century history to offer a vision of a different political future for South Africa.

A recent article by Jenny du Preez, titled "Liminality and Alternative Femininity in Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi*", offers the alternative reading that Plaatje, while "far-sighted and progressive" for his time, was by no means "radically feminist" (46). She argues that Plaatje's writing illustrates "a very practical awareness of the importance of context and of current conditions"; while he "appears to uphold the traditional ideal of womanhood – women are faithful wives and mothers and remain in the home – [he] is quick to acknowledge that this is only possible in an ideal situation" (46). Du Preez's argument therefore insists that Plaatje's construction of Mhudi's femininity is not, and cannot be, wholly subversive, but rather reveals a great awareness of the importance of context and its effect on the ways in which femininity might be acceptably performed. According to Du Preez's reading, different spaces and contexts inform how Mhudi performs her femininity. I will return to this point more fully in the course of this chapter.

Du Preez's argument about the importance of context certainly rings true, given that Plaatje's emergent literary nationalism arises from the historic moment when colonial

power structures in South Africa were changing from British colonial occupation to the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910. *Mhudi*, Michael Green argues, is a product of the changing “material conditions out of which ‘South Africa’ was first projected as a nation state” (“Translating” 327). Plaatje wrote the bulk of *Mhudi* between 1919 and 1920, Green writes, “but the text’s genesis lies in the founding of the South African state just a decade earlier” (“Generic Instability” 35). The Union of South Africa comprised the former “British colonies, the Afrikaner republics conquered during the Anglo-Boer war, and the African kingdoms in the region” (Green “Generic Instability” 35). However, as Green notes, the new Union was, in effect, “the product of an alliance of British and Afrikaner interests” (“Generic Instability” 35). The exclusion of black representation “led to the forming of the South African Native National Congress in 1912” (“Generic Instability” 35), of which Plaatje was a founding member. The name of the organisation was later changed to the African National Congress, making Plaatje one of the founding members of the current South African ruling party. Mbulelo Mzamane notes that, as a journalist, “Plaatje vigorously campaigned against the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, forecasting the ascendancy of Boer supremacy and further African dispossession” (190).

Plaatje thus conceived and wrote *Mhudi* during a historical period of great social change and instability within South Africa. During the first half of the twentieth century, South African society was undergoing both rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Firstly, the Natives Land Act of 1913, vigorously opposed by Plaatje in *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), forced dispossessed black farmers to the so-called “reserves”, where they often could not find enough fertile land to grow crops. In *Native Life*, Plaatje describes the flux of black South Africans moving across South Africa “[a]s a result of the passing of the Natives Land Act,” where “groups of natives are to be seen in the different Provinces seeking new land. They have crossed over from the Free State into Natal,” Plaatje writes, “from Natal into the Transvaal, and from the Transvaal into British Bechuanaland” (99). Furthermore, widespread poverty during the depression years of the 1920s and 1930s meant that rural families, particularly women in the “reserves”, increasingly moved to urban centres in search of work, to such an extent that the first laws restricting the

urbanisation of black women were introduced in 1930. Plaatje, Laura Chrisman argues, was an “unstinting supporter” of the 1913 women’s campaign against pass laws, “unlike many of his male peers” (“Fathering” 63). As pass laws became more relaxed during the period of the Second World War, followed by post-war industrial expansion, more and more black South Africans moved to cities (see Clowes “Miss Africa” 2 and Driver “Drum” 232-233). As a result, social and familial structures were in a marked state of flux for the most part of the first half of the twentieth century, as migrant workers continued to exchange rural homesteads for urban centres. Traditional gender roles were also becoming more unstable and thereby open to reinterpretation and re-signification. This period of social change clearly informed much of Plaatje’s writing in *Mhudi*, as the novel’s emphasis on female-centred political agency imagined new gender roles for black South African women.

According to Gabriella Madrassi, what is most relevant about Plaatje’s romance is that it “idealistically reveal[s] the glorious past of the race at the very moment the noxious effects of the Land Act of 1913 were increasingly felt” (87). Madrassi argues that the symbolic connection between the real loss of land and the portrayal of the African landscape in the novel can be seen in Plaatje’s descriptions of the “nurturing soil as the source of courageous strength and pride” (87). In Madrassi’s reading of the novel, both of Plaatje’s strong African female characters, Mhudi and Umnandi, are closely linked to the land, suggesting that she reads both the characters of Mhudi and Umnandi as “Mother Africa” stereotypes. When Umnandi flees Mzilikazi’s camp, the land itself seems to turn against the Ndebele and their empire begins to crumble. Madrassi argues that

in the dynamic of the woman-land association, the flight of the woman (the lack of the land) brings adversity to the tribe. By way of compensation, the return of the queen (reinstatement of the land) in a courageous act of loyalty to her people, drives misfortune away. Finally, the inheritance of new territories (to be understood as the glorification of the land) by the queen’s son (as progeny of the land) is the signifier of fertility and re-generation. (88)

I disagree with Madrassi's reading for a number of reasons. Firstly, Plaatje's feminised descriptions of the "nurturing" soil are only evoked as part of a critique against a traditional, patriarchal way of life, as I will show more fully in the course of this chapter. Secondly, the "new territories" Madrassi mentions refer to the Ndebele's northward trek after the defeat of Mzilikazi, before, as Green points out, "the renewed settler colonial assault on the Ndebele that results in their final defeat and the founding of Rhodesia" ("Generic Instability" 36). These "new territories" can thus hardly be understood as a glorification of the land; rather, it foreshadows a final loss of not only land, but also all political power and agency. Lastly, Plaatje's novel does not romanticise an "essential" nurturing or life-affirming femininity, nor does it simply equate commanding female characters with motherhood. The text does not even mention the birth of Mhudi's first son, and only notes in passing that Mhudi's husband, Ra-Thaga, waits until "seven months after Mhudi had presented him with their second boy" (85) before journeying eastwards. Instead of highlighting her nurturing nature and her domestic skills, the text draws attention to Mhudi's wisdom, courage and political insight. As Chrisman argues, Plaatje rather situates African women as having access "to more diverse forms of subjectivity than men have, ironically at times as the result of their very exclusion from power" (*Rereading* 179). Chrisman further points out that "against a Haggardian (and later African nationalist) equation of national history with masculine warfare, Plaatje's novel argues for the central place of African women – as political agents, not static domestic icons of tradition – in building a national narrative" (*Rereading* 14). In my discussion of *Mhudi*, I focus on Plaatje's subversion of colonial stereotypes and his radically new representation of race and gender in the South African literary tradition. Plaatje's emergent literary nationalism therefore not only explores the complex origins and consequences of colonialism in South Africa, but also, through the character of Mhudi, imagines radically new possibilities for the South African nation in terms of racial and gendered equality.

The central plot of *Mhudi* is organised around the love story of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, two Tswana characters of the Rolong tribe ("Barolong" in the novel). They happen to meet in the wilderness after their city, Kunana, is destroyed in a violent Ndebele ("Matebele" in

the text) attack in the wake of the historical period known as the *mefacane*, the “widespread warfare and resultant scattering of ethnic groups”, some argue, “as an effect of Zulu imperialism in the south” (Green “Generic Instability” 35-36). Having lost their homes, family, friends and entire community, the two protagonists start a new life together in the wilderness. In this pastoral idyll, where the two protagonists find themselves removed from all conventional familial, economic and social structures, Plaatje imagines new gender roles for his two main characters. “There were no home ceremonies,” the narrator informs the reader,

such as the seeking and obtaining of parental consent, because there were no parents; no conferences by uncles and grand-uncles, no exhortations by grandmothers and aunts; no male relatives to arrange the marriage knot, nor female relations to herald the family union, and no uncles of the bride to divide the *bogadi* (dowry) cattle as, of course, there were no cattle. It was a simple matter of taking each other for good or ill with the blessing of the ‘God of Rain’. The forest was their home, the rustling trees their relations, the sky their guardian, and the birds, who sealed their marriage contract with their songs, the only guests. Here they established their home and called it Re-Nosi (We-are-alone). (61)

The name of their forest home, “We-are-alone”, emphasises the fact that Plaatje imagines a new world order for the two heroes, outside of the usual governing structures of nation, history and society. This liminal space, outside of conventional governing structures of society and gender, is especially apparent in the novel’s reinterpretation of traditional gender roles. The relationship between Mhudi and Ra-Thaga is marked by a sense of equality, where both characters hold the other in the highest regard and actively try to improve each other’s life. Ra-Thaga’s “one ambition was to make his pretty wife very happy” (62). The text repeatedly informs the reader of the extent of Ra-Thaga’s “veneration” (75) of his wife, adding that “[n]one of his countrymen ever adored his wife as intensely as he did Mhudi” (75). Ra-Thaga “felt that she – his queen – should be as free as the birds of the air were free, nay, even more so; she should be a queen ruling over

her own dominion, and he her protector guarding her safety and happiness” (62). If Ra-Thaga considers himself a “king reigning in his kingdom” (61), the fact that he feels Mhudi should likewise be a queen ruling over her *own* kingdom suggests a sense of equality in their relationship. Mhudi thinks of Ra-Thaga as her “little father”, her “other self”, “guide”, “protector”, and her “all”, while she is his “little mother”, his “sister”, his “other self”, “helpmate”, “his life, his everything” (62). The fact that Ra-Thaga remains the “father” and the “guide”, and Mhudi the “mother” and the “helpmate”, suggests that, even in Re-Nosi, gender is still imagined in terms of long-established patriarchal norms. Still, this mirroring of similarly imagined positions within the relationship also re-imagines gender as something that is constructed constitutively. This becomes clear when Mhudi exclaims: “How can I help him be more manly!” (62) “Masculinity,” as Chrisman points out, is therefore “a project in which Mhudi has an active involvement, rather than a natural condition to which she bears witness” (*Rereading* 175).

Gender roles in Re-Nosi stand in stark contrast to Plaatje’s descriptions of the patriarchal society of the old Barolong stronghold, Kunana. The novel opens with a description of life in Kunana before its destruction at the hands of Mzilikazi’s army. It is described as a happy and prosperous place, where “work was of a perfunctory nature” (23). However, Plaatje’s narrator immediately goes on to criticise life in Kunana, explicitly informing the reader that “[in] this domain, they led their *patriarchal* life” (23, emphasis added). “Cattle breeding,” the narrator continues,

was the rich man’s calling and hunting a national enterprise... But woman’s work was never out of season. In the summer she cleared the cornfields of wheat and subsequently helped to winnow and garner the crops. In winter times she cut the grass and helped to renovate the dwelling. In addition to the inevitable cooking, basket-making, weaving and all the art-painting, for mural decorations were done by women. (23)

Therefore, if “work was of a perfunctory nature”, the text suggests that this is only true for the men in Kunana, clearly highlighting an unequal gendered division of labour. The

narrating voice is positioned in such a way to both evoke sympathy for the women living “their patriarchal life”, in that their work is never done, and that they clearly work so much harder than their male counterparts. The narrating voice further evokes a sense of admiration for the women’s skill and dedication in performing so many duties. The narrator, however, also criticises this way of life by pointing out that “the *simple* women of the tribes accepted wifhood and transacted their onerous duties with the same satisfaction and pride as an English artist would the job of conducting an orchestra” (24, emphasis added). This description offers a strange conflation of praise and criticism. By highlighting the fact that their many duties are “onerous”, the narrator offers a critique of the position of women in patriarchal society and expresses sympathy and admiration for female labour and familial dedication. At the same time, the word “simple” subtly criticises the women themselves for allowing this to happen, suggesting that intelligent women would not allow themselves to be taken advantage of in this way. The incongruent image of the English orchestra seems out of place in a description of the gendered division of labour in Kunana, perhaps suggesting that it is the dedication of the women to their many onerous duties, and the skill with they execute these duties, which ensures the harmonious continuation of their way of life. It may also subtly criticise the “simple” women of Kunana for being content with their “patriarchal life” of “onerous” duties, and for not aiming for more lofty achievements.

The narrator further criticises the inhabitants of Kunana for their lack of interest in the world around them. According to the narrator,

these peasants were content to live their monotonous lives, and thought nought of their overseas kinsmen who were making history on the plantations and harbours of Virginia and Mississippi at that time; nor did they know or care about the relations of the Hottentots and the Boers at Cape Town nearer home. (24)

In contrast, Mhudi and Ra-Thaga are actively involved in the great historical moments of their time. Ra-Thaga is present to witness the arrival of the Voortrekkers, he joins the

alliance between the Voortrekkers and the Rolong and goes to war against Mzilikazi as part of this alliance. Even more significant is the fact that Plaatje invariably includes Mhudi in every politically important scene. She is never portrayed as one of the “simple” women of Kunana, content with domestic chores, but is rather one of the main political agents in the text. In this way, Plaatje imagines new societal, familial and political structures through the novel’s depiction of the relationship between the two heroes.

In the novel, the character of Mhudi can be read as a counter to both colonial stereotypes of hypersexualised black female bodies and traditional, conservative gender roles. When Ra-Thaga first encounters Mhudi, she is running from a lion. However, she soon offers to show him where to find the lion and kill it, rather than continue running away. Ra-Thaga “heard this with a shiver; he believed that women were timid creatures, but here was one actually volunteering to guide him to where the lion was, instead of commanding him to take her far away from the man-eater. How he wished he might find it gone!” (21). In this way, the text subtly suggests that Mhudi is braver than Ra-Thaga, for he is not only surprised at her bravery, but “shivers” at the thought that, at her insistence, he now has to confront the lion. When they find the beast, Mhudi does not falter, for when Ra-Thaga “rushed at the feasting lion, the girl [did] the same” (33). Later in the text, when a lion enters their forest homestead, Ra-Thaga only manages to grab the beast by the tail, while it is Mhudi who “yielded to the humour of the picture of her husband having a tug of war with the lion,” and, “feeling highly amused,” fetched Ra-Thaga’s *assegai* and “aimed a stab at the lion’s heart” (66).

In addition to her remarkable bravery, Mhudi is also described as being more politically astute and as a better judge of character than her husband. Even though the text makes it clear that Ra-Thaga “had benefitted much from the sober judgement of his clever wife” (75), when Mhudi distrusts the “Qoranna” leader, Ton-Qon, and warns Ra-Thaga against him, he dismisses it as “some idiosyncrasy, peculiar to women, which would no doubt wear off in time” (75). “With regards to manly occupations”, Ra-Thaga recalls a “Sechuan proverb”: “Never be led by a female lest thou fall over a precipice” (75). Ra-Thaga ignores Mhudi’s advice and, as a result, falls prey to Ton-Qon’s plot to kill him

and take Mhudi for himself. Mhudi's "cool judgement" (76) allows her to see through Ton-Qon's trickery and she saves Ra-Thaga's life a second time. In this way, the text not only highlights Ra-Thaga's bad judgement in ignoring his wife, but also subtly highlights the dire consequences of heeding the kind of proverb that would attempt to prohibit female leadership.

I now return to Du Preez's argument that different spaces and contexts in the novel consciously inform the ways in which Mhudi performs her femininity. Following Butler, Du Preez argues that "a single individual cannot be expected to act subversively in a context or societal space that is completely inhospitable to the potential for such action" (47). She offers a different interpretation of Mhudi's confrontation with Ton-Qon, where Mhudi's dislike of the Korana leader rather signals her displeasure at the hunting party's intrusion into the liminal space of Re-Nosi, and Mhudi's reluctance to return with the hunting party to their village. Her reluctance to return to society, Du Preez argues, "can be read as a reluctance to be removed from the space in which she could enact an alternative femininity and engage in an alternative kind of marital relationship" (54). Ra-Thaga, on the other hand, already occupies a privileged position within society, and so has no qualms about returning to it. This is why, Du Preez argues, when Mhudi warns Ra-Thaga of Ton-Qon's intentions, he chooses to revert back to the traditional wisdom presented in the Sechuana proverb, "rather than trusting his wife as he had been doing in the liminal space of Re-Nosi" (Du Preez 55). Under the influence of societal rules and expectations, Du Preez concludes, Ra-Thaga "reintegrates himself into the traditional patriarchal hierarchy," dismissing Mhudi's warning as a idiosyncrasy "peculiar to women" (55). In this way, Ra-Thaga immediately falls back onto the traditional stereotype of women "as fickle and emotional and therefore unable to act rationally or be trusted to do so" (Du Preez 55).

In Du Preez's reading, Mhudi cannot extricate herself from the "peril" of Ton-Qon's intentions by acting in an overtly "masculine" way, as she does when she faces the lion, as performing her gender in such an unintelligible way is "likely to make her more vulnerable" (56). I fully agree with Du Preez's reading of the limitations of conventional

gender roles within the defining structures of social relations of power. However, the fact that Mhudi sometimes performs her gender in radically unconventional ways, and sometimes adheres to established gender norms, does not negate her agency as a character. In the scene where she is left alone at the fire with Ton-Qon, Mhudi lets Ton-Qon do “the talking [...] while she did the thinking” (*Mhudi* 75). While she enacts a traditional femininity by keeping quiet and thus performing the role of a submissive and silent woman, she in fact uses this silence to plan how to outwit Ton-Qon. She tells Ton-Qon’s wives that with her “husband being out hunting she [is] afraid to spend the night alone in her hut” (*Mhudi* 76), allowing her to seek refuge with other women and thus to evade Ton-Qon. For Du Preez, the “presence of traditional patriarchal hierarchies of power limit [Mhudi’s] actions, putting her in peril and making her subversive actions more difficult to accomplish” (56). While I do not disagree, I think it is important to add that when Mhudi pretends to be helpless in Ra-Thaga’s absence, she is not truly rendered passive nor deprived of her agency; while limited by patriarchal gender roles, Mhudi nevertheless emerges as the heroine of the encounter.

Mhudi and Ra-Thaga’s relationship is contrasted with two other romantic couples in the novel. They meet a “Boer” couple, Phil Jay (a phonetic rendering of the name De Villiers) and Annetje, with whom they form a tentative alliance. Mhudi also befriends Umnandi, the favourite younger wife of Mzilikazi, the Ndebele chief who destroyed their old city. While male friendship in the novel hinges on the interracial alliance between Ra-Thaga and Phil Jay in the war against Mzilikazi, Mhudi’s two female friendships articulate a warning against both masculine warfare and future white domination in South Africa. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw particular attention to Plaatje’s portrayal of female friendships in the text. It is through the relationships that Mhudi forms with both Umnandi and Annetje that the novel, firstly, offers its most powerful statement affirming female political agency, and, secondly, articulates a new, female-centred narrative of political agency.

Plaatje’s two main African female characters, Mhudi and Umnandi, represent a political vision for South Africa that is very different to the text’s masculine and interracial

political alliance, which actively seeks out war. Mhudi and Umnandi take leave of each other after the Afrikaner-Rolong alliance, “the biggest army that ever went to war” (165) according to Mhudi, had just won a decisive victory against the Ndebele. In taking leave of her friend, Mhudi asks Umnandi to urge Mzilikazi, “even as [she] would urge all the men of [her] race, to gather more sense and cease warring against their kind” (179).

“How wretched,” cried Mhudi, sorrowfully, “that with so many wild animals in the woods, men in whose counsels we have no share, should constantly wage war, drain women’s eyes of tears and saturate the earth with God’s best creation – the blood of the sons of women. What will convince them of the worthlessness of this game, I wonder?”

“Nothing, my sister,” moaned Umnandi with a sigh, “as long as there are two men left on earth I am afraid there will be war.” (179-180)

This scene seems incongruous at first, when compared to Mhudi’s earlier violent wish for revenge against the Ndebele. Soon after Mhudi and Ra-Thaga are married, the text informs the reader that there was only “one topic [on which] there was a sharp difference of opinion between man and wife” (67). When Ra-Thaga ventures that “Mzilikazi was justified in sending his marauding expedition against Kunana”, Mhudi’s “feminine ire” is roused, for she cannot believe that the “massacre of a whole nation” can ever be justified (67). “I used to have a high respect for the sense of men,” she tells Ra-Thaga, “but I am beginning to change my good opinion about it” (67). Mhudi’s refusal to agree that the attack on Kunana could ever be justified ties in with her later criticism of war. However, Mhudi also refuses to believe that the entire Rolong tribe could have been killed and imagines a future where the Rolong will launch their own counter-attack against the Ndebele. She calls the Ndebele “interlopers and intruders” (67), insisting that the Rolong “will chase them from here” (68) and “will overthrow their perverted might, which takes women and children unawares, by a force that is more powerful than treachery” (68). The novel never specifies when Mhudi exchanges her wish for revenge for the pacifism underlying her farewell speech to Umnandi. As the text does not provide an external

event or interior moment marking this change, I suggest that Mhudi's change of heart follows necessarily from her friendship with Umnandi.

First of all, when Mhudi and Ra-Thaga are alone in Re-Nosi, their pastoral idyll outside of history and society, it seems as if Mhudi can talk about fighting and destroying the Ndebele with relative ease. The moment that they leave Re-Nosi to join the remaining Rolong in the war against Mzilikazi, war suddenly becomes a personal reality for Mhudi and Ra-Thaga. When Ra-Thaga leaves for battle with the allied soldiers, Mhudi dreams of his death on the battlefield and immediately sets off to find him. By the time that she is reunited with Ra-Thaga, Mhudi is fully convinced of the futility and tragedy of war, as her farewell speech to her friend indicates. In forming an intimate female friendship outside of her marriage, Mhudi can articulate a vision for the future that is very different from that of her husband, who had "always been nursing a bloody revenge in his heart" (116).

Furthermore, given the fact that Umnandi is the favourite wife of Mzilikazi, the Ndebele chief who destroyed Mhudi's home, it is clear that this friendship marks a significant shift in Mhudi's social and political understanding. Prior to befriending Umnandi, Mhudi wishes to "overthrow" the Ndebele and "chase them" from the land (68). In the scene where they take leave of each other, both women now agree on the "worthlessness" of war (179). They further agree to urge their men "to gather more sense and cease warring against their kind" (179).

Chrisman argues that Plaatje's text thus "echoes the arguments of Olive Schreiner against war, and for women's suffrage; like Schreiner, Plaatje seems here to advocate a social project centred on feminised nurture as opposed to masculinised war" (*Rereading* 165). While I certainly agree with Chrisman that Plaatje's novel advocates a social project which opposes the novel's masculine alliance of war, I have to point out that while this social project may be centred on "feminised nurture", Plaatje's novel does not rely on representing women's political power through the trope of motherhood. Mhudi's power to effect social change in the novel is never represented through her role as mother in

teaching her children to live up to a certain ideology. Rather, I locate the novel's arguments against war as originating from within the intimate friendship between Mhudi and Umnandi.

In the very last sentence of the novel, Ra-Thaga's informs his wife: "[F]rom henceforth, I shall have no ears for the call of war or the chase; my ears shall be open to one call only besides the call of the Chief, namely the call of your voice – Mhudi" (200). This suggests that Mhudi has successfully convinced her husband of the futility of war by the end of the novel. In this way, Plaatje portrays her character as a political agent that can effect real social change. However, Chrisman points out that the editor of the first 1930 Lovedale Press edition of *Mhudi* altered the final sentence to include the phrase "besides the call of the Chief". The final sentence should have read: "my ears shall be open only to the call of your voice – Mhudi" (see Chrisman *Rereading* 178). "For this editor," Chrisman argues, "Plaatje's privileging of feminine/domestic bonds over those of traditional chiefly authority is an unacceptable transgression of a properly 'native' ideology. These anxious responses suggest just how provocative Plaatje's text is" (*Rereading* 178). Earlier in the text, one of the Rolong chiefs tells Siljay, the leader of the Afrikaners: "There are two persons we Barolongs can never do without; these are a wife to mind the home and a king to call us to order, settle our disputes and lead us in battle" (88). This description would support what Chrisman terms a "properly 'native' ideology." However, Plaatje's text radically subverts this ideology, as, firstly, Mhudi is never depicted as the kind of wife who stays behind and minds the home, and, secondly, as the novel ends with Mhudi and Ra-Thaga driving off to live their lives away from either chiefly authority or warfare. In this way, the end of the novel affirms Mhudi's political vision for the future, instead of a traditional and patriarchal political order.

Mhudi's political vision is further strengthened in the farewell scene between herself and Annetje. While Ra-Thaga embraces the alliance between the Rolong and the Afrikaners without any reservation, "Ra-Thaga's intense love of the Boers was not shared by his wife," for "somehow she could not master an inexplicable dread that lingered in her mind" (123). Ra-Thaga is blind to the racism and cruelty of the Afrikaners, while Mhudi

notes many instances of brutality in the Afrikaner camp: a “Hottentot maid” who is beaten with a “hot iron” (124), the man “tied to the wagon wheel and flogged until he was half dead” (176) for not minding the oxen, and “little Jan”, the shepherd boy, who is “mercilessly punished” (176). She dismisses the Afrikaners as “Ra-Thaga’s friends” (125) and refuses to have much to do with them, telling every Rolong guest to her hut of their cruelty. The text takes some pains to exclude Phil Jay and Annetje from Mhudi’s charges of racism and cruelty. Mhudi calls Phil Jay “the one humane Boer that there was among the wild men of his tribe” (125) and calls Annetje “an angel” (176). However, Mhudi’s friendship with Annetje stands in stark contrast to that of her friendship with Umnandi. In the farewell scene between Mhudi and Annetje, it is clear that the same intimacy which marked her friendship with Umnandi is sadly lacking. In this way, the text highlights even “angelic” Annetje’s underlying racism:

Annetje too had fallen in love with Mhudi. She said if she lived to have little ones of her own surely they would be proud to have for an ayah such a noble *mosadi* as Mhudi. (197)

Annetje’s “love” for Mhudi immediately inscribes Mhudi in the role of a domestic servant, clearly marking the absence of any real intimacy in their friendship. Whereas the intimacy in the relationship between Mhudi and Umnandi allows Mhudi to articulate her own political vision for the future of South Africa and thus emerge as the novel’s foremost political agent, the lack of true intimacy in her relationship with Annetje immediately illustrates the way in which Annetje can only imagine an adult black female “friend” in the role of a domestic servant. This is made clear by Plaatje’s particular contrasting of the words *ayah* and *mosadi*. Throughout the novel, Plaatje’s narrator usually translates African words by supplying the English equivalent in brackets. It is at this moment, though, that the narrating voice withdraws its function as translator. This leads Chrisman to argue that

Plaatje’s mixing of languages juxtaposes ‘ayah’ and ‘mosadi’ (Setswana for ‘woman’) in such a way as to emphasise the words’ non-equivalence. The

discourse mimics the incomprehension between the two women. A further effect of this sentence is to indict the English reader, as well as Annetje, of racism. The reader who does not know the meaning of ‘mosadi’ is put in the position of ‘othering’ Mhudi. (*Rereading* 185)

In this way, the text suggests that the white woman cannot view her friendship with Mhudi in terms of true intimacy and, therefore, true equality. As a result, the character of Annetje cannot think of Mhudi beyond racial stereotypes of “othering”, immediately casting Mhudi as a servant in relation to herself. This scene recalls Rebekah’s complete failure to forge an intimate connection to the “other” in Schreiner’s *From Man to Man*, as discussed in the previous chapter. As in the scene between Rebekah and Clartje, Annetje’s failure to forge a true and intimate friendship with Mhudi is fissured by race, clearly indicated by the symbolic violence inherent to Annetje’s positioning of Mhudi as “ayah”. In this moment of failed intimacy, the face of the “other” is represented in such a way that representation can only efface the subjectivity of the supposed “other”. However, it is crucial to note that, unlike the failure of intimacy in Schreiner’s novel which positions Clartje as a stereotypically hypersexualised and racialised “other”, Plaatje’s description of this scene never reduces Mhudi to a stereotype of “otherness”. Rather, this scene reveals Annetje’s underlying racism in attempting to position her “friend” as a servant.

This scene stands in stark contrast to the farewell scene between Mhudi and Umnandi. It does, however, function as a further corroboration of Mhudi’s political vision against war. In Chrisman’s reading of this scene, interracial bonding remains the privilege of masculinity, while the female characters cannot escape the “structures of socio-economic inequality and racist ideological correlatives” (*Rereading* 185). I would add that the interracial bonding between the two men is the product of a military alliance. Mhudi’s reservation about her husband’s continued friendship with Phil Jay after the battle has been won therefore also serves as a political allegory of twentieth-century white domination, further emphasised by Mzilikazi’s prophetic words that the Rolong “are

fools to think that these unnatural Kiwas (white men) will return their so-called friendship with honest friendship” (188). Mzilikazi’s final speech in the novel warns that

[t]hey will turn Bechuana women into beasts of burden to drag their loaded wagons to their granaries, while their own bullocks are fattening on the hillside and pining for exercise. They will use the whiplash on the bare skins of women to accelerate their paces and quicken their activities; they shall take Bechuana women to wife and, with them, breed a race of half man and half goblin, and they will deny them their legitimate *lobolo*. With their cries unheeded these Bechuana will waste away in helpless fury till the gnome offspring of such miscegenation rise up against their cruel sires; by that time their mucus will blend with their tears past their chins down to their heels, then shall come our turn to laugh. (188)

The descriptions of the “half man and half goblin... gnome offspring of miscegenation” uneasily echoes Millin’s racist ideology in *God’s Stepchildren*. However, the fact that Plaatje only seems concerned with the fate and suffering of women in this passage might be a reference to his 1921 pamphlet against so-called “black peril” threats. As already mentioned in my discussion of *God’s Stepchildren*, Plaatje’s pamphlet attested to “the hypocrisy of whites who whipped up fears of ‘black peril’ ... while ignoring ‘white peril’ assaults by white men upon black women, with the complicity of courts delivering a ‘double standard of justice’” (Blair 586).

In *Mhudi*, Plaatje utilises the genre of the colonial romance novel not only to counter a literary tradition of colonial stereotypes of African women, but also to draw on nineteenth-century history to offer a vision of a different political future for South Africa. The novel’s allegorical warning against white domination in South Africa is astute, but perhaps not entirely surprising, given Plaatje’s involvement in the early political life of the ANC. However, Plaatje’s emphasis on female-centred narratives of political agency offers a radically new imagining of gender in the emerging South African nation.

Plaatje's vision was incredibly provocative for his time, as the textual interference of the Lovedale Press editor suggests. In a time when African men were losing what little political power they had, other cultural texts at the time of *Mhudi*'s publication point to a policing of African women's gender and sexuality. Plaatje's affirmation of female political agency is therefore all the more extraordinary when read next to other cultural texts of his time, such as *Bantu World*'s 1932-33 beauty competition, which I examine in the next chapter. Plaatje's novel subverts colonial stereotypes of the hypersexualised black female body and offers a profoundly different literary representation of black femininity. However, in the same historical moment that Plaatje's novel celebrates female political agency, and imagines new and liberating gender roles for South African women, the male editors of *Bantu World* were discursively disempowering female self-representation, as the newspaper's male staff sought to limit and control the kinds of representations of African female bodies they would allow in print.

## Chapter 5

### (Re)Covering Bodies in the Postcolony

Whereas the previous two chapters examined colonial stereotypes of black female bodies in South African literature, in this chapter I turn to photographic representations of black South African women. In the novels discussed thus far, authors either deliberately constructed and disseminated stereotypes of African women's bodies to support their ideological worldviews, as in the case of Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and Millin's *God's Stepchildren*, or authors attempted to disrupt a literary tradition of colonial stereotypes of African women's bodies, as in the case of Schreiner's *From Man to Man* and Plaatje's *Mhudi*. However, colonial stereotypes of hypersexualised black female bodies are not only literary constructions found in novels. In a similar way, colonial photography also created, constructed and then disseminated stereotypical representations of colonised peoples.

The camera was first invented in 1839. Anne McClintock notes that, for contemporary nineteenth-century observers, "[t]he technological perfection of the camera" suggested its "capacity to replicate reality exactly as it is" (*Imperial Leather* 123). However, even though colonial photography may have hinted at an unmediated and truthful glimpse into the reality of colonial settings and colonised peoples, such photographs nevertheless framed and constructed its subject matter in such a way as to legitimise the project of imperial domination. Helen Bradford, for example, describes colonial photographs of African women as "photographic *fictions*" (73, emphasis added). Colonial photography "encoded the desires, visions and technologies of invisible settlers" (Bradford 73), which offered the ostensible subjects of these colonial representations very few, if any, possibilities for self-expression or self-representation.

The stereotypes that were constructed through colonial photography have the potential to be far more insidious than literary stereotypes, given photography's implicit claim to empirically convey the "reality" of an image and nothing else. As Stuart Hall writes, the photographic image's claim to "truth" is always

implicated in a politics of truth as well as a politics of desire. Paradoxically, its apparent transparency to “reality” is when it is at its most ideological – for example when photography disavows its status as a cultural practice, passing itself off as “nature’s paintbrush” (38).

Hall’s point is crucial if one considers how colonial photography would construct a particular cultural representation of an assumed “other”, yet enable colonial photographers to pretend that they have done nothing more than empirically document “the truth”. Susan Sontag also challenges photography’s “presumption of veracity”, arguing instead that photographs are “as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are” (6-7) – or, to link Sontag’s argument with my own, that the particular photographic visions captured in colonial photographs are just as much an interpretation of the world as the literary constructions found in novels. This is particularly troubling when one considers the colonial ethnographic gaze and the presumption that colonial ethnographic photography is somehow not culturally constructed from a very particular position of power.

For example, in an article titled “Framing African Women”, Bradford explores nineteenth-century photographic representations of the black female body produced in British colonial South Africa. In an era when the display of a white woman’s ankle was deemed erotic, Bradford argues, colonial male photographers were discovering that “colonised women could be posed in more lucrative ways” (72). She focuses on the work of one colonial photographer in particular, a mountebank named Michael Durney. Durney’s representations of black South African women, Bradford argues, were even more troubling than that of other colonial male photographers, since he combined different negatives in a way that was not apparent to the casual viewer and thus “recorded his own visions of the sexualized grotesque” (80).

The fact that Durney could combine different negatives to create his own visions of the colonised bodies of black South African women not only illustrates the constructed nature of the photographs themselves, but also highlights the constructed nature of

colonial stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality. Bradford draws particular attention to the Victorian frames of colonial photographs. “Frames,” Bradford rightly points out, “clearly structure how we see and think about what they enclose” (71). It is thus both the symbolic framing of the colonial male gaze, as well as the material production of the photographic representation, which constructed and then disseminated hypersexualised stereotypes of African femininity. The limited access to and availability of visual technologies in colonial South Africa meant that white male colonists monopolised photographic representations of black female bodies. The captive moments of both symbolic and material framing found in photographic representations therefore highlight the circumstances in which colonial visions of African femininity were imagined, produced and distributed.

A vast amount of scholarship exists already on colonial photography. Photography, as Henriette Gunkel points out, has been “constitutive of the categories of race, gender, sex and sexuality” (*Cultural Politics* 37). Gunkel argues that “it was especially the female subject that was of particular interest for the gaze of the [colonial] photographer”, given how African women “were historically displayed through the colonial gaze” (*Cultural Politics* 39). Desiree Lewis notes how colonial photography “functioned as a powerful instrument of masculine and colonial domination, with black women generally being instrumentalised images for others’ self-definition and gratification” (“Against the Grain” 13). In their comprehensive history of black women’s bodies in photography, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams point out that until the late nineteenth century, photographic images of black women were, in fact, very scarce (see Willis and Williams 1). “When she appears at all,” they write, she was “a savage in the landscape, ‘Sarah’ on the display stage, but always merely an adjunct” (1). It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century, they write, that an “explosion of ethnographic photography” widely disseminated “ideas about ethnographic difference” through “the display of the naked coloured body” (3). Andrew van der Vlies highlights this “history of the ethnographic photographing of types” and how the “prurient European interest in indigenous African women’s bodies under the thinnest veneer of scientific interest” spectacularised representations of the nude black female body (142). Ayo A. Coly also points out that

photography “was specifically utilised by colonial ethnographers to construct and accumulate evidence of African primitivism and, by extension, evidence of the necessity to civilise and colonise Africans” (654).

In this chapter, I explore some of the earliest South African visual texts to subvert the nineteenth-century colonial ethnographic stereotypes outlined above. I examine the first photographic beauty contest aimed at black South African women, namely *Bantu World*'s 1932-1933 “Miss Africa” contest, in which entrants were required to send in photographs of themselves. What I hope to contribute with this chapter is an examination of the complex ambiguities of this photographic beauty contest, which ostensibly offered black South African women one of the first public opportunities to take control of the production of their own photographic representations. The entrants' fashioning of themselves as desirable and eroticised objects marks a crucial shift from the colonial, hypersexualised representations of African women mentioned above, to the entrants' own representation of their femininity as both fashionable and desirable. Most of the entrants chose to represent themselves in what Lynn Thomas has termed the “modern girl” style. Thomas defines the “modern girl” trope as the “global emergence during the 1920s and 1930s of female figures identified by their cosmopolitan look, their explicit eroticism and their use of specific commodities” (461). The “Miss Africa” beauty contest opened up one of the very first publically visual platforms for black South African women to choose how they wished to represent themselves. However, at the same time, the contest once again made black female bodies highly visible while discursively disempowering the female entrants, as male editors sought to re-establish control over the kinds of representations of African female bodies they would allow in print.

Since all of the representations the black female body that I have discussed thus far have been literary representations in novels, it is particularly important to point out that the “modern girl” trope featured in the *Bantu World* beauty competition is not only a discursive representation. These were also the photographic self-representations of real, embodied, individual women. However, at no point in this chapter am I trying to

“recover” the “real” lives of the women in these photographs, nor do I attempt to make any kind of claim or argument on their behalf.

Rather, I want to invoke the idea of “re-covering” as a productive trope through which to interrogate the *Bantu World* “Miss Africa” contest and the entrants’ performance of a “modern girl” style. Postcolonial representations of African womanhood and sexuality, Coly argues, “have generally been cognisant of the visual history of the African female body, and the tendency has thus been to *cover up*, de-sexualise and de-corporealise African womanhood” (654, emphasis added). Meg Samuelson has also shown that postcolonial nationalism often “reiterates the colonial demand for unified ‘covered and enclosed’ bodies to reflect the unified subject of nation” (*Remembering* 97). When it comes to countering colonial stereotypes of black female hypersexuality, Coly argues that “an epistemology of respectability is [thus] almost endemic to black visual treatments of the female body” (656-657). In this way, Coly’s argument suggests that a literal and symbolic “re-covering” of the exploited, exposed and hypersexualised female body plays a large part in postcolonial projects and narratives of recovery.

However, the majority of the women who entered *Bantu World*’s “Miss Africa” contest responded to the visual history of colonial photography by *not* “re-covering” African womanhood. Instead, most entrants appropriated a “modern girl” style and deliberately positioned themselves as fashionable, desirable and implicitly sexualised. Very few entrants chose to represent themselves in terms of the “epistemology of respectability” Coly mentions. Photographs of women in conservative clothing with high, modest necklines, their heads covered with old-fashioned bonnets, were few and far between.

Thomas writes that by the early 1930s, “white beauty contests featured photos of scantily clad bathing beauties, signalling a significant shift in white notions of acceptable female display” (471). It is only in the 1950s that black periodicals first began to publish similar photos. While the entrants to the 1932-1933 “Miss Africa” most certainly did not uncover their bodies to the degree of representing themselves in bathing suits, they nevertheless positioned themselves as both desirable and desiring subjects, thereby implicitly drawing

attention to their sexuality. This offers a very different challenge to both hypersexualised colonial stereotypes, as well as the “epistemology of respectability” which Coly mentions. It is perhaps because of the “modern girl’s” refusal to “re-cover” the black female body that *Bantu World*’s “Miss Africa” beauty competition soon became a focalised site for heated public debates about ideas surrounding race and respectability.

The notion of respectability – especially racial respectability – was of the utmost concern to *Bantu World*’s male editorial staff (see Lynn Thomas 466-467). Lynn Thomas writes that *Bantu World* embodied the “concerns of mission-educated African Christians”, noting their “fervent embrace of mission Christianity and their elite ambitions” (466). Thomas points out that in contexts such as these, where “respectability [is] framed through racial categories ... appearances are of the gravest importance” (467). I want to highlight Thomas’s use of the word “appearances”, as I will later go on to show that the very notion of “appearance” is fundamental to understanding a “modern girl” performance of gender. According to Thomas, the trope of the “modern girl” simultaneously “emerged through”, but also “posed challenges” to, categories of race and respectability (465). However, the “modern girl” trope did not only challenge *Bantu World*’s male editors’ ideas of racial respectability. It also challenged ideas surrounding “respectable” gender roles for African women. This became abundantly clear during the course of the *Bantu World* beauty competition, as the male writing and editorial staff became increasingly anxious about publishing black South African women’s photographic performance of a “modern girl” style. Their anxiety can be seen in the editorial staff’s discursive attempts to prescribe which performance of gender it deemed appropriate for African women, and their attempts at limiting those gender performances which they found threatening, as I will go on to illustrate in the course of this chapter.

I read the “Miss Africa” photographic beauty contest in *Bantu World* as simultaneously discursive and material. Most of the entrants consciously performed a “modern girl” style, thereby not only challenging the stereotypes common to colonial photography, but also simultaneously challenging an “epistemology of respectability” in terms of race and gender. The beauty contest publically prescribed the performance of certain racial and

gendered norms for black South African women in the early 1930s, while, at the same time, documenting important, and sometimes subversive, self-representations of real, embodied women in a historically and culturally specific location. While the entrants' representation of themselves as desirable objects can be read as an attempt to recover a (not unproblematic) form of self-representation that was denied to African women in the context of colonial photography, male editors discursively "re-covered" the bodies of women for their own political interests, and so enforced their own ideas about race, gender and postcolonial respectability.

The very idea of "self-representation" is, in itself, also problematic. The notion of the photographic beauty contest rests on an uncritical assumption that subjects can produce autonomous representations of themselves; beauty contests, however, are always already performative, in that they require entrants to perform a formalised and idealised idea of "beauty" at the level of the material body. Furthermore, the entrants to *Bantu World's* "Miss Africa" beauty competition would have had limited technological and discursive resources at their disposal, which would have been further complicated by the editorial presence of *Bantu World's* all-male staff. The highly limited capacity for self-expression which the *Bantu World* photographic beauty contest offered entrants therefore required women to cast themselves as sexualised objects of beauty for the desiring male gaze. This reveals a complicated notion of supposedly "self" representation, where the photographic beauty contest paradoxically allows women to assert themselves in the public sphere by, ironically, constituting themselves as objects. What I do find important about the "Miss Africa" beauty competition is that it created one of the very first public platforms for black South African women to represent themselves in terms which they could choose and establish for themselves, albeit only in very limited and problematic ways. I examine the paradoxical complexities of this beauty contest in the remainder of this chapter.

### **(Re)covering bodies in *Bantu World*, 1932 to 1933**

*Bantu World*, a national weekly newspaper launched on 9 April 1932, was the first South African newspaper targeting black South Africans to offer "women's pages". "The

proprietors of *Bantu World*,” Les Switzer writes, “were among the first to recognise that African women were a crucial source of potential readers for the black commercial press” (199). *Bantu World*’s “women’s pages” were introduced six months after the launch of the newspaper, quite possibly in the hope of increasing its early circulation figure of 6 000 copies per week (see Lynn Thomas 465). The “women’s pages”, titled “The Women’s Activities”, were launched by announcing a beauty competition to find “Miss Africa”.

There are a few crucial points regarding *Bantu World*’s “women’s pages” that I would like to highlight immediately. First of all, the very notion of a so-called “women’s supplement” suggests that the editors and proprietors of *Bantu World* assumed that women would not be interested in politics, local and international news, or sport, and that the newspaper would have to create special, separate “women’s pages” in order to attract African women as potential readers. Secondly, the title of the supplement is especially telling. “The Women’s Activities” strengthens the assumption that female readers would, and could, only be interested in articles and topics published in their own separate supplement, and, by extension, that male readers would not care about the contents of the “women’s pages”. The articles published in *Bantu World*’s “women’s pages”, Switzer writes,

were concerned with cooking recipes, household hints (making and repairing clothes and curtains, cleaning blankets and linen, economising in the kitchen), health and home remedies, personal etiquette (stressing good behaviour and cleanliness), safety (especially from fires, poisons and weapons), child rearing, love and marriage. (199)

Therefore, Switzer argues that even though the women’s supplement was titled “Marching Forward”, most of its articles were “what one would expect of a society in which the normative framework featured women as decorative objects and homemakers submissive to their husbands” (199). Even though Switzer’s claim that *Bantu World*’s beauty competition positioned women as decorative objects is convincing, between 1932

and 1933, when *Bantu World* ran its first – and its only – beauty competition, the women’s supplement was not titled “Marching Forward”. *Bantu World* launched its women’s supplement on 1 October 1932 under the title “The Women’s Section.” Two weeks later, when *Bantu World* first announced the beauty competition on 15 October 1932, the women’s supplement was renamed “The Women’s Activities.”

The fact that the newspaper launched its “women’s pages” with a beauty competition suggests that the male editors and proprietors of the newspaper intended to use photographs of beautiful women to both promote racial pride and to secure *Bantu World*’s commercial success. Writing as “The Son of Africa”, *Bantu World*’s editor, R. V. Selope Thema, announced the beauty competition in an editorial titled “Great Progress! The Bantu World Calls To The Women Of The Race”. Selope’s editorial is marked by a highly patronising tone:

Our ladies – God bless them – are coming into their own at long last! Thanks to the indefatigable enterprise of “The Bantu World” ... For, not content with giving women a column of their own, it now introduces a Beauty competition for our ladies – the dears! (*Bantu World*, 22 October 1932: 10)<sup>21</sup>

Selope further claimed that the beauty competition would prove that “there are beautiful women and girls in Africa”, would promote “diligent perusal of enterprising Bantu newspapers” and would encourage “careless or lazy [ladies] to give a little more attention to their toilet” (*Bantu World*, 22 October 1932: 10). From this statement, it is clear that the male editors and shareholders of *Bantu World* intended that the beauty contest should promote a particular early nationalist discourse of racial uplift within a very specific performance of black middle-class urban femininity; “Miss Africa” would be an educated reader of *Bantu World*, she would be a conscientious consumer, and she would prove the

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<sup>21</sup> All of the original *Bantu World* newspaper articles, editorials and letters quoted from or referred to in this chapter are drawn from the archival collection in the University of Cape Town Libraries, Special Collections, BZA 98/76. Images from the *Bantu World* 1932-1933 beauty competition are reproduced with the kind permission of the University of Cape Town Libraries, Special Collections.

beauty and worth of African women to the world by conforming to a particular version of Western modernity. Indeed, *Bantu World*'s women's pages promoted a very specific ideal of black, middle class, urban femininity, which saw women as well-groomed, educated and literate, as shrewd consumers of both domestic and cosmetic products, but not as independent professionals.

The majority of the entrants to the *Bantu World* beauty contest performed their femininity as a conscious self-representation of the "Flapper" style that was fashionable in the 1920s and 1930s, thereby choosing to represent themselves as "modern", stylish and desirable. A smaller number of entrants chose to emulate a much more modest and conservative style, strongly reminiscent of Victorian portraiture. These entrants most likely chose this "respectable" style of portraiture in order to represent themselves as "proper" and sexually modest in relation to the stereotypically sexualised images which would have dominated colonial photographs of African women.

However, as the competition progressed, the male editors became increasingly anxious about publishing black South African women's photographic self-representations. More and more editorials attempted to limit and control the kinds of photographs women entered in the competition, thereby exposing the newspaper's policing of African femininity that had to conform to a particular version of modernity. In this chapter, I trace the small instances of self-representation and self-expression the beauty contest offered contestants, and show how these photographic representations challenged *Bantu World*'s early nationalist discourse. I argue that *Bantu World*'s male editors and shareholders found these photographic self-representations threatening and disturbing precisely *because* the entrants' performance of both gender and race challenged the newspaper's middle-class notions of race and gender propriety.

The very idea of the photographic beauty contest is grounded in the rise of the "modern girl" heuristic as a means of feminine self-representation. Beauty contests are already performative in themselves, requiring entrants to perform an idealised beauty at the level of the material body. The rise of photographic beauty contests in the 1920s and 1930s

radically commodified the idea of feminine beauty and gave an unprecedented importance to women's visual self-representation. In *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, Liz Conor traces how the rapid growth of consumerism and the unprecedented premium that commodity culture placed on the visual encouraged the rise of what she terms, following Judith Butler, "modern appearing women". "Appearing" is an especially important term for Conor, who argues that the heightened visual component of the "modern signficatory scene spectacularised the feminine and produced a new subjectivity in which the performance of the feminine became more concentrated on the visual" (6). "Appearing", she argues, became both a "mode of gendered performativity", as well as a "particular visual practice within the signficatory scene of modernity" (6). Conor argues that by emphasising the importance of visual culture, Western modernity displaced Victorian ideals of female modesty and respectability, and instead encouraged women to represent themselves as "modern", glamorous consumers that knew how to transform their self-representations with the use of particular commodities. According to Conor, "for perhaps the first time in the West, modern women understood self-display to be part of the quest for mobility, self-determination and sexual identity" (29).

Conor's use of the terms "appearing" and "self-display" signal the paradoxical nature underlying the particular mode of self-presentation promised by the photographic beauty contest. Since the agency of the "modern girl" was directly associated with her public visibility, she is positioned as a sexual object through casting *herself* as an object of beauty. However, she could do so in terms which she established for herself. As Conor points out, the "modern girl" asserted herself "as a sexual subject by paradoxically constituting herself as an object within the new conditions of feminine visibility" (209). The limited capacity for self-expression which the *Bantu World* photographic beauty contest offered entrants therefore required women to now cast *themselves* as the decorative objects mentioned by Switzer.

Furthermore, the very idea of the beauty contest is grounded in a very restrictive ideal of what constitutes "beauty" in the first place. It necessarily excludes women on the grounds

of age, body type and often of race. Still, the photographic beauty contest's implicit promise of self-determination through visual performativity would have held a great appeal for *Bantu World's* female readers, given the history of colonial photography in colonial South Africa. *Bantu World's* winning entrants' fashioning of themselves as desirable and eroticised objects marks an important shift; namely, the shift from colonial representations of African women as hypersexualised and corporeally "deviant", to the entrants' self-representation of their femininity and sexuality as part of a globally fashionable and progressive "modern girl" style. In this way, the winning entrants to *Bantu World's* beauty contest performed their desirability as a form of self-expression, rather than being cast as eroticised colonial subjects with no power over the production of their own images.

However, not all of the entrants chose to represent themselves as fashionable, desirable and "modern". Some entrants chose to represent themselves as sombre and unsmiling, wearing conservative dresses or blouses with high, modest necklines, forgoing cosmetic products, and covering their heads with old-fashioned bonnets.



Fig. 2 Two of the first entrants to *Bantu World's* 1932-1933 beauty contest.

*Bantu World*, 12 November 1932. University of Cape Town Libraries, Special Collections, BZA 98/76.

These images are strongly reminiscent of Victorian portrait photography, which focused all attention on the subject's face and drew the attention away from bodily attributes. Such photographs recall typical Victorian portraits of African converts that would appear in mission fundraising literature to prove the "success" of their "civilising mission". Considering the prevalence of racial and gendered stereotypes about African women's supposed sexual "deviancy" in colonial photography, it is of little wonder that some of the entrants to *Bantu World's* beauty contest chose deliberately to appropriate the symbolic markers of "civilised" Victorian sexual modesty.

However, it is noteworthy that all six of the top entrants to the competition rejected the conventions of Victorian portraiture. The winning photograph, featuring Flora Ndobe from Cape Town, is a typical example of a "modern girl" style.



Fig. 3 Flora Ndobe from Cape Town, winner of *Bantu World's* 1932-1933 beauty contest. *Bantu World*, 25 March 1933. University of Cape Town Libraries, Special Collections, BZA 98/76.

Flora Ndobe is photographed as a typical Flapper. Ndobe won first place with 230 votes, while the entrants who came second and third received 110 votes and 100 votes respectively. The fact that Ndobe received more than twice as many votes as her nearest competitor is a definite indication of how much the readers of *Bantu World* admired her particular performance of the “modern girl” style. She is pictured wearing a fashionable, cosmopolitan outfit, including a cloche hat, a blouse with a dropped neckline, which is further accentuated by a string of pearls, and a feather tippet. Unlike the majority of entrants to the competition, she sports an open, teeth-revealing smile. Her body is slightly tilted towards the camera, subtly inviting the viewer’s gaze. It is a pose that is markedly different to those commonly found in colonial photographs of African women’s bodies.

It is important to note that the top two entrants came from Cape Town and Johannesburg respectively, rather than more rural parts of South Africa, thus suggesting the “modern girl’s” implication in a global metropolitan scene of consumerism, mass media and visual culture. Readers might well have responded so warmly to the winning entrants’ performance of a “modern girl” style, precisely because it situated black South Africans within a global framework of transnational media culture and consumerism, thereby granting them a cosmopolitan status previously denied to colonised subjects.

It is also noteworthy that two of the top three entrants to the “Miss Africa” contest were married women. The captions to the photographs of the top six entrants clearly introduce Mrs Flora Ndobe as the winner of the competition, and Mrs Nellie Duna, from Grahamstown, in third place. The caption seems the most incongruous in Flora Ndobe’s case, where she is hailed as “Miss Africa” at the top of her photograph, but positioned as a married woman by the title of “Mrs” printed underneath her photograph. Clearly, the *Bantu World* editors had no qualms about the first “Miss Africa” being married. This may suggest that readers admired married women who took particular care with their physical appearance. However, during the course of the competition, *Bantu World*’s male staff became increasingly anxious when it came to printing portraits such as that of Flora Ndobe’s. I therefore suggest that *Bantu World*’s male editors had no qualms about the first “Miss Africa” being a married woman, as the “modern girl’s” subversive

refashioning of conservative gender roles, as well as her implicit eroticism, was rendered less threatening if this trope was performed by a married woman, “safely” inscribing a “modern girl” gender performance into established patriarchal social norms. I argue this point more fully in my discussion below.

On 18 February 1933, the photographs of all 51 entrants were published under the heading: “Who [sic] do you choose as Miss Africa?” The very next issue, however, used the space which the newspaper usually reserved for publishing photographs entered into the beauty competition to instead publish the photographs of “some leading women of the race” (*Bantu World*, 25 February 1933: 10). The women featured in these photographs shared the conservative dress and sombre expressions of the two entrants in Fig. 2, and were to be valued for their contributions to “the race”, rather than for their beauty. The accompanying article expressly told readers that the “Bantu Race wants women who can face life with clear minds” and that “Bantu people should educate their girls for the future good of the race” (*Bantu World*, 25 February 1933: 10). It is noteworthy that the moment the newspaper had published the photographs of all of the entrants, it no longer wished to encourage “careless or lazy [ladies] to give a little more attention to their toilet” (*Bantu World*, 22 October 1932: 10); *Bantu World* now told readers expressly that “deeds were more important than appearances” (*Bantu World*, 25 March 1933: 4). Indeed, when Flora Ndobe was announced as the winner of the competition on 25 March 1933, Thema’s accompanying editorial insisted that the “Bantu race is certainly proud of its beautiful women,” but “it will be more proud of women who take interest in the welfare of the people” (*Bantu World*, 25 March 1933: 4).

While the male staff of *Bantu World* initially intended to use photographs of beautiful women to secure the commercial success of their newspaper, they became increasingly apprehensive of the entrants’ performance of a black “modern girl” style as the competition progressed. Much of this editorial anxiety was sparked by the top entrants’ use of cosmetic products, as is immediately clear from the number of letters and editorials published during this time on the subject of black women’s use of white face powder and,

to a lesser extent, red lipstick. Lynn Thomas suggests that this editorial anxiety “ensured that this was *Bantu World*’s first and last beauty competition” (477).

For example, on 4 March 1933, the “women’s pages” included a strongly worded letter from a “Miss Roamer”, titled “Beautiful Bantu women need no lipstick or powder to aid nature” (10). Tim Couzens points out that author R.R.R Dhlomo wrote a “famous and popular column” for *Bantu World* in the 1930s under the pseudonym “R. Roamer, Esq.” (5). It is therefore not too far a stretch to suggest that “Miss Roamer” was, in fact, another of Dhlomo’s literary pseudonyms. This is even more significant, given that Dhlomo was himself the “editress” (Couzens 5) of *Bantu World*’s “women’s pages”. According to “Miss Roamer’s” scathing attack on women who use cosmetics products, black women should abandon their “desire to turn themselves white” and rather recognise “the beauty of their natural colouring” (*Bantu World*, 4 March 1933: 10). Since the use of cosmetics is one of the chief characteristics of a “modern girl” style, the editors’ anxiety surrounding black South African women’s use of cosmetic products could well reflect a larger and more pervasive apprehension at the increasing number of urbanised, professional and independent black South African women during the 1920s and 1930s, the male editors’ distress at the implicit self-denigration of women trying to change their skin colour for the sake of urban mobility, as well as the changing nature of traditional gender roles.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, South African society underwent both rapid industrialisation and urbanisation during the first half of the twentieth century. Widespread poverty during the depression years of the 1920s and 1930s meant that rural families, particularly women, increasingly moved to urban centres in search of work. *Bantu World* was specifically aimed at “mission-educated African Christians who worked as clerks, teachers, domestic servants, nurses and clergy” (Lynn Thomas 466). *Bantu World*’s female readers would thus have had some opportunity, while limited, to pursue financial independence and be independent professionals. While *Bantu World*’s female readers “struggled, under increasingly difficult circumstances, to achieve middle-class status”, they could nevertheless earn their own money and decide how they wished to

spend it (Lynn Thomas 466). In addition to this, Karen Tice points out that “expansion of visual technologies, commodity consumption, urbanization, and spectacularization in the 1920s ushered in a multitude of new occasions, sites, and ways for women to be on display” (147). This “display” was very different to the colonial display of black female bodies. As a result, traditional social and familial structures were in a marked state of flux for the most part of the first half of the twentieth century. Traditional gender roles were also increasingly unstable and therefore open to reinterpretation and re-signification.

R.R.R. Dhlomo’s *An African Tragedy* (1928), the first published English novel by a black South African, clearly reflects such an anxiety about ways in which urbanised black South African women could subvert conservative, traditional and patriarchal gender roles. *An African Tragedy* serves as a cautionary tale against those aspects of urban existence that would stand in stark contrast to Victorian ideals of “Christian respectability”, such as drinking alcohol, dancing and extramarital sex, especially through prostitution. When the novel’s hero, Robert Zulu, arrives in Johannesburg, he is seduced by the “lovely, dancing ladies of fashion” (4), so that he forgets all about his fiancée, Miss Jane Nhlauzeko, who is waiting patiently in the village for his return. While his village fiancée is described as “a true, pure, faithful girl” (6), the urban women of Johannesburg are described as “[l]oose, morally depraved women” with “prostituted bodies”, who “parade the Township with uncovered bosoms” (5). They wear “short, daring skirts” and engage in “outrageous flirtations”, which leads the narrating voice to conclude that any possibility of these women ever being seen as fit mothers would be “dashed against the rocks of impossibilities” (7). Given that Dhlomo was the “editress” of the *Bantu World* “women’s pages”, his editorial presence in the newspaper and his views on gender roles would certainly have been informed by the kinds of assumptions surrounding urban African femininity set out in his novel.

Indeed, exactly one month after the first photographic entries to *Bantu World*’s beauty competition were published, the “women’s supplement” included the following editorial:

[M]ost of the educated Native girls have a wrong conception of what education means. They think that education means being a teacher or worker, earning a lot of money to indulge in expensive dresses, and going to town for unnecessary holidays ... Girls should be educated to realise that this great work of uplifting the Bantu lies in their hands, as the future mothers of the nation. They should have a thorough knowledge of improving their homes if at all they wish to uplift the nation. (*Bantu World*, 10 December 1932: 10)

In this way, Dhlomo's editorial presence strongly encouraged urban women to remain the submissive mothers, homemakers and decorative objects mentioned in Switzers' analysis. It is telling that Dhlomo positions women as the "mothers of the nation", limiting their full potential to "uplift the nation" to the domestic sphere of motherhood and "improving their homes" (*Bantu World*, 10 December 1932: 10). Indeed, only two weeks after Flora Ndobe was announced as the winner of the competition, the "women's pages" announced that it would in future carry a new column "of interest to the women of the race", which would provide "useful hints to help Bantu women solve the household problems" (*Bantu World*, 8 April 1933: 10). The beauty contest was thus very obviously replaced with an editorial attempt to contain female gender roles to that of the domestic sphere. Therefore, if we contrast Dhlomo's statement that the "great work" of African women is to be the "mothers of the nation" and to "improve their homes" with Plaatje's *Mhudi*, it not only reveals the radical innovation of Plaatje's political vision in affirming female political agency. It also illustrates how *Bantu World's* male editorial presence actively tried to control racial and gendered categories to conform to what they deemed as "respectable" black femininity.

Lynn Thomas notes how *Bantu World's* male editors and letter-writers charged women who wore make-up with multiple offences; smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, speaking so-called "township languages", wearing trousers and fixating on "romance", arguing that such habits had turned the "girl" into a "she-man" (see Lynn Thomas 479). What is interesting about these "charges", both in terms of race and gender, is that all of

them are concerned with a rejection of normative gender roles. The entrants' use of cosmetic products therefore not only challenged the newspaper's ideas concerning racial respectability, but also pushed the boundaries of what was considered as "respectable" femininity. While the "modern girl" is, arguably, still a decorative object, as well as being complicit in turning herself into an eroticised object for the male gaze, the "modern girl" trope also allowed women a publically visual platform through which to challenge conservative feminine roles that would cast women as obedient wives and limit them to the domestic sphere. The Flapper, Conor argues, more than any other type of "modern woman", physically embodied the scandal attached to women's new public visibility (209). Since the Flapper associated her agency with her visibility, she constituted herself as a sexual object, but, paradoxically, in "constituting herself as an object within the new conditions of feminine visibility", the Flapper also asserted herself "as a sexual subject" (Conor 209).

While *Bantu World's* male editorial staff intended to publish photographs of women as beautiful objects and to use these images to further their own agendas, they were clearly unprepared for the ways in which the "modern girl" style could subvert conservative notions of racial and gendered "respectability". The "modern girl" style paradoxically both conformed to this notion of women as beautiful objects, but also challenged normative stereotypes by granting women the power to both fashion and display their sexuality as a form of self-expression. This, even more than other controversial "modern girl" practices, like smoking cigarettes or wearing trousers, made *Bantu World's* male staff question the entrants' commitment to racial uplift. The entrants' performance of a "modern girl" style thus provoked such strong reactions from *Bantu World's* male staff and male letter-writers precisely *because* their performance of both gender and race challenged the newspaper's "middle-class notions of gender propriety with intimations of racial shame" (Lynn Thomas 490). In this way, the entrants' use of cosmetic products marked black women's awareness of both their own desirability and their power in using their sexuality to gain access to the public sphere, albeit in a very limited and limiting sense.

At the same time as *Bantu World* was inviting its readers to elect “Miss Africa”, the newspaper was protesting Prime Minister Barry Hertzog’s ultimately successful campaign to abolish African men’s limited voting rights. This beauty competition, Lynn Thomas argues, “like others the world over, drew disparate entrants and reader–voters into new circuits of citizenship by granting voting rights to all consumers” (469). It is significant, though, that *Bantu World*’s male writers and readers could only claim this small, symbolic voting right through the objectified bodies of the female entrants. Their “vote” extended no further than deciding what they deemed to be an idealised standard of feminine beauty. *Bantu World*’s readers, on the one hand, clearly appreciated and admired the winning entrants’ performance of a “modern girl” style, as reflected by their votes. I would suggest that readers, unlike the *Bantu World* editors, saw such a cosmopolitan, global style as contributing more to racial uplift than the sombre and conservative portraits upheld by Thema for taking an “interest in the welfare of the people” (*Bantu World*, 25 March 1933: 4).

Confronted with the “modern girl’s” implicit eroticism, *Bantu World*’s male staff members were, on the other hand, actively trying to shape ideals of feminine beauty into racial and gendered categories that would not challenge conservative, patriarchal notions of what they deemed to be a “respectable” performance of black South African femininity. In a time when African men were losing what little political power they had, *Bantu World*’s male editorial staff kept women’s gendered and racial identities in very close check. This policing of the entrants’ gender and sexuality in the historical moment when “South Africa” was first emerging as a new nation state highlights how attempts at controlling black women’s bodies still, to this day, take “the form of neo-imperial constructions of their [supposed] sexual excess” (Lewis “African Sexualities” 206).

The next section marks a chronological shift from early South African proto-nationalisms of the 1920s and 1930s to current postapartheid nationalisms. The three chapters in this final section refuse to perpetuate the symbolic violence which makes a stereotype such as the “Baartman trope” possible. Instead, they focus on contemporary South African representations of black female bodies that either disseminate or challenge the “Baartman

trope”, especially when confronted with the very particular deployment of the “Bartman trope” in the service of current postapartheid nationalism. The final chapter suggests a possible strategy for reading and representing the black female body, one which no longer needs to invoke Sara Bartman’s dissected body as a theoretical and emotive anchor.

### **SECTION 3**

## **Postapartheid Nationalisms and the Politics of Representation**

## Chapter 6

### Sara Baartman and the Violence of Representation

In the opening sentence of this thesis, I claimed that few bodies have been made to bear the symbolic weight of as many cultural and academic discourses as that of Sara Baartman's. Considering how often Sara Baartman's embodied specificity is reduced to an essentialist symbol – either as the archetypal hypersexualised victim of colonial exploitation and humiliation, or as the symbolic mother of the “new” South Africa – I argued that there is a reductive, symbolic violence which underlies the “Baartman trope”, even when it is marshalled in the service of a postcolonial discourse about the renewal of the nation. In this chapter, I propose a different representational strategy, one that is grounded in intimacy and therefore refuses to perpetuate the symbolic violence which makes a stereotype such as the “Baartman trope” possible. I explore three postapartheid South African texts that challenge and complicate the “Baartman trope”, namely Diana Ferrus's poem “I Have Come to Take You Home” (1998), K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000). In Chapter Two, following Pumla Dineo Gqola, I introduced the notion of the “unknowability” of Sara Baartman as an ethical response to the problem of the violence of representation (“Sarah Bartmann” 102). I return to the question of how to represent Sara Baartman in this chapter. All three of the above-mentioned texts – in different ways, and to very different effects – draw on intimacy as an imaginative strategy with which to signal the very “unknowability” of Sara Baartman, while they, at the same time, highlight the particular deployment of the “Baartman trope” in the service of postapartheid South African nationalism.

Both Gqola and Gabeba Baderoon argue that it is only by acknowledging the “(im)possibility of representing Sarah Bartmann” that scholars can fully signal her humanity (Gqola “Sarah Bartmann” 70; also see Baderoon “Baartman and the Private” 66). For Baderoon, the “unknowability” of Sara Baartman is linked very specifically to the realms of the private and the intimate. She argues that Sara Baartman's interment marked the end of the “invasive visibility to which [she] was subjected during her lifetime” and restores her as a “subject with an interior that is inviolable and *private*”

(“Baartman and the Private” 71-72, emphasis in original). Drawing on Baderoon’s argument, I explore the importance of intimacy as a category of representation more fully in the course of this chapter. Sara Baartman’s interment in South Africa in 2002 marks a crucial moment in recognising her life as one that is, to use Judith Butler’s terms, “grievable and worth protecting” (Butler quoted in Puar 170). As I mentioned as part of my earlier discussion on the problem of representation in Chapter Two, Butler argues that some bodies are produced as “less precarious in relation to those who are rendered more precarious”, and that this raises important questions regarding “whose life is grievable and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrievable, or [only] marginally or episodically grievable” (quoted in Puar 170). Sara Baartman’s elaborate state funeral finally and publically recognised her full humanity on a national scale, as an entire nation mourned her tragic history, and recognised her life as “grievable”.

Still, Sara Baartman’s funeral was not only an occasion of national mourning and remembrance; it was also a very particular spectacle of a nation performing its own national unity, which was made possible by repeated references to the “Baartman trope”. I therefore begin this chapter with a brief discussion of Sara Baartman’s interment in order to highlight how the particular nationalist discourse dominating her funeral complicated the notions of the private and the intimate, as the symbolic violence underlying the “Baartman trope” once again reduced Sara Baartman to an essentialist stereotype, even as it ostensibly celebrated her life.

### **“Sarah Baartman is no longer Sarah Baartman”: Postapartheid nationalism and the “Baartman trope”**

Sara Baartman’s remains were interred on National Women’s Day, 9 August 2002, during an elaborate, televised, day-long state funeral, described by Meg Samuelson as “a spectacle of nation building” (*Remembering* 88). Her coffin was draped in the national flag, as crowds of funeral goers waved miniature flags to the accompaniment of the national anthem. Former President Thabo Mbeki’s eulogy described Baartman’s funeral as an “important day and occasion in our national life”, claiming that “[t]he story of

Sarah Baartman is the story of the African people of our country in all their echelons” (Mbeki).<sup>22</sup> Redi Direko, the presenter covering the funeral for national broadcast television, claimed that “[r]arely had one figure meant so much to an entire country” (quoted in Holmes 178). Henry Bredekamp, the Chief Executive Officer of Iziko Museums, described Baartman as “a national icon” and called her return a “national celebration” (quoted in Crais and Scully *Sara Baartman* 165).

The various comments above all point to the fact that Baartman’s funeral was staged with a marked emphasis on national unity, rather than focusing on Sara Baartman as an individual woman. During the funeral broadcast, Sylvia Vollenhoven stated explicitly that “Sarah Baartman is no longer Sarah Baartman”, but that she “had become a symbol for the women of our country” (quoted in Holmes 187).

There are two important points I would like to unpack about Vollenhoven’s claim that “Sarah Baartman is no longer Sarah Baartman”. First of all, a statement such as this very obviously invokes the “Baartman trope”. It illustrates how the embodied specificity of the life, history and suffering of the individual woman, Sara Baartman, is dislodged from her identity, which is then reduced to a discursive tool. In this way, her name is entrenched as a generalised symbol of colonial racism and sexism that can be used to illuminate or substantiate a variety of arguments that may be very far removed from her particular history and experience. Indeed, Vollenhoven’s statement may have been the most accurate and truthful claim made during the state funeral, though my reading of her statement is in all likelihood not the sense in which she intended it.

Secondly, Sara Baartman’s extravagant, day-long, televised state funeral was also not really about Sara Baartman; rather, the “spectacle of nation building” which Samuelson describes was more concerned with a nation performing its own national unity. Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully note the tragic irony that Sara Baartman was “repatriated not to a family but to a nation that, during her own lifetime, did not exist” (*Sara Baartman* 164). This is not to say that the countless expressions of commiseration with Baartman’s tragic

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<sup>22</sup> For a full transcript of Mbeki’s funeral speech, visit <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2002/mbek0809.htm>. Site accessed 9 February 2011.

history and the joy that she could, at last, be given the dignity of a proper burial were not sincerely meant or felt. Sara Baartman's funeral most certainly marks an important moment in recognising her life as "grievable" and thereby restoring her humanity. I am interested in *how* the sincere national outpouring of empathy surrounding Sara Baartman's burial was incorporated into a nationalist narrative of healing in order to consolidate the unity of the postapartheid nation state.

Mbeki's eulogy placed a marked emphasis on the idea of a postapartheid, postcolonial national unity. The eulogy drew attention to both Sara Baartman's history as a victim of imperial racism and sexism and, even more emphatically, to the postapartheid nation's role in "saving" her from a derogatory and hurtful colonial past. Mbeki linked "the historic mission of restoring the human dignity of Sarah Bartmann" explicitly to the project of "transforming [South Africa] into a truly non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous country, providing a better life for all our people" (Mbeki). Indeed, Mbeki's eulogy did not so much focus on Sara Baartman as a historical figure as it did on the future of the postapartheid nation state, where the nation's "presence at [Baartman's] grave" was linked to "the struggle to build a truly non-racial society in which black and white shall be brother and sister" (Mbeki). Baartman's state funeral, an internal government document claimed at the time, "was a victory over colonialism, racism and sexism", as it "brought together and united South Africans of all backgrounds in seeing justice done" (Crais and Scully *Sara Baartman* 164).

The sense of unity performed during the state funeral broadcast was thus a very specific understanding of "unity" as that of a nation brought together through a shared triumph over the history of colonial racial and gender oppression. However, this suggests, first of all, that only some members of the new nation can claim this sense of unity, which, in fact, throws the still-divided nature of postapartheid society to sharp, if ironic, relief. Secondly, it further suggests that by celebrating the triumph over colonial racism and sexism as an instance of national unity, the new nation can too easily overlook pressing current gender and racial inequalities that continue to fracture the postapartheid nation's

tentative “unity”. In this way, this particular nationalist discourse relies on racial and gender oppression for its sense of unity, which, ironically, fractures the nation.

Furthermore, the tragic irony underlying both Mbeki’s eulogy and the larger funeral celebration is that in “casting” (Samuelson *Remembering* 85) Baartman as an iconic victim of imperial racism and sexism, Sara Baartman, the woman, becomes the archetype of the silenced, suffering victim. While Mbeki’s eulogy repeatedly referred to Baartman’s interment on National Women’s Day, to “gender equality and the emancipation of women”, he also described the historical person of Sara Baartman as both “a simple African woman” and as “a defenceless African woman”, thus employing a patronising patriarchal discourse to cast her in the role of symbolic victimhood (Mbeki). Referring back to Vollenhoven’s claim that “Sarah Baartman is no longer Sarah Baartman”, it is clear that the particular performance of postapartheid nationalism surrounding the funeral broadcast makes the restoration of Sara Baartman as a “subject with an interior that is inviolable and *private*” almost impossible to achieve (Baderoon “Baartman and the Private” 71-72, emphasis in original). Sara Baartman’s interment certainly marked the end of the “invasive visibility” to which she was subjected during her lifetime (Baderoon “Baartman and the Private” 71). However, the nationalist discourses that were performed during her state funeral once again turned Sara Baartman into a highly visible and essentialist icon of the “Baartman trope” by simultaneously “casting” her as both the victim of colonial exploitation and humiliation, as well as the symbolic mother of the “new” South Africa.

This leads Samuelson to argue that it is through this memorialising of Sara Baartman as “a ‘tragic victim’, rescued and re(-)covered by the nation,” that the nation itself, through this process, “recovers from its own traumatic past” (*Remembering* 101). In *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?*, Samuelson offers a thorough critique of the nationalist discourses that were “enacted” around Sara Baartman’s interment (93). She argues that by turning Sara Baartman into a “symbol to unite all South Africans”, the “continuities and complicities between the colonial past and the national present” were not acknowledged (*Remembering* 92-93). Indeed, rather than deconstructing the “binaries

of racialised sexuality through which Baartman's body was read and produced in the imperial theatre", the particular performance of nationalism surrounding Baartman's interment merely rewrote her body "as domestic and maternal", thereby "cast[ing] Baartman as unifying Mother" (*Remembering* 93, 97). Drawing on Samuelson's argument as a point of departure, I once again invoke the organising trope of the (m)other, though in a different sense than I did in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I aim to draw attention to the ways in which the nationalist discourses surrounding her interment uncritically "cast" Sara Baartman as a national "mother" without acknowledging the ways in which this particular discourse relied on the trope of victimhood, thus subtly propagating colonial stereotypes of Sara Baartman as hypersexualised "other".

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to three postapartheid South African texts that disrupt the "Baartman trope" through the representational category of intimacy, while highlighting the particular deployment of the "Baartman trope" in the service of postapartheid South African nationalism. All three texts draw on the notions of a national "home" and of Sara Baartman as the "unifying national mother", as identified by Samuelson's analysis. However, all three texts resist the violence of representation that would reduce Baartman to a mere essentialist symbol, thereby offering different strategies for representing Sara Baartman.

### **"For you have brought us peace": The "Baartman trope" and the national (m)other**

One of the few instances of a woman participating in Sara Baartman's official funeral ceremony was the oration by the South African poet, Diana Ferrus, reading her well-known poem, "I Have Come to Take You Home". The poem is widely credited as being instrumental in convincing the French Senate to return Sara Baartman's remains.<sup>23</sup> In January 2002, Senator Nicolas About read the poem to the French Senate as part of a Bill he was advocating to return Baartman's remains to South Africa. After the Bill was

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Samuelson (*Remembering* 89), Holmes (174), Levin (20), Willis (9), Taljaard (11), Jordaan (14), Davie and Setshwaelo.

passed, “the poem was officially published as part of the Bill, making it the first time in French history that a poem became part of a law record” (Davie).

Ferrus wrote the poem in June 1998 while studying in Utrecht. In an interview with Marang Setshwaelo, she recalls how “acutely homesick [she] was”, and how her own homesickness gave rise to her poetic identification with Baartman and the loneliness she imagined Baartman must have suffered: “My heart just went out to Sarah, and I thought, ‘Oh, god, she died of heartbreak, she longed for her country’” (Ferrus quoted in Setshwaelo). The extent to which Ferrus’ own homesickness and her identification with Baartman is interconnected in the poem is made even more explicit in her short story, “Sara Will Be Home: A Story of Restoration” (2000). The short story can be read as an extension of the poem, as it dramatises the writing of the poem and deals with the same concerns, only in prose form. The protagonist of the story, Diana, recalls that

[a]fter three weeks this time, the tremendous longing made an appearance. “Africa, South Africa, Africa,” her soul belted, “I want to go home.” And it was here she met Sara Baartman again. One evening she looked up into the sky and could not touch a star, then she heard Sara’s screams, she heard her sobs, “let me go home... let me go home.” (71)

As soon as the protagonist writes a poem in order to “comfort Sara with words”, “[her] sobs stopped” (71), revealing the poem itself as the source of Baartman’s comfort. This empathic identification foreshadows a different kind of representation in the poem, which does not focus on Baartman as an icon or a symbol, but imagines an intimate connection between two women. I will return to this point more fully in the discussion to follow.

Since 1998, the poem has appeared under a number of different titles, and the content of the variously titled versions have also differed slightly. Most of these differences occur either in the spelling of Baartman’s name or in small variations in punctuation. The poem first appeared as “A Poem for Sarah Bartmann” on the Virtual Arts Gallery

(VGALLERY) website.<sup>24</sup> It was first published as “I Have Come to Take You Home: A Tribute to Sarah Baartman” in the anthology *Ink @ Boiling Point* (2000). More recently, the poem appeared in the critical collection *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (2011) as “I’ve Come to Take You Home (Tribute to Sarah Baartman. Written in Holland, June 1998)”. Later versions of the poem notably contain an additional final line not found in the earlier versions: “For you have brought *us* peace” (emphasis added). However, all of the different versions of the poem’s title, namely a poem *for* Sara Baartman and a tribute *to* Sara Baartman, signal that the poem is not attempting to speak on Baartman’s behalf, to “recover” her “lost” voice, or to represent her “true” self, but offers homage instead. I offer the 2011 version here:

I have come to take you home, home!  
Remember the veld,  
the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees?  
The air is cool here and the sun does not burn.  
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 along over little stones.

I have come to wrench you away,  
away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark with his clutches of imperialism  
who dissects your body bit by bit,  
who likens your soul to that of Satan  
and declares himself the ultimate God!

I have come to soothe your heavy heart,  
I offer my bosom to your weary soul.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.vgallery.co.za/2000article28/vzine.htm>. Site accessed 21 April 2010.

I will cover your face with the palms of my hands,  
I will run my lips over the lines in your neck,  
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you  
and I will sing for you,  
for I have come to bring you peace.

I have come to take you home  
where the ancient mountains shout your name.  
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 –  
I have come to take you home  
where I will sing for you,  
for you have brought me peace,  
for you have brought us peace.

Since all the different versions of the poem's title contain Sara Baartman's name in some form, there is no question as to the identity of the "you" addressed directly by the first person speaker. The poem opens with the strongly emotive cry: "I have come to take you home, home!" (line 1). The speaker's own homesickness and her poetic identification with Baartman's imagined longing to return to South Africa is immediately emphasised by the repetition of the word "home".<sup>25</sup> Samuelson suggests that, rather than speaking on behalf of Baartman or representing her through the viewpoint and voice of another, the poem is "staged as an instance of self-identification that counters the pervasive inscription of Baartman through the voices and eyes of others" (89), as both women share a similar longing to return to the same home.

As soon as the longing for a shared home is generated by the opening lines, the first stanza represents "home" as an idyllic countryside covered in "lush green grass" (line 3),

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<sup>25</sup> I read Ferrus' well-documented self-identification with the speaker in the poem as evidence that the first person speaker of the poem is intended to be read as female.

“buchu and mint” (line 6), and “proteas [that] stand in yellow and white” (line 7). The use of indigenous plants, such as buchu and proteas, instantly locates the “home” of the first two lines as specifically South African, made even more apparent by the image of the South African national flower, the protea. In this way, the South African nation state is reconfigured to signify homeliness, domesticity and peace. Furthermore, since buchu is believed to have healing properties in the context of indigenous South African knowledge systems, this imagined homecoming not only projects a sense of peace, but also one of healing.

It is in this imagined space of tranquil nature where the speaker comes to prepare a “bed at the foot of the hill” (line 5) for Baartman, where the natural “blanket” of “buchu and mint” (line 6) not only signifies a typically South African homecoming, but also hints at the fact that, for Baartman, unlike the speaker, “homecoming” can only signify burial in the South African soil. The mention of indigenous buchu further strengthens the idea of burial, as it is used in local Khoesan cleansing rituals.<sup>26</sup> This imagined burial is, however, very far removed from the spectacle of nation building surrounding Baartman’s actual funeral, where the image of a “blanket” (line 6) and the gentle lullaby of a chuckling, sing-song stream (line 8) suggest nothing more than peaceful rest and sleep in this idyllic South African pastoral setting.

This pastoral idyll is in direct contrast to the second stanza’s “man-made” (line 11) metropolitan centre. As the site of Baartman’s suffering, the second stanza emphasises words like “wrench” (line 10), “poking” (line 11), “monster” (line 11), “clutches” (line 12), “dark” (line 12) and “dissects” (line 13), positing Baartman as the intended victim of all of these harsh words. In this way, the poem’s central imagery rests upon a nature/culture binary. “Home” is posited as all that is green, lush and natural, far removed from the man-made, imperial metropolitan centre; nature is posited as a redemptive space

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<sup>26</sup> Baartman’s state funeral ceremony began with the burning of buchu to purify her spirit. “We are burning this traditional herb as part of our culture,” said Piet Booysen, a Khoesan traditional leader. “We have to unite with the earth and the spirits of Sarah Baartman.” For the full article, see “Sarah’s Exploiters Were the Real Barbarians” [online]. *The Star*, 9 August 2002. Available at: [www.arlindo-correia.com/220602.html](http://www.arlindo-correia.com/220602.html). Site accessed 26 July 2010.

of peace and rest, away from the space of science that “dissects your body bit by bit” (line 13). The imagery underlying this nature/culture binary is certainly effective, given the historical context of colonial Europe and its obsession with an Enlightenment discourse of “scientific” racism. Furthermore, the fact that the sphere of nature is specifically linked to the sphere of the local through the inclusion of indigenous plants makes an important emotive identification between the speaker and Sara Baartman possible, as I will go on to illustrate below.

In Nobunye Levin’s reading, the poem runs the risk of re-inscribing Baartman as the implied victim of the “poking eyes of the man-made monster” (line 11) with his “clutches of imperialism” (line 12). For Levin, Baartman remains a passive victim who waits patiently for the speaker to rescue her. Ferrus, Levin argues, “continues to operate within the narratives and identity formations” popularly ascribed to Baartman, as “[h]er poem fails to offer any of Baartman’s interiority or a sense of self-determinism. [Baartman] is therefore re-constituted as a tool or symbol” (21). Chris Dunton, like Levin, also argues that “[p]recious little agency is attributed to Baartman” in the poem (41). Levin concludes that Ferrus “consequently fails to offer a real gendered reading of Baartman which privileges memory, the private and the experiential” (21).

The repetition of the word “I” in lines such as “I have made your bed” (line 5), “I have come to wrench you away” (line 10), “I have come to soothe your heavy heart” (line 16) and “I have come to bring you peace” (line 22) would support such a reading, and assigns agency in the poem solely in terms of the speaker. She has the power to return Baartman to her home, “to wrench [her] away” (line 10) from the space of exile and loneliness, and, most telling, she has the capacity to grant Baartman “peace” (line 22). Such a reading brings to mind the religious imagery of the second stanza, presenting the speaker as a Messianic saviour-figure who can save Baartman from the “dark” (line 12), satanic (line 14) “man-made monster” (line 11) of “imperialism” (line 12) and give her peaceful rest in lush, green fields beside cool streams – images that are strongly reminiscent of the religious imagery of Psalm 23.

However, in my reading of the poem, the speaker's image as a saviour is not represented in terms of conventional Christianity, but rather as a re-identification with local, indigenous elements, such as buchu and proteas. This identification with the local strengthens the emotive power of homecoming and highlights the empathic identification between two women with a shared longing for home.

In Pumla Gqola's reading of the poem, the repetition of the word "I" signals a personal conversation between the speaker and Sara Baartman, one to which the reader is not privy. Ferrus, Gqola argues, "forces her reader into the position of onlooker, excluded from the intimate space between Bartmann and her speaker" ("Sarah Bartmann" 77). This is a crucial distinction, given that Sara Baartman is so often "denied a private intimate space through readers' access to her naked body (parts)" (Gqola "Sarah Bartmann" 77). For Gqola, the poem therefore marks "an intimate act of rescue" and "a declaration of immense affection and connection" ("Sarah Bartmann" 85). The language of intimacy found in the third stanza offers numerous examples to support such a reading, as the speaker "offer[s] [her own] bosom" (line 17) as the very site of this intimate act of rescue. The maternal imagery of this line does not cast Sara Baartman as an imagined "national (m)other", but rather locates Baartman as a mutually constituted subject in an intimate moment of affection to which the reader has no access. The sense of reciprocity created by the mirroring of lines 22 and 30, from "for *I* have come to bring *you* peace" (line 22, emphasis added) to "for *you* have brought *me* peace" (line 30, emphasis added), further strengthens a reading that the poem marks an intimate connection between two women as equals.

The poem therefore creates a strong empathic identification between Baartman and the speaking voice by highlighting their shared homesickness, rather than attempting to speak on Baartman's behalf or "recover" her "true" self. In this way, the poem signals the "unknowability" of Sara Baartman, mentioned at the start of this chapter. Ferrus's representation of Sara Baartman emphasises an intimate and empathic identification between Baartman and the speaker, but does so through a representation of privacy. In Dunton's reading, the poem "startlingly" veers off "into a paean of sensual appreciation

of Baartman's body" (42). In my own reading, however, when the speaker "cover[s] [Baartman's] face with the palms of [her] hands" (line 18), she is both acknowledging Sara Baartman's full humanity, while preserving her privacy from the "invasive visibility" which typically marks representations of her body (Baderon "Baartman and the Private" 71).

The subsequent addition of a later final line, "for you have brought *us* peace" (line 31, emphasis added), changes this intimate and personal conversation between the speaking voice and Sara Baartman, as the poem now invokes an imagined collective "us". The first printed version of the poem, published in 2000, does not include this additional final line, nor does a 2003 version of the poem, published as "Tribute to Sara Baartman (written in Holland, June 1998)" in the journal *Feminist Studies*. From 2010 onwards, all published versions contain the additional final line. This includes the above-mentioned 2011 version, a reproduction of the poem in the critical anthology *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her 'Hottentot'* (2010), as well as the version of the poem published in Ferrus's own debut anthology, *I've Come to Take You Home* (2010). This suggests that the additional final line was only added after Ferrus's performance of the poem during Sara Baartman's interment in 2002. This complicates my earlier reading of the poem as symbolically privileging the realms of intimacy and privacy, as it suggests that the very spectacle of nation-building which dominated Baartman's funeral itself influenced later versions of the poem.

The sense of intimate reciprocity that was created by the mirroring of lines 22 and 30 is disrupted by the addition of the new final line: "for you have brought *us* peace" (line 31, emphasis added). It changes the poem from a personal conversation between Baartman and the speaker, as the conversation now opens up to also include an imagined "us". The specifically green and golden colours of the "buchu and mint" (line 26), the proteas that "stand in yellow white" (line 27) suggest the colours of South Africa's national sports teams, thereby not only locating the image of "home" as obviously South African, but also suggests that the imagined "us" stands for the South African nation. In this way, the additional line suggests that "saving" Sara Baartman and bringing her "home" to "sleep"

under the symbolic buchu and proteas will also restore the “peace” of the “new” nation state. The underlying nationalism inherent in the images of proteas, as well as the specifically green and golden colours found in the image of “home”, support a reading that the “peace” which is at stake in the poem is no longer only Sara Baartman’s peace, but also the restoration and celebration of a national and unifying “peace”.

The historical context of the poem, which was written in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), suggests the centrality of issues of homecoming, national healing and nation building. The poem therefore signals a simultaneous and imaginative looking forwards and backwards; it highlights the tragedy and suffering of a painful past, and wants to restore the victims of that past to a symbolically peaceful national home. In her analysis of Baartman’s funeral, Samuelson argues that “the emphasis on bringing Bartmann back *home* speaks to three central concerns” (*Remembering* 89, emphasis in original). The most important of these concerns for the present argument is the fact that, if the nation is posited as “home”, then a rhetoric of the nation as “family” can legitimise gendered hierarchical structures, casting women as the “Mothers” who ensure national unity (Samuelson *Remembering* 89). Imagery of nurturing motherhood and domesticity abound in Ferrus’ poem. It emphasises a domestic, homely space of safety and peace. The speaker “offer[s] [her] bosom to [Baartman’s] weary soul” (line 17) before symbolically putting her to bed under the “blankets” (line 6) of buchu and mint covering the South African soil. Both images recall a mother cradling a child before putting it to bed, further emphasised by the lullaby “sing-songs” (line 8) of the stream. Whereas earlier versions of the poem presented this maternal imagery as an intimate act between Baartman and the speaker, the additional final line now casts Baartman herself as the maternal figure that brings the nation peace. In this representation as a “national (m)other”, the symbolic figure of Sara Baartman now unites all South Africans in the equally symbolic national “home”. Thus, as Samuelson argues,

Bartmann’s return to South African soil is not only an act of bringing her home, but also one in which both the nation-state and primordial identities are reproduced as Home. Both perform acts of amnesia whereby the history

of slavery and of unrecuperable loss is forgotten or cast out. Such forgetting and repressions are produced in the re-memberment of Bartmann as a maternal figure who... will render the national or ethnic Home homely [...] In the process, she is presented as a domestic subject rather than sexualised savage. (*Remembering* 94)

Even though the speaker in Ferrus's poem comes to save Baartman from the "man-made monster" (line 11) of imperialism in the second stanza, she notably "comes to *wrench* [her] away" (line 10, emphasis added). The same violence underlying the imperial imagery is mirrored by the act of wrenching, as opposed to the peace found in the pastoral imagery of the other stanzas. While the second stanza seemingly suggests that the violence done to Baartman's body is limited to the imperial centre and its "man-made" (line 11) "clutches" (line 12), and that the local sphere of home is devoid of violence, the fact that Baartman's body has to be wrenched away, covered in buchu and proteas, and interred in the native soil carries the same seed of violence into the heart of the poem's pastoral fantasy.

The addition of the final line therefore changes the poem in a profound sense. It figures Baartman's return through the maternal, homely terms which Samuelson's argument critiques. In this way, Sara Baartman's interment under the national proteas renders the national "home" homely and confers peace, not only onto the speaker, but also onto all of "us". The very fact that Ferrus's construction of Baartman is able to give "us" peace presupposes that there already exists an "us", as an imagined national unity in which South Africans have already come together in the domestic space of a national "home".

### **"I didn't ask to be saved": The "Baartman trope" and the national (m)other**

Unlike the identification with an imagined national "home" found in the Ferrus poem, K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* is a novel that is fundamentally suspicious of the idea of national unity. Like the poem, *Thirteen Cents* also represents Sara Baartman's symbolic body as the vehicle through which the national "home" is rendered homely. However, the

novel problematises this idea by highlighting the discursive violence that is inherent to this kind of representational strategy .

*Thirteen Cents* tells the coming-of-age story of Azure, a marginalised and exploited thirteen-year-old orphan living on the streets of Cape Town, who makes a meagre living as a child prostitute. As both an orphan and a street child, Azure has neither home nor family. The adults in his life fail to provide any sense of security or familial connection, rather subjecting the young protagonist to sexual exploitation, physical violence and various forms of betrayal.

Even though very little critical scholarship exists on *Thirteen Cents*, the novel is often referred to or quoted as an example of literature depicting South African society during the transition years. Most notably, the editors of the collection *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Social Change in South Africa* (2004) write in the preface to the book that “[t]his book and the processes of exchange that surround it were born out of a confrontation with Azure – the courageous protagonist in Sello Duiker’s acclaimed debut novel, *Thirteen Cents*” (xiii). Even though this collection lacks an analysis of the novel which supposedly frames its entire project, the preface nevertheless highlights a connection between *Thirteen Cents*’ protagonist and the state of South African society at the turn of the millennium.

With his “blue eyes and dark skin” (1), Azure’s character can be read as a physical embodiment of the “rainbow nation” of postapartheid South Africa. Azure himself tells the reader: “In everyone I pass I can see a little of myself. I carry a little of everyone I know in me” (102). However, Azure finds that his hybrid identity is not the uncomplicated and uncritical source of unity represented by a “rainbow nation” discourse. It is rather a continual site of struggle and hardship; other children “beat [him] up” and grown-ups “pierce [him] with their stare” (1). Furthermore, the fact that Azure is poised on the brink of puberty and must discover his identity as a young adult suggests that Duiker constructs the character of Azure as a literary exploration of identity-making and self-definition in postapartheid South Africa, thus making Azure the symbolic

representative of the search for a new national identity. Towards the end of the novel, Azure manages to forge a new identity for himself by appropriating the symbolic body of Sara Baartman for his own ends and means. However, the novel is highly critical of the way in which Azure uses Baartman's symbolic body for his own project of identity-making, as I will show in the course of my discussion of *Thirteen Cents*.

Azure's search for identity cannot rely on an easy identification with the nation as "home". He lives under an unfinished bridge, signifying the nation state's utter failure in providing disenfranchised people, such as Azure, with a space of belonging. Moreover, the unfinished bridge is a commanding symbol; bridges are supposed to bridge divides, to connect that which is unconnected, and to bring people together. An unfinished bridge can only draw attention to things that should have been unified, but remain apart. In this way, the unfinished bridge symbolises both Azure's inability to connect to his fellow South Africans, as well as the deeply fractured and divided society of the "rainbow nation" itself. This is further emphasised by Azure's "blue eyes and dark skin" (1), a combination which resists an easy identification with any of the ethnic groups in South Africa and, as a result, leaves him feeling as if he belongs nowhere and to no one. Vincent, his only friend in the novel, tells him: "So now they look at your blue eyes and your shoes and they think blue eyes, veldskoene, he's trying to be white. That's how people think... that's why people have beat you up all your life. They think you're not black enough" (35). The novel thus lacks any sense of the projected national unity celebrated previously in the Ferrus poem, where Sara Baartman's interment has "brought us peace" (line 31, emphasis added).

Even more important is the fact that Azure only encounters the domestic space of "home" when rich white men pay to take him to their houses as a child prostitute. In this domestic space, Azure watches one man turn over the pictures of his family, "as if they will see and hear everything" (83), and he asks the same man to remove his wedding ring first (81). Azure comes to the conclusion that "[g]rown-ups are devils. They have children so that they can feel good about themselves... Grown-ups have children so that they can say, Oh God I'm going to come. I'm going to shoot all over you" (144). The domestic space

in the novel is portrayed as a space of sexual abuse, exploitation and humiliation, whether in the luxury apartments of the rich white punters, or in the sordid flat where Gerald, the gang leader, has Azure raped by his henchmen for “insulting” him when Azure accidentally calls Gerald by the wrong name. The ideas of “home” and “peace” are thus problematised throughout the novel, as Azure struggles and fails to find a space of belonging.

While Azure’s desperate search for identity and belonging can be read as typical of the *bildungsroman* form, Duiker’s novel also complicates a standard *bildungsroman* narrative by combining Azure’s journey of development and maturation with highly symbolic and mystical imagery. In *Thirteen Cents*, the difference between the realist *bildungsroman* form and the novel’s magical imagery is cleverly represented in the spatial imagery of the novel. While Azure is in the space of the city, Duiker constantly uses images of walking, sidewalks, roads, feet and shoes. Azure’s claim that “[his] feet are sore, they have walked too much” (65) runs like a constant refrain throughout the novel, revealing the city to be a space of abuse, rather than of belonging. Cape Town itself is described as “a long road, winding” (65), recalling images of city blocks and the regulated, ordered spaces of modern city planning. These images both signal Azure’s sense of entrapment within the city and recall the unfinished bridge as the symbolic site of society’s failure to provide Azure with a national “home”.

Table Mountain, by contrast, is the site of Azure’s magical visions in *Thirteen Cents*, as mountains often symbolise visionary spaces of spiritual enlightenment. The natural space of the mountain also stands in contrast to the cruel and bustling metropolis, reminiscent of the nature/culture dualism found in the Ferrus poem. Azure finally finds a symbolic “home” in a cave on top of Table Mountain, unlike the space of the city, which could never offer him any sense of belonging. While on the mountain, Azure encounters a woman who introduces herself simply as “Saartjie” (120). Azure’s first encounter with Saartjie is clearly framed as a dream. The chapter starts with the words: “In my dreams, I walk all over Cape Town” (119). Azure climbs Table Mountain in his dream, where he meets “a woman who looks like she lived a very long time ago” (119). The next chapter

starts when Azure “wake[s] up feeling thirsty” (124), clearly signalling the end of the dream. However, later encounters between Azure and Saartjie are not as clearly delineated.

Shaun Viljoen writes that all three of Duiker’s novels “are marked by the presence of the supernatural, the surreal, the mythical, which layer and disrupt the real and comment on it” (vi.) In Viljoen’s reading, Azure’s encounter with Saartjie is a “graphic and primordial [...] extended dream” (xvi). However, Azure’s encounter with Saartjie is not always framed explicitly as only belonging to a dream state; Duiker’s use of supernatural elements disrupts the real to the extent that these mythical moments interrupt Azure’s reality in Cape Town. However, the exact nature of Azure’s visions is not as important as the fact that Duiker’s use of magical imagery in the novel provides a compelling comment on the nature of Azure’s project of identity-making. I read Azure’s character as a symbolic representative of the search for a postapartheid national identity. Azure’s encounters with Saartjie most clearly mark the novel’s critique of the way in which nationalist discourses appropriate Sara Baartman’s symbolic body and the violence of such representations.

Azure stays on the mountain for four days. He tells the reader that he has “strange dreams” every night in which he always sees Saartjie (126). In one of these visions, Saartjie and Azure stand on the mountain and watch T-Rex destroy the city of Cape Town at their feet. Earlier in the novel, Vincent warns Azure that Gerald, the gang leader who had him raped, is “T-Rex”, a “predator” who does whatever he wants (63). While in the magical space of the mountain, however, Azure himself starts metamorphosing into the new “little T-Rex”; his “skin looks like a lizard’s with all the markings” (119) and he has a “tail” with which he “smack[s]” Gerald (123). Azure tells Gerald: “I’m too little to eat you. But I’m growing up fast” (123). As Gerald falls over, “T-Rex gets to him”, “chews off his head” and then “eats Gerald” (123) while Azure watches. “So he’s the last T-Rex, then,” Azure remarks to Saartjie. “No,” Saartjie answers,

“you are, he’s getting old.”

“Me? But I’m still growing.”

“I know,” she says and looks at my scales, “you are going to be big just like him.” (122)

When Azure returns to Cape Town four days later, he finds that Gerald has been killed mysteriously inside his locked bedroom. While Gerald’s death is dismissed as suicide, Sealy, one of the members of Gerald’s gang, tells Azure that he found a claw in Gerald’s room and that “no man would have cut himself up the way he was” (134). Azure’s lack of surprise at Gerald’s death leads Sealy to confide in him:

“I know you killed him,” he says.

“What?”

“I know you went up the mountain.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw you. I flew up there,” he laughs, “but I was the only one who could see you. The others weren’t strong enough to fly up there.”

[...]

“How do you know this?”

“Because I’m an angel.” (135-136)

In this way, the novel problematises a clear distinction between the real and the supernatural moments in the text. The magical elements are mostly framed as dreams and visions on the mountain, but also form a part of Azure’s reality when he returns to Cape Town, particularly informing his belief that he is getting stronger. The phrase “I’m getting stronger” (46) is another constant refrain running throughout the novel, as Azure slowly moves from a victimised childhood and enters the symbolic space of manhood. The character of Saartjie is revealed as a nurturing mother figure who, more than any of the other characters, helps Azure to grow stronger, offering young Azure the symbolic space of identification and belonging which the city never could. When Azure first encounters Saartjie, he describes her in the following way:

She is short and her bum is big but she has the lightest smile I've ever seen. She wears only a leather thong and her long breasts are like fruit, like fat pears. She is shy and hides in the cave. I follow her in, careful as I walk. She sits in the corner of the cave while a small fire burns. I go inside and sit next to her. I can't stop looking at her face. She has a beautiful face and a yellow skin that seems to glow. In the cave she looks at home. There are carved bones, herbs that make you want to smoke them, clay animals and lots of other small beautiful things. And the floor is the earth. (119-120)

Saartjie offers him a physical space of "home" in the domesticated, indigenous space of the cave. She also becomes a maternal figure for an orphan who, in his very first sentence in the novel, immediately emphasises the loss of his mother. She cooks meat for him, which she, tellingly, spices with indigenous herbs. She also becomes a friend and confidant until Azure is strong enough to murder his nemesis, Gerald. In the symbolic space of the "homely" cave, Azure learns to paint his body and to dance around the fire, clapping and hopping, until, in a trance, he can channel the spirits of wild animals (158). In this way, the novel represents Baartman as the symbolic vehicle through which Azure recovers a lost, indigenous, spiritual identity, which stands in direct contrast to the suffering and exploitation he encounters in the space of the westernised city. The space of the mountain and Azure's encounter with Saartjie marks the culmination of the *bildungsroman* form, as it is here that Azure discovers his identity, recovers his heritage and claims his own agency. The particular indigenous identity which Azure seemingly claims, however, is strongly suggestive of a traditional Khoesan identity, given the novel's descriptions of the rock paintings in the "homely" cave, the indigenous herbs, and Azure's ceremonial chanting, dancing and clapping around the fire. I will return to this point more fully.

This short passage highlights a number of problematic themes concerning the representation of Sara Baartman in *Thirteen Cents*. The first one is the overt sexualisation of Baartman's body. She is described solely in bodily terms, with an emphasis on her "big bum" and her "long breasts... like fruit, like fat pears" (119), recalling nineteenth-

century stereotypes of the “Baartman trope” which saw Sara Baartman only in terms of racial and sexual “difference”. Helene Strauss points out how, in the phrase “her bum is big *but* she has the lightest smile” (119, emphasis added), the word *but* “casts her already stereotyped physical features in negative terms, thus signalling [Azure’s] own discursive interpellation by the discourses that inscribe Baartman’s physicality with deviance” (Strauss 37).

This is even more problematic, given young Azure’s own sexual victimisation and his own on-going struggle with bodily markers of “difference”, namely his blue eyes and his black skin. While Azure is able to imagine a new relationship to his body when he “starts claiming agency in the process of bodily self-inscription” (Strauss 33) through the symbolic representation of indigenous forms of dancing, body painting and rock art, this bodily agency is denied to the character of Saartjie. First of all, Azure seemingly claims Saartjie’s own indigenous identity for himself, while her body is reduced to the symbolic vehicle for Azure’s project of identity-making. Secondly, Saartjie’s body is literally rotting. Azure sees “an old wound under her breast” (126), which is crawling with maggots. It is telling that the wound is under her breast, at the same time both sexualising the wound and turning the maternal body, which would normally be the site of nurture, into a space of decay. Azure tries to restore the maternal body by “taking a small bone from her ribs” (126) and removing the maggots.

The rib bone, suggestive of the creation of Eve, as well as the supernatural setting in which this scene takes place, posits Azure as a powerful patriarchal figure who creates the body of Sara Baartman as both the hypersexualised “other” and as a “national mother” as part of his own project of identity-making. Azure thus restores Saartjie’s body, but only so that her body can serve as the symbolic site through which he can grow from a space of victimised childhood to that of powerfully patriarchal manhood. When Azure symbolically becomes the new “T-Rex” (123) – the novel’s most powerful masculine figure – he displaces Saartjie from the cave where she used to look “at home” (120). When she first meets him, Saartjie tells Azure that the cave “is home for [her]” and she “[doesn’t] know anything else” (120). However, after she has nurtured him until he is

strong enough to overpower Gerald, ownership of the “homely” cave suddenly shifts to Azure:

“I’m really tired,” she says, “I must get back home.”

I look at her sadly as she leaves. (122-123)

As soon as Azure takes over the cave, the domesticated, maternal space becomes threatening and violent. Whereas Saartjie had cooked meat over the fire, adding “herbs and other things that smell nice” (122), Azure is described as the new “T-Rex”, the ultimate predator, who eats his meat “[w]hen it’s red and bleeding” (123). By placing the images of T-Rex feasting on Gerald and Azure eating “red and bleeding” raw meat next to each other, the novel suggests that Azure eats his old enemy and, in so doing, becomes just as violent and brutal as Gerald used to be.

Azure displaces Saartjie so completely that he “cannot even remember her name” (158). This is very important when considering that, in the opening pages of the novel, Azure emphasises how much his own name means to him, as it is the only thing that he has left from his mother (1). “My name is Azure,” the first sentence of the novel reads (1). “*Ah-zoo-ray*. That’s how you say it. My mother gave me that name. It’s the only thing I have left from her” (1). When he cannot remember Saartjie’s name, he not only denies her the identity and agency he has found on the symbolic space on the mountain, but also indicates how the maternal body is cast as a tool to help Azure become the new patriarch in a novel rife with images of violence against women.<sup>27</sup>

When it comes to the representation of Sara Baartman in *Thirteen Cents*, the novel recalls some of the pastoral, homely images of the Ferrus poem. The emphasis on indigenous and natural elements strengthens a dualistic representation of the “sacred” space of Table Mountain as opposed to the abuse that Azure suffers in the “evil” metropolis. Baartman is

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Azure sees a “woman being raped by policemen right near the station” (142). He regularly sees “a bruise or a cut under [the] lip” (4) of Liesel, the prostitute who also lives under the unfinished bridge. When one of the prostitutes complains that she’s being worked too hard, Allen, the pimp, “grabs her by the hair” and “punches her and she falls flat on her face” (14). Later, Azure notes the “stitches” and the “bruises” (31) on her face.

cast as a maternal figure, while Table Mountain becomes the national “home” Azure has been searching for throughout the novel. Furthermore, Baartman is returned home through a symbolic burial in both the Ferrus poem and in *Thirteen Cents*. In the novel, Saartjie looks “at home” in her cave, where the floor, tellingly, “is the earth” (120). This suggests a similar image of homecoming in the South African soil. However, this symbolic burial is not framed in the peaceful terms of the Ferrus poem. In the novel, the character Mantis yells at Saartjie to “go back into the earth” (127), both suggesting the origin of the maggots under her breast and illustrating how the male characters need her to remain buried for them to claim ownership of the cave as national “home”. Also, in male possession, the symbolic space of the cave changes from a domestic space to a space of violence and death. Still, both the novel and the poem share the central assumption that Baartman’s body is in need of “saving”. Azure not only restores the maternal body by removing the maggots from her breast, but he also overcomes two powerful symbolic patriarchs – T-Rex, Saartjie’s husband, and Mantis, Saartjie’s father – in order to become the new patriarch in the novel. When Azure kills Mantis, he does not understand why Saartjie would mourn someone who abused her:

“Why are you still crying?” I ask her.

“Because you killed my father.”

“But I was saving you. He was going to kill you.”

“I didn’t ask to be saved.” (128)

This is the novel’s most interesting moment in terms of its representation of Sara Baartman. I read the presence of the maggots in Saartjie’s body as a powerful visual manifestation of discursive violence done to Sara Baartman in reducing her body to the “Baartman trope”. Azure tries to restore Saartjie’s body, but he also inflicts violence onto her body. In his own desperate search for a space of belonging, Azure “saves” Saartjie, but, in so doing, robs her of the only home she herself knows. In this way, Duiker’s novel offers a critique of nationalist discourses that reduce Sara Baartman to the icon of the national (m)other. This is clear when the character of Saartjie finally speaks back to her many patriarchal “saviours” in the novel, all of whom want to restore her body, simply so

that they can use it for their own agendas, and says explicitly that she never asked anyone to save her. This moment in the text speaks most clearly to Baderoon's appeal "to respect the limits of what we can know, and the purposes to which we can put [Sara Baartman's] memory, her body, and her history" ("Baartman and the Private" 66). Since the character of Azure does not respect the limits and purposes to which he can put Saartjie's body in his own search for identity and belonging, the novel highlights the discursive violence this does to Sara Baartman's body through the image of the maggots crawling in Saartjie's flesh.

Furthermore, Azure's character appropriates the history of Sara Baartman for himself, robbing her of any sense of identity. He tells Saartjie that he "used to stay by the river once", but that people who "cut [him] up into little pieces and spread [him] everywhere" (129) forced him to leave, and that he has now returned "from very far... over the ocean" (120) to the symbolic space of the cave. In the novel, Baartman's history and burial is used to restore the dignity of the protagonist as representative of the emerging "rainbow nation" and to grant him a sense of belonging in the "new" South Africa. However, the novel portrays this idea of a national homecoming in very different terms than the Ferrus poem. In fact, the novel leaves the reader with a deep sense of unease, as Azure's rise to power heralds the same cycle of violence of which he used to be the victim. As Azure takes over Saartjie's beautifully decorated, homely cave and turns it into the hunting ground of the new patriarchal "T-Rex", the novel concludes with the suggestion that the new nation will still be ruled by the symbolic "monsters" of Azure's surrealist dreams, who will continue to prey on women and children. In this way, *Thirteen Cents* suggests that Sara Baartman's symbolic burial will *not* "bring us peace", but will instead allow the old cycles of violence to continue.

*Thirteen Cents* draws on the history of Baartman's colonial suffering, as well as a stereotypically colonial representation of her overtly sexualised body, in order to problematise uncritical ideas of national identity and belonging in the "new" postapartheid South African nation. Like the Ferrus poem, the novel offers a simultaneous looking backward and looking forward, drawing on a colonial past in order

to imagine a postapartheid future. Unlike the Ferrus poem, however, *Thirteen Cents* remains fundamentally suspicious about the ideas of a national “home” that bestows an uncritical sense of belonging and peace. In *Thirteen Cents*, Duiker’s portrayal of the character of Saartjie suggests that Azure’s project of “saving” her does not figure the national “home” as homely and peaceful, but instead highlights the violence inherent in such a symbolic claiming of Sara Baartman’s body and history. As the novel is highly critical of the idea of a national “home”, it does not conclude with peaceful images of green fields and little chuckling streams, but rather with a ferocious natural storm of fire and water in which Cape Town and all its inhabitants are destroyed – a very different imagining of a nature/culture binary. At this point in the novel, Duiker no longer distinguishes the supernatural from the real, and the reader is left uncertain as to whether the storm is one of Azure’s visions or a real destructive force. The fact that Azure escapes to the symbolically visionary space of the mountain suggests that it is a vision of a future destruction of the national “home”, precisely for failing to provide the disenfranchised characters with a space of belonging.

### **“TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT”: The “Baartman trope” and the national (m)other**

Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000) is even more critical than *Thirteen Cents* of the discursive violence done to Sara Baartman’s body in claiming her as the symbolic mother of the “new” South African nation. In the opening pages of *David’s Story*, the title character, David, instructs the unnamed female narrator and amanuensis writing his biography to link his own history and search for identity with the history of Sara Baartman. “One cannot write nowadays,” David insists, “without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself” (1). When David later produces his “meticulously researched monograph, complete with novelistic detail” (134), the narrator discovers, to her personal dismay, that David has produced a catalogue of Baartman’s suffering: the “treachery of white men”, the “seasickness on the ship”, the “cage in London decked with leopard skins, and, on the catwalk of her cage, the turning of the spectacular buttocks, this way and that, so that Europeans would crack their ribs with

laughter” (134-135). The narrator is unfailingly unsympathetic when confronted with David’s desire to include representations of Baartman’s victimhood as the foundation for a story in which “truth” is equated with “the struggle for freedom” (116). As she believes that “[t]here are quite enough of these stories”, she tries to convince David that his “can do very well without” (135), especially since, according to the narrator, Baartman’s history has nothing to do with David’s own. David, however, is openly contemptuous, informing her that “Baartman belongs to all of us” (135), an attitude which calls to mind the final line of the Ferrus poem. The defeated narrator then concedes that “there is no point in arguing; it is clear that the Baartman piece will have to stay” (135).

Even though the novel constantly refers to David’s monograph on Sara Baartman, it is never actually included in the text. This establishes the narrative’s critical distance from David’s appropriation of Baartman, thereby offering an ironic commentary on the difficulties in representing Sara Baartman without turning her history into a discursive tool in the service of one’s own narrative. Of the three texts under discussion in this chapter, *David’s Story* most clearly signals the “unknowability” of Sara Baartman, and is most critically self-aware of the purposes to which it employs Sara Baartman’s body and history.

*David’s Story* both is, and is not, David’s story. The amanuensis finds it very difficult to tell David’s story, because he refuses to tell her almost anything of real importance about his personal life. *David’s Story* is set in South Africa in 1991, following Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. David, a former Umkhonto we Sizwe operative in South Africa’s struggle for liberation from apartheid, admits that “now, with the unbanning of the Movement” (12), “everything’s so confused” when it comes to “all the tensions about Mandela’s release, about a new dispensation” (33). More particularly, David admits to feeling uncertain about the “changing roles” and “tensions around [the] new offices in the Movement” (33). He finds that “nowadays there is also more time to think, and turning an eye inward he finds a gash, a festering wound that surprises him, precisely because it is the turning inward that reveals a problem on the surface” (12). David, who wants to avoid thinking about this “festering wound” at all costs, tries to distract himself by writing a

historical account of the Griqua people. It is telling that he wants to conclude his historical narrative with the words: “Nkosi sikilele iAfrika – God Bless Africa. Viva the Struggle, Viva!” (3). For David, “the truth lies in black and white, unquestionably, in the struggle for freedom” (116). This suggests, firstly, that David is trying to locate his identity in a decidedly nationalist rhetoric which celebrates of the end of apartheid, but, secondly, that it is the “new” South African nation itself which gives rise to David’s uncertainty about his identity and his place in society outside of the liberation struggle. Throughout the novel, David remains incapable of ever voicing the source of the emotional “gash”, the “festering wound” that so troubles his sense of belonging and his identity in the “new” South Africa.

In order to “take [his] mind of things” (27), David tries to document his own personal history, but instead foregrounds and reinvents the narratives of historical South African women. David’s “first attempt at writing his own story” (33) is the elusive monograph cataloguing Baartman’s suffering. David’s insistence that Baartman “belongs to all of us” (135), his “eagerness to historicise, to link... his own life with the [life] of Baartman” (2), points to the way in which David deploys the “Baartman trope” to ensure the success of a narrative of liberation which he wishes to culminate in the words: “Viva the Struggle, Viva!” (3). For the female narrator, on the other hand, “we” and “us” are, in themselves, contentious terms. When David insists that Baartman “belongs to all of us” (135), she teasingly asks him if “we are all Griquas” (135, emphasis added). Not even the narrator’s teasing about his quest to discover his Griqua roots, her insistence that Baartman “may not even have been a Griqua”, or her final arch comment that “[e]rgo, we are all Griquas” (135), can deter David from his project of utilising Baartman’s history in his search for a new national identity. Dorothy Driver writes in the afterword to the Feminist Press edition of *David’s Story*, “[a]s regards Saartjie Baartman, the narrator suggests David is ignorant of the politics of representation, and is naive to suggest – in his own narrative of nationalism – that she ‘belongs to all of us’” (231). In this way, the narrator’s gentle mocking of David’s insistence that “Baartman belongs to all of us” (135) shows that *David’s Story* both interrogates its own literary representation of Sara Baartman, and is

also consciously self-critical of the way in which literary representations of her victimhood have been used to validate the nationalist rhetoric of nation building.

While not writing explicitly about *David's Story*, Desiree Lewis writes that the “truth” about Sara Baartman is, in fact, the “truth about the individuals, relationships, institutions, and structures that dehumanised a black South African woman and created the ‘Hottentot Venus’” (“Baartman’s Agency” 102). Wicomb’s novel constantly problematises such a “truth”, as the female narrator remains highly suspicious of David’s easy claiming of Sara Baartman’s body as a site for representing his own personal quest for the “truth”. Indeed, the very word “truth” is itself repeatedly brought into question throughout Wicomb’s novel. David’s quest to discover his personal truth, to finally voice the “festering wound” he cannot speak of, is inextricably linked to representations of Sara Baartman. As Samuelson notes, “[t]he body and name of Baartman are [...] reproduced in dizzying proportions across the pages of the novel” (104). All the female characters, even the unnamed narrator, share her so-called “steatopygia”. David’s wife, “Steatopygous Sally” (16), was known as Saartjie as a young child, and as Sarah when she was at high school. Sally’s mother is called Sarie, which is another diminutive form of the name Sara. While the novel makes it clear that David tries both to claim and utilize Baartman’s body as a means of representing the “truth”, Wicomb’s narrative is also highly critical of the way in which David does this, especially since the “truth” which David, in fact, needs to tell, and which he is incapable of telling, is the truth about Dulcie’s torture. It is therefore through the character of the mysterious and elusive Comrade Dulcie, a fellow Umkhonto we Sizwe operative, that the novel most strongly problematises David’s appropriation of Sara Baartman’s body.

Samuelson reads Dulcie’s character as “[a]n avatar for Baartman” (*Remembering* 111). It is not only Dulcie’s “steatopygia” which links her to Baartman; whenever David tries to write about Dulcie, he “displaces her by working on the historical figure of Saartjie Baartman instead” (134). When David brings the narrator “his first attempt at writing his own story”, namely “the piece on George Cuvier and Saartjie Baartman”, she dismisses it as “an exercise in avoidance” (33). “And what is the real subject of your story?” the

narrator asks David, but he is unable to answer her (34). At the bottom of David's monograph on Baartman, the narrator finds "a mess of scribbles and scoring out and doodling of peculiar figures that cannot be reproduced", which she immediately recognizes as David's "attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out" (135). This crossing out of Dulcie's name recalls an earlier instance when David finds a "hit list, a handwritten sheet of paper left under his chair" (113) in a hotel in Kokstad. Finding Dulcie's name on the "hit list", David "scores her name out with a pen, repeatedly, so that it can no longer be recognised" (117). This moment at once highlights the idea of "saving" the symbolic body of Sara Baartman, though in a very different manner than in the previous two texts. David's attempt to "save" Dulcie obliterates her name completely.

When David displaces his attempts to write about Dulcie by writing about Sara Baartman instead, he cannot keep his attention on the task of recording Baartman's story as a historical subject. Instead, David "found his interest deflected from outrage on Baartman's behalf to fascination with Cuvier's mind, with the intellectual life he imagined for the anatomist" (33). This leads Mike Marais to argue that David "finds himself writing not about Baartman, but about 'white people's pathological terms' – about the discourse which displaced her body" (28). David therefore learns nothing about his own attitude towards women in the process of rewriting female histories. His first attempt at representing the historic figure of Sara Baartman, however, does not immediately cast her as a victim. He writes that, "[o]n display, the Hottentot Venus might well on a good sunny day have snarled or giggled at her plane-backed viewers" (33), granting her at least some agency. However, David is soon reminded "of the shame in print, in perpetuity, the thought of a reader turning to that page", and that "refreshe[s] David's outrage" (33). It is this idea of the "shame in print" which forms the novel's central critique about representations of the black female body.

In an article titled "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa" (1998), Wicomb argues that although the postcolonial project of Sara Baartman's "recovery is propelled by the ignominy of sexualised display before the imperial eye, the

discourse of the return of Baartman is cast in terms of *injury* rather than *shame*” (91, emphasis added). Wicomb therefore questions whether Sara Baartman’s “burial will also bury black woman as icon of concupiscence, which is to say bury the shame of having had our bodies stared at, but also the shame invested in those (females) who have mated with the coloniser” (91-92). She reads the body of Sara Baartman as the symbolic site of this “shame, cross-eyed and shy, [which] stalks the postcolonial world [and] reproduces itself in puzzling distortions” (92). It is this notion of shame, “of the shame in print, in perpetuity” (*David’s Story* 33), which informs the novel’s representation of both Sara Baartman and Dulcie, as her avatar; neither Baartman nor Dulcie are ever really represented in the novel. This is signalled by David’s inability to ever truly represent either Baartman or Dulcie on paper. “As a highly self-reflexive text,” Samuelson therefore argues, “*David’s Story* is keenly aware of the powers and dangers of representation, and what is risked in writing about women such as Baartman and Dulcie. The novel partially negotiates this minefield by shifting its focus from the re-presentation of bodies to the body of representation itself” (*Remembering* 105). Driver also argues that the novel’s “partial exclusion” of Sara Baartman “offers a comment on the difficulties of telling Dulcie’s story, and, in turn, Dulcie’s story invites us to reinterpret [...] Saartjie Baartman’s”, to make it “less tidy, less readily comprehended” (“Afterword” 232).

As the first sentence of Wicomb’s novel proclaims, *David’s Story* both “is and is not David’s story” (1). Driver argues that *David’s Story* “might have been called Dulcie’s story if it had been possible to give voice to a woman like Dulcie” (“Afterword” 218). Dulcie’s story “is of no relevance to its own”, David tells the narrator “weakly”, but, she says, he has “already betrayed the belief that some trace of hers is needed for his to make sense; he has already betrayed the desire to lose her story within his own” (78). David, concerned with rewriting local Cape history as part of his quest to discover the truth, is only interested in the local truth-narrative, which is, of course, intimately linked to his own nationalism and to a postapartheid discourse of nation building. However, David’s inability to voice the truth about Dulcie’s torture is also closely linked to the local, as the very word “truth” breaks down into “a palindrome of Cape Flats speech – TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT...”, a word that “breaks down into letters” and “fall(s) plop”

into a “useless heap” (136) on the page, reminiscent of Dulcie’s broken, disfigured body. The novel resists David’s uncritical imposition of a nationalist “truth” narrative onto the black female body through Wicomb’s resistance to turn the female body into a vehicle for easy and uncritical representation. This unease is vocalized in the text by David’s wife Sally, when she claims that “[s]he has had enough of the bodies of black women: their good thick legs, their friendly high-riding backsides, their great sturdy hams” (177).

The text goes one step further in highlighting its unease about turning female bodies into political icons and symbols, in that Dulcie’s body simply cannot be represented on page. When David tries to write about Dulcie, not only the word “truth”, but also language itself, breaks down in manner which recalls Dulcie’s tortured body, but still does not pin her body to the page to make her the vehicle of David’s search for the truth:

trurt, oh trurt, of the trurt, to the trurt, trurt, by, with, from the trurt

[...]

TRURT... TRURT... TRURT... TRURT... the trurt in black and white...

colouring the trurt to say that... which cannot be said the thing of no name

towhisperspeakshouthollercolour. (136)

In this way, “the thing of no name”, “the thing which cannot be said”, is linked to an inability to whisper, speak, shout or holler the word “colour”. It clearly references Wicomb’s essay, which reads the body of Sara Baartman as the locus of the “shame” of the “black woman as icon of concupiscence,” which “reproduces itself in puzzling distortions” (“Shame and Identity” 91- 92). Therefore, in a certain sense, “the thing which cannot be said” is the “Baartman trope” itself. I again draw attention to Samuelson’s critique of Sara Baartman’s interment, which I referenced as part of my earlier discussion of the Ferrus poem, to substantiate this point. Samuelson argues that in bringing Sara Baartman “home”, “both the nation-state and primordial identities are reproduced as Home” (*Remembering* 94). This performs an act “of amnesia whereby the history of slavery and of unrecuperable loss is forgotten or cast out”, which is “produced

in the re-memberment of Baartman as a maternal figure who... will render the national or ethnic Home homely" (*Remembering* 94). This is why Dulcie's body can never be represented; if David could pin down the "truth in black and white" of Dulcie's body, he could turn Dulcie's body into the symbolic vehicle for his own triumphant narrative of postapartheid identity-making. Given that David wants his personal history to end with the words "Viva the Struggle, Viva!" (3), Wicomb's novel resists such an easy appropriation of black women's bodies as the symbolic vehicles of others' political rhetoric. Instead, in Wicomb's novel, "the thing which cannot be said", the real history of slavery in colonial South Africa, the real history of colonial sexual exploitation of black women's bodies, refuses to render the national "home" homely. It is David's attempts to use the "Baartman trope" as means of avoiding his own shame and complicity in Dulcie's torture which results in this "colouring of the truth", this "thing of no name".

The novel describes Dulcie as a powerful woman "with muscular arms and an eye that misses nothing," who can "aim with deadly precision" and "knock out a strong man with a fleet-footed move" (32). She is positioned as a freedom fighter and a political activist. Still, the novel also suggests that there is no space in the new nation state for women such as Dulcie. She cannot be re-inscribed into the domestic sphere, like David's wife, Sally, nor can she be an icon of hypersexualised black femininity, like Baartman. At night, she is brutally tortured by men in balaclavas who sneak into her home – once again, as in *Thirteen Cents*, revealing the domestic space of "home" to be treacherous and founded on an unspoken violence, even in the "new" postapartheid nation state. Driver notably points out that David's memory of terrible things happening to Dulcie "before [his] very eyes" implies that he is complicit in her torture ("Afterword" 201). This further suggests that David's obsessive quest to find "truth" through the various representations of historical women is, in fact, a desperate attempt that "might allow him to *cover* the truth" (Driver "Afterword" 238, emphasis added). David, whose entire sense of selfhood rests on the belief that truth can be "black and white" (116), and that the postapartheid nation state legitimizes the "truth" of the "struggle for freedom" (116), cannot admit to the fact that, even in the new "rainbow nation", women like Dulcie can be tortured nightly by their

own comrades. It is in this moment that David's "black and white truth" breaks down into the "coloured trurt" of Dulcie's disfigured body.

This is made even more apparent when the narrator finds another page with the "dismembered shapes of a body" and has "no doubt that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on [David's] page" (205). In reading Dulcie as an avatar of Baartman, Wicomb's criticism of the way in which Baartman's body is appropriated by a nationalist discourse of "truth" becomes very clear. Indeed, David's very attempt to put Dulcie to paper imposes violence on her body, and part of this violence is David's view of the truth as an uncritical, black-and-white appropriation of the discourse of nation-building. In this way, Dulcie's "trurt", her truth, "cannot be said" (see Marais 28). Marais argues that

Dulcie cannot be represented in language, because it is *in* and *through* language that the body of the black woman has been dismembered by being reduced to a vocabulary of signs. Thus her "trurt" cannot be rendered in "black and white". To do so would be to "colour" it: self-evidently Wicomb's play on the literal colour of typed words on a page and the colours which signify race points to the complicity of language in racialising the subaltern body. (28, emphasis in original)

As Kellen Hoxworth further elucidates, it is through Sander Gilman's "landmark essay" and its "apparatus of epistemic violence" that Sara Baartman is positioned "as the paradigmatic black female body within the Euro-American white/black racial binary" (278). Drawing on Wicomb's essay, Hoxworth writes that "[i]n contrast to political claims of determinate racial identities, Wicomb demonstrates how Baartman may be understood to be black and Khoekhoe and Coloured, with significantly different racialisations – and particular racial traumas – attending upon each racial belonging" (280). This leads Hoxworth to conclude that "Baartman's legacy remains bound up in the interlaced historical threads of colonisation and enslavement" (281).

Drawing on Hoxworth's insights, I argue that Wicomb's novel thus highlights the danger in forcing the female body to symbolically represent a postapartheid narrative of an imagined national black-and-white "truth", as both Dulcie's body and the word "truth" disintegrate on the page. Shane Graham makes the pertinent connection between David's apparent inability to write the word "truth" and Antjie Krog's words in *County of My Skull*: "The word 'Truth' makes me uncomfortable. The word 'Truth' still trips the tongue... Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*" (quoted in Graham 153). *David's Story* therefore both interrogates the interlinked discourses of national healing, homecoming, unity and peace, as well as the way in which women's bodies become the symbolic markers of such a nation-building discourse.

Dulcie, on the other hand, has no illusions about a postapartheid "truth". She says that

[s]he will not ask for an explanation, will not protest, since they can only offer lies. She has done nothing less than her duty, nothing less than fighting for freedom and justice – even though these words have now become difficult. That too, then, is why she cannot speak. Uttering such tarnished words makes them sound at best foolish, at worse false. (179)

By refusing to make Dulcie speak some national "truth" narrative, Wicomb resists turning Dulcie, as an avatar for Baartman, into a symbolic vehicle for a postapartheid nationalist discourse of nation-building. Graham writes that "Wicomb's novel has the effect of throwing cold water over post-apartheid triumphalism and nationalist bromides; it becomes harder to celebrate the success of the Truth Commission" (167) when the reader is left with nothing but the broken, tortured "trurt" of Dulcie's body, signalling the on-going and ever-present violence against women in the postapartheid nation state.

The final pages of the novel both foreshadows Sara Baartman's interment in 2002, but tellingly disrupts the nationalist discourse of unity performed during Baartman's funeral ceremony, as Dulcie's body cannot be buried. Instead, Dulcie's body turns up in the narrator's garden. The image of her gaping, bleeding wounds and decomposing flesh

illustrate the symbolic violence inherent to representations of women like Baartman and Dulcie at a very physical level. As Samuelson concludes,

[t]he body of Dulcie and the materiality of the body of the text are presented as fundamentally unstable, disrupting the nationalist desire for re-recovery and closure, and allowing us to trace, instead, continuities and disjunctions in the making of nation and the inscription of women's bodies. (*Remembering* 115)

The entire text finally breaks down as a "bullet explodes into the back of the [narrator's] computer"; her "screen is in shards" and her "words escape [her]" (212-213). The sudden appearance of a mysterious figure climbing over the narrator's wall leaves the reader with the ominous suggestion a postapartheid nation-building rhetoric is utterly ineffective in providing a place of safety and belonging.

Dulcie's decomposing flesh in *David's Story* and the maggots in Saartjie's breast in *Thirteen Cents* both highlight the symbolic violence inherent to representations that try to uncritically claim Baartman's body as a vehicle for national unity. Both of these representations of Baartman's symbolic body feature a diseased, decomposing body that has been subjected to literal, physical violence. By rendering this symbolic violence overt, these two postapartheid novels highlight the need to rethink conventional literary representations of Sara Baartman, both as representative of the trope of victimhood and as the "national (m)other".

All three of the postapartheid texts in this chapter resist an easy appropriation of Sara Baartman's body as the symbolic vehicle of others' political rhetoric. However, it is Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and Wicomb's *David's Story* which most clearly refuse to perpetuate the unifying gesture of rendering the national "home" homely, as a site of peace, which an uncritical and unexamined appropriation of the "Baartman trope" seemingly bestows on a postapartheid nation-building rhetoric. Instead, these two novels not only render visible the violence of representation which underlies such uncritical

appropriations of Sara Baartman's symbolic body, but also complicate and disrupt an uncritical invocation of a postapartheid nationalist discourse of seeming national unity.

## Chapter 7

### “You are Either a Girl or a Boy and That’s It”:

#### Covering Bodies in the Postcolony

When South African athlete Mokgadi Caster Semenya won the women’s 800 metres at the Athletics World Championships in 2009, the outstanding achievement of an 18-year-old teenager from a poor, rural village was almost immediately overshadowed by a global media furore over suspicions surrounding her sex. Almost as soon as the story of the gender controversy made international headlines, sympathetic media commentators, both in South Africa and elsewhere, compared the insensitivity of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) in submitting Semenya to invasive and degrading tests to the colonial exploitation of Sara Baartman’s body. South African media commentators, in particular, were quick to condemn discrimination against Semenya on the basis of perceived “difference”. A number of journalists described the young athlete as “a twenty-first century ‘Hottentot Venus’”, thereby highlighting the fact that an African woman’s body was, once again, made an object for the scrutiny of Western science, and linking the humiliating treatment to which Semenya was subjected to a long history of racial and gendered insensitivity (Ray 18, emphasis added; also see Levy, Davenport, Smith “Semenya Row”). A political cartoon in *The Sunday Independent* of 30 August 2009 explicitly linked the history of Sara Baartman to the unfolding gender saga. The cartoon depicts Sara Baartman and Caster Semenya under identical magnifying glasses labelled “Europe”, while a small banner in the lower right corner asks the viewer: “So what has changed?”

In this chapter, I am interested in the particular form that the South African media’s passionate defence of Semenya took. In comparing the global media’s fascination with Semenya’s gender and embodiment to the colonial humiliation of Sara Baartman, sympathetic media commentators were deliberately evoking a powerful emotional response in Semenya’s defence. Moreover, I am particularly interested in the ways in which the media’s support for Semenya was represented through conservative gendered tropes, which allowed a number of local politicians to appropriate media representations

of Semenya's sex, gender and embodiment in order to promote a very specific nationalist rhetoric. I argue that, in this particular case, both the media's passionate defence of Semenya and local politicians' appropriation of this defence were made possible by evoking the "Baartman trope" as a theoretical and emotive anchor.

Before I begin my discussion of the media's representation of the gender controversy surrounding Caster Semenya, I wish to highlight a few important points regarding the media's sympathetic, yet uncritical deployment of the "Baartman trope". First of all, Caster Semenya is not "a" twenty-first century Sara Baartman. Even though both women were subjected to the humiliating scrutiny of the Western scientific gaze, one cannot posit an uncritical equivalence between the very different histories of these two women. While contemporary South Africa is far from perfect in terms of racial and gender equality, Caster Semenya certainly has far more autonomy over her life than Sara Baartman ever did. The regularity with which media commentators compared Caster Semenya to "a" contemporary Sara Baartman thus not only points to a lack of critical reflection in invoking Sara Baartman's personal history as a discursive tool. It also highlights the extent to which people are still unperturbed when seeing black female bodies subjected to public display and commentary. As Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully rightly argue, "even while ostensibly supporting Caster Semenya, writers still enter into the debate about the black female body in ways that reproduce the continued gaze on black women and their sexuality" ("Curious Case"). Neville Hoad also points out that Caster Semenya's body "has been made a case of too many things – mistaken identity, unfair advantage, impossible being – by many combatants in the debate who display little awareness of the history of the scientific gaze on the gendered and sexualized black body for, at least, the last three hundred years" (938).

Even a sympathetic invocation of the "Baartman trope" paradoxically subjects Caster Semenya to a similarly "invasive visibility", which still marks Sara Baartman's continued symbolic display (Baderon "Baartman and the Private" 71). Meg Samuelson writes that few bodies have been "exposed to such a degree of scrutiny or overwritten with others' desires to the extent that [Sara] Baartman's has" (*Remembering* 85). It is precisely this

tendency to overwrite Sara Baartman's body with others' desires, others' rhetoric, which makes the "Baartman trope" possible. Therefore, invoking the "Baartman trope", albeit sympathetically and in defence of Caster Semenya's right to privacy, ironically will only highlight ways in which Caster Semenya's defenders were also writing their own desires, their own discourses of race, gender and sexuality, onto her symbolic body. In this way, an uncritical invocation of the "Baartman trope" can only continue to engender stereotypes of black female bodies within the media and popular culture.

Therefore, even though the history of Caster Semenya is very different from the colonial oppression suffered by Sara Baartman, the way in which the media represented bodily markers of sex, gender and race throughout the Semenya affair suggests ways in which the black female body is still colonised by the discursive practices of racial and gender stereotyping. Contemporary South African representations of the black female body too often and too easily reproduce disturbing stereotypes of race and gender that are strongly reminiscent of colonial practices. Samuelson has convincingly shown how "decolonising, nation-building discourses depend on gendered representations previously employed to support the colonial endeavour" (*Remembering* 85). Samuelson argues that these representations "enable us to trace continuities in the exploitation and abuse of women's bodies, from the colonial past to the post-apartheid present" (*Remembering* 91).

In her analysis of Sara Baartman's interment in South Africa on 9 August 2002, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Samuelson argues that Baartman's return "is not only an act of bringing her home, but also one in which both the nation-state and primordial identities are reproduced as Home" (*Remembering* 94). Sara Baartman is re-produced "as a maternal figure who [...] will render the national or ethnic Home homely" (*Remembering* 94). The most important of these concerns for the present argument is the fact that, if the nation is posited as "home", then a rhetoric of the nation as "family" can legitimise gendered, hierarchical structures, and cast women as maternal figures who can, and will, ensure national unity. Furthermore, Samuelson writes that postcolonial nationalism often "reiterates the colonial demand for unified 'covered and enclosed' bodies to reflect the unified subject of nation" (*Remembering* 97). In this way, the

racialised and gendered female body is cast as a cultural icon in the service of national allegory and political rhetoric. I want to highlight Samuelson's specific use of the terms "covered and enclosed" bodies as those which reflect the unified subject of the "new" nation, as it is this symbolic "covering up" of certain bodies in order to make them embody an imagined national unity which I find telling, and which I explore in the course of this chapter.

This is especially apparent in South African media coverage of the gender controversy surrounding Caster Semenya, where uncritical comparisons between the different histories of Caster Semenya and Sara Baartman allowed a number of local politicians to invoke the "Baartman trope" in order to forward a rigidly heteronormative nationalist discourse. Local politicians appropriated South African media representations of Semenya's sex, gender and embodiment in order to promote a very specific nationalist, anti-imperial rhetoric that casts the nation as a heteronormative "family", while successfully hiding their own political interests. I argue that this kind of nationalist rhetoric not only renders gender-variance invisible by denying its existence, but also subtly manipulates South Africans into believing that any "transgression" of conservative gender norms will not be allowed.

The gender controversy surrounding Caster Semenya and the media's representation thereof thus allows us to examine the ways in which race, gender and sexuality are all co-constituted in nationalist discourses. In this chapter, my focus is not on Caster Semenya, the woman, but rather on the discourses of race, gender, sexuality and nationalism which dominated media representations of her symbolic body. However, since Caster Semenya *is* a real person, and someone who was forced to live through an extraordinary amount of public scrutiny and objectification, I hope to write about these interconnected discourses without objectifying Caster Semenya in my own analysis. It is for this reason that I will not include any images from the media's representation of Caster Semenya in this chapter. In this way, I hope to signal that my main focus is the interconnected discourses of race, gender, sexuality and nationalism, and their deployment in the media.

I begin my discussion with a brief summary of the major events of the gender controversy as they unfolded in the global media, in order to examine the language in which journalists framed the unfolding saga, as well as the exact terms used in the media. On the morning of 19 August 2009, only hours before Caster Semenya was due to compete in the women's 800 metres finals, two Australian newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Herald Sun*, leaked the story that the IAAF had raised doubts over Semenya's sex. A few hours before the race, the IAAF announced officially that it had begun "gender verification" testing on Semenya. After the race, the IAAF's general secretary, Pierre Weiss, took Semenya's place at a post-race press conference to announce that "an investigation into her *gender*" (Parker 6, emphasis added) was underway, and that the question of whether she would be allowed to retain her medal, as well as whether she would be allowed to compete in future events, would be determined by the outcome of the investigation.

I find the IAAF's use of phrases such as "*gender* verification" and "an investigation into her *gender*" particularly telling. First of all, the word "investigation" carries an undertone of criminality or wrongdoing, suggesting that Semenya's gender performance would be scrutinised for evidence of some form of wilful gender "deception". Secondly, I am struck by the IAAF's strange use of the term "gender verification", and the accompanying incongruity that hardly any of the journalists and commentators writing about this saga ever thought to question its use. Ever since second-wave feminism popularised an understanding of gender roles as socially constructed, the understanding that gender identity is not simply reducible to material sex difference has become fairly commonplace. Yet, in this instance, hardly any one questioned how exactly one would go about verifying "gender". More significantly, hardly any of the various media reports on the Semenya affair thought to challenge stereotypical perceptions of how exactly a "man" or a "woman" is supposed to look, dress or act.

Indeed, initial newspaper reports immediately framed the unfolding saga in terms of perceived corporeal "difference" and supposed "deviancy", both of which were couched in the language of biological determinism. The article in the *Herald Sun*, for example,

claimed that Semenya's physical appearance, "including obvious facial hair, and muscular build", caused "speculation about her gender" (Gullan). This suggests that the material body itself can be read for the signs of gender, strengthening the erroneous assumption that a certain kind of gender performance must necessarily follow a certain kind of material body. Journalists reported that several of Semenya's fellow athletes were "incensed" that she had been allowed to participate in the race (Levy). "These kind [sic] of people should not run with us", Elisa Cusma of Italy, who finished sixth, told journalists. "For me, she is not a woman. She is a man" (quoted in Levy). "Just look at her," Mariya Savinova of Russia, who finished fifth, said (quoted in Levy). This kind of language speciously suggests that if one has facial hair and a muscular build, one can only be a man. It also highlights the underlying racism and sexism of this kind of language, by suggesting that one only has to "look" at the material body in order to make some kind of essentialist claim about a person's embodiment.

Two South African media commentators stand out in this regard. Colleen Lowe Morna, in *The Sunday Independent* of 23 August 2009, wrote: "Ironically, gender – not sex – testing is exactly what Semenya is being subjected to. She is being questioned on the basis of our assumptions about how a woman should look and behave: not the biological facts" (10). Nikiwe Bikitsha asked in the *Mail & Guardian* of 28 August to 3 September 2009: "What is a woman supposed to look like anyway? Surely we can look, sound and run as we please" (24). The majority of journalists, however, did not think to challenge the heteronormative performance of feminine gender roles which the global media clearly expected "women" to conform to in order to be seen as women, nor did they question the particular ways in which Semenya's embodiment threatened such a narrow understanding of what constitutes femininity. Indeed, most journalists turned to clichéd phrases to affirm the young athlete's femininity, the two most common being "our golden girl" and "our first lady of sport" (see Howden). While obviously intended to show support and admiration for Semenya's incredible accomplishment, such epithets are nonetheless explicitly gendered, and thus betray an underlying assumption that both sex and gender can be read as a "natural" binary between male and female.

“Gender,” Judith Butler notably writes in *Undoing Gender*, “is not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has’” (42). However, the IAAF’s insistence on a “gender verification” test – indeed, the very idea of an “investigation” into a person’s gender in the first place – rests on the assumption that gender is definitely something a person “has”, and that this can be tested for and thus scientifically verified. This, in turn, would then reveal which gender a person truly “is”, suggesting that gender identity and material sex difference necessarily follow from one another. Such an erroneous assumption would strengthen the belief that both sex and gender conform to a supposedly naturalised male/female binary.

This has clear implications in terms of the Caster Semenya affair, for it highlights the consequences of performing one’s gender outside of the supposedly “natural” male/female binary. It suggests that certain gender performances can be criminalised, pathologised or marginalised, and that subjects that “cross gender”, to borrow Butler’s phrase, risk both symbolic as well as very real violence (see *Undoing* 30). According to Butler, gender is an apparatus, a “mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalised” (*Undoing* 42). To assume that gender necessarily implies a binary of “masculine” and “feminine” is, Butler argues, “to precisely miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance” (*Undoing* 42). Butler gestures to other ways of configuring gender, suggesting that terms such as “gender trouble”, “gender blending”, “transgender” and “cross-gender” already signal an understanding of gender beyond the “naturalised binary” of “masculine” and “feminine” (*Undoing* 42-43). This suggests one way in which journalists could have challenged the assumption of a “natural” gender binary underlying the IAAF’s “gender verification” test. Instead, the majority of journalists merely affirmed a naturalised gender binary through their use of clichéd gendered epithets.

This is especially apparent in South African media coverage of the Caster Semenya affair, which repeatedly emphasised a very conservative and heteronormative notion of

gendered femininity and womanhood. Leonard Chuene, President of Athletics South Africa (ASA) at the time, decried the IAAF's "gender verification" test as "racism, pure and simple" (quoted in Smith "Semenya Row"). "In Africa, as in any other country," Chuene told reporters, "parents look at new babies and can see straight away whether to raise them as a boy or a girl" (quoted in Smith "Semenya Row"). Chuene resigned from the IAAF in protest, telling reporters:

We are talking about a child here, whose name has been dragged through the dirt by an organisation which should know better. [...] If gender tests have to take place, they should have been done quietly. It is a taboo subject. How can a girl live with this stigma? By going public on the tests, the IAAF has let down this young child, and I will fight tooth and nail to protect her. (quoted in Smith "Semenya Row")

Julius Malema, President of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) at the time, notably declared:

Hermaphrodite, what is that? Somebody tell me, what is hermaphrodite in Pedi? There's no such thing, hermaphrodite, in Pedi. So don't impose your hermaphrodite concepts on us. [...] She's a girl and why should we accept concepts that are imposed on us by the imperialists? We will never agree to that concept. You are either a girl or a boy and that's it.<sup>28</sup> (quoted in Tromp et al)

Malema's claim echoes a comment made by Chuene, who told reporters: "We are not going to allow Europeans to describe and defeat our children" (quoted in Smith "Semenya Row"). Chuene further defended Semenya by publically stating: "You can't say somebody's child is not a girl. You denounce my child as a boy when she's a girl? If

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<sup>28</sup> Ido Lekota wrote in *The Sowetan* that "the Sepedi name for 'hermaphrodite' is ... *sekgeramatona*. But like its English version, this name is derogatory and demeaning and should therefore not be used" (quoted in Hoad 402). Malema repeatedly employed the term "hermaphrodite" without any seeming awareness that it is considered both offensive and inaccurate by the intersex community.

you did that to my child, I'd shoot you" (Robyn Dixon, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 August 2009, quoted in Nyong'o 95).

There are a number of points I wish to unpack in terms of the particular form that Chuene's and Malema's passionate defence of Semenya took. Firstly, while Chuene is quoted as being highly paternalistic and quite violent in his fervour to defend Semenya, his argument also draws heavily on a distinctly anti-imperial rhetoric. Both Chuene's and Malema's statements presuppose a "traditional" method of determining gender, rejecting the idea of a "gender verification" test as an instance of colonial racism. By evoking "traditional" culture as evidence, such claims strengthen an erroneous assumption that a binary understanding of gender is somehow "truly African". "When a child is born," Malema told reporters, "you say it is a baby girl or a boy. We have never heard in the village a child being announced, 'we were given a hermaphrodite'" (quoted in Tromp et al). This implies that any instance of gender variance can be dismissed as an "imperial concept" that is imposed on the "natural" and "truly African" heteronormative body. For Natasha Distiller, Malema's claim can be read as "one example of how a discourse of normative gender identities, cast as authentically African," is being "deployed in the service of a highly invested claim to an authentic African identity" (126-127). Antje Schuhmann reads such statements as a "linguistic extermination" of people who "transgress the norms of the two-sex system" ("Taming" 102). "By denying the existence of intersex people," Schuhmann argues, "the ANCYL denied their right to exist, and used these genocidal linguistics as an amplifier for their anti-racist authenticity" ("Taming" 102).

It is important to point out that Caster Semenya was never officially declared an intersexed person, nor did she ever publically identify herself as intersexed. Both Chuene and Malema were defending Semenya from confidential IAAF reports that were leaked to the press without her knowledge or consent, and which suggested that she *may* have an intersex condition. However, my focus is neither on Caster Semenya's embodiment nor her sexuality; I do not attempt to make any sort of claim about her "true" embodiment. Rather, I am interested in how the discourses of race, gender, sexuality and nationalism

surrounding the gender controversy were deployed in the media. I therefore agree with Schuhmann that the South African media's "constant reiteration that [Semanya] is a woman reinforces the same binary that is the cause of the problem: men have to be men and women have to be women" ("Feminine Masculinities" 22).

Chuene's and Malema's statements certainly reinforce a problematic naturalised male/female binary in the service of an anti-imperial rhetoric. Neville Hoad, however, is more sympathetic to parts of Malema's claim. "I do not think that [Malema's statement] is simply nominalism," Hoad argues (400). "Sexual/gender difference is culturally variable up to a point," he continues, but "the paradox here is that Malema, in ostensibly defending Semanya, implicitly invokes a fixed gender binary in the name of cultural variance" (400). As Hoad points out, the very detailed and personal claims published in the global media about Semanya's embodiment and sexuality contain an immense symbolic violence (see Hoad 402). Malema's insistence that Semanya can only be a "girl" and nothing else is thus offered as a counter to the immensely powerful symbolic violence disseminated by the global media. I can, along with Hoad, appreciate the impulse of both Chuene and Malema to defend Semanya against the symbolic violence underlying the majority of media reports. However, as Hoad points out, "there have to be other ways [to defend Semanya] than shrilly insisting on binarised gender as truly African" (402). Malema's passionate denial of the very existence of African gender-variant bodies reduces African sexualities to a naturalised, heteronormative male/female gender binary that does not leave much room for imagining alternative gender identities or embodiment.

One reason why Malema necessarily reads the existence of a gender-variant African body as a racial insult can be explained by looking at how the cultural debris of colonial histories continues to shape and control contemporary and supposedly postcolonial thoughts, tropes and practices, long after the colonial state and its policies have been dismantled. Colonial, racist assumptions about African sexuality involved defining the African body in terms of "simple" or "natural" categories that were restricted to the reproductive sexual body. However, somewhat ironically, representations of sexuality are

equally central to the imagining and institutionalising of postcolonial nationalism. As Gabeba Baderoon points out, the argument that

varied genders and same-sex sexualities in Africa are corrupt practices imported from the West is stubbornly invoked by conservative politicians, as well as religious and civic leaders, to strategic effect, as their claims to represent authentic African culture often deflect attention from issues of governance. (“Gender within Gender” 391)

Desiree Lewis argues that in a similar fashion that

that assumptions about African sexuality were central to colonial myth-making, these assumptions have also become central to postcolonial myths. These myths have often supported efforts at nation-building, with dominant political parties, politicians and community leaders claiming to speak in the name of the collective by constructing rigid images of innate sexual identities, relationships and institutions. (“Representing” 210)

Drawing on both Baderoon’s and Lewis’s insights, it is clear that Malema’s dismissal of the gender-variant African body is underpinned by exactly this kind of nation-building mythology, in which South African politicians drew on heteronormative sexual identities to further an anti-imperial nationalist rhetoric. It shows, firstly, the extent to which colonial stereotypes about African sexualities are still present in contemporary representations of gendered and racialised female bodies. Secondly, it highlights ways in which the postcolonial nation state reiterates precisely these kinds of colonial stereotypes as part of a postcolonial nationalist rhetoric.

Shari Dworkin, Amanda Lock Swarr and Cheryl Cooky offer an additional framework through which to read and understand Malema’s and Chuene’s dismissal of the gender-variant African body as a racial insult. They argue that, given the history of apartheid, as well as the role of national sporting events in nation-building discourses during the

transition years, Caster Semenya is “a crucially important contemporary national icon”, as she was “the first black South African woman to win a gold medal at an IAAF World Championship, and – given her upbringing in an impoverished rural village in Limpopo – her sporting success was seen as emblematic of the ascendancy of the ‘new’ South Africa” (46). They insist that the “overwhelmingly negative response to her gender verification testing (coupled with the anger at the suggestion of her intersexuality within South African print media coverage)” must be situated within this national history (46). According to Dworkin, Lock Swarr and Cooky, the global media’s suggestion that Semenya was intersexed “undermined the (gendered) ‘normality’ not only of her as an individual, but also [of] the nation” (48). For this reason, they argue that South African leadership “made it clear that when they were protecting Semenya, they were defending South Africa” (49).

Drawing on their insight, I wish to add that when South African leadership were defending both Caster Semenya and the nation, they clearly did so by invoking the “Baartman trope”. Mark Gevisser notes the repeated and “conscious reference, by parliamentarians, to Saartjie Baartman”, while Tavia Nyong’o describes the “rush to compare Semenya to Saartjie Baartman” as “obvious for nationalistic reasons” (Gevisser; Nyong’o 98). The “Baartman trope” was thus not only invoked in Caster Semenya’s personal defence. It was also appropriated by a postapartheid nationalist rhetoric which casts the nation as a heteronormative “family”. This rhetoric not only renders gender-variance invisible, but also manipulates South Africans into believing that any “transgression” of conservative gender norms will not be allowed.

This brings me to the next important point that I would like to highlight in terms of the particular form that Chuene’s passionate defence of Semenya took. By constantly describing Semenya as a “child”, “this young child” and as a “girl”, rather than a woman, Chuene’s statement effectively both infantilises and desexualises Semenya. At a press conference in Johannesburg on 25 August 2009, for example, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela repeatedly referred to Caster Semenya as “our little girl”, “the poor child” and “my grandchild” (quoted in Howden). For Tavia Nyong’o, these kinds of responses lead

to “simplistic reassertions of gender normativity for the sake of the vulnerable child” (98). Nyong’o instead highlights Semenya’s own “original, succinct response” to the IAAF’s ordering of a “gender verification” test: “I don’t give a damn” (98). “Instead of making her a traumatised symbol of a violated continent,” Nyong’o argues, “might it be possible to adopt some of this practical pugnacity?” (98).<sup>29</sup>

During this particular press conference, though, officials claimed that Semenya was “too traumatised” to speak, thereby effectively silencing any “practical pugnacity” that could highlight a different representation of Semenya other than that of the innocent, childlike victim (see Howden). In casting Semenya as a “little girl”, such media representations, firstly, confirm a heteronormative gender binary, and, secondly, infantilise Semenya by casting her in the trope of the childlike victim. It also casts Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in the symbolic role of the “mother of the nation”. Brenna Munro notes how, in “matriarchal contrast” to Julius Malema, Madikizela-Mandela said: “There is nothing wrong with being a hermaphrodite. It is God’s creation. She is God’s child. She did not make herself. God decided to make her that way and that can’t be held against her” (quoted in Munro “Caster Semenya” 392). Munro argues that while Madikizela-Mandela is “de-stigmatising intersexuality here, she is doing so by presenting Semenya as an innocent ‘child’, within a family romance that also (re)casts her as ‘mother of the nation’” (“Caster Semenya” 392).

Munro also points out that the very week after Semenya’s race in Berlin, the two men who raped and murdered South African lesbian soccer star, Eudy Simelane, were on trial. “Winnie Mandela and Jacob Zuma”, Munro argues,

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<sup>29</sup> Nyong’o does not provide a source for Semenya’s seemingly unfazed response to the ordering of the “gender verification” test. I could not locate any articles containing this quote by Caster Semenya, but I did find a video interview with Semenya on the following website: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1207739/Caster-Semenya-defies-gender-row-gold-800m.html> (site accessed 2 August 2014). I am struck by the insensitivity of the unseen male interviewer who says to Semenya: “With this boost in your career comes rumours. I heard one that you were born a man. What do you have to say about stuff like that?” Semenya then responds as Nyong’o noted: “I have no idea about that. I don’t know. I don’t give a damn about that.” However, as Ariel Levy writes, the video “is very hard to watch” (Levy). As the reporter speaks, the viewer can see Semenya’s breathing quickening. According to Levy, “she appears to be on the verge of panic” (Levy). Semenya abruptly walks away, thereby complicating Nyong’o’s reading of her “practical pugnacity”.

have not publically decried [Simelane's murder], nor the many cases of "corrective rape" that have occurred over the last few years – these women do not, apparently, qualify as "daughters of the nation" in the way Semenya does. To use Meg Samuelson's terminology, it is as if Semenya is being made to embody national unity, while the bodies that mirror hers are being "dis-remembered". ("Caster Semenya" 393)

I find Munro's point that Semenya is being made to embody national unity especially telling, as it highlights which performances of bodily and gendered identity are officially sanctioned as "belonging" in the "new" South African nation, and which are excluded or dismissed. This also has an important bearing on the next chapter, where I look at South African photographer Zanele Muholi's portrayal of nude black lesbian subjects and queer intimacy. If Semenya is cast as the "daughter of the nation," as "our little girl", and if Madikizela-Mandela casts herself in the role of the symbolic "national mother", then such a rhetoric of the nation as "family" legitimises gendered, hierarchical structures through which the racialised and gendered female body is utilised in the service of national allegory and political rhetoric. Thus, even though the majority of South African journalists loudly decried the injustice and humiliation Semenya was made to suffer at the hands of the IAAF, their passionate defence took the form of a very conservative interpretation of both gender and sexual identity.

Furthermore, in casting Semenya as the "daughter of the nation", this particular discursive use of intimacy creates a social structure, based on the heteronormative family, within which to locate the gender-variant African body. In *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, Michael Herzfeld argues that the "formal ideology of the state lays claim to intimacy and familiarity in a series of rather obvious metaphors" (5), which he describes as "bodily and kinships metaphors" (12). "These familial metaphors," Herzfeld argues, "show that conceptually the nation-state is constructed out of intimacy" (13). This is clear in the case of the Semenya saga, where Semenya's embodiment was constantly described through familial metaphors, such as "our child" or "our

granddaughter”, in order to cast her body as the embodiment of national unity. Indeed, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner point out, “[h]eterosexual culture achieves much of its intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy” (553). They argue that a “complex cluster of sexual practices gets confused, in heterosexual culture, with the love plot of intimacy and familialism that signifies belonging to society in a deep and normal way” (554). As long as local politicians could represent Semenya as “our child”, “our little girl” or “our granddaughter”, the heteronormative sexual identities underlying these familial metaphors were strengthened by an anti-imperial nationalist rhetoric that simultaneously cast the gender-variant African body as an imperial perversion, and prescribed the rigidly heteronormative conditions for belonging to the nation in the “deep and normal way” mentioned by Berlant and Warner.

As Zillah Eisenstein further points out, a nation always has “a” gender, but its gender is “usually not spoken” (41). Rather, gender is “encoded”, or “naturalised”, through “patriarchal familialism” (41). This leads Eisenstein to point to the “complex invisibility” of specific women in the nation (43); “As mother of the nation,” she argues, “woman is invisibly visible as a symbolic fantasy. And the different layerings of invisibility are accorded along racial, economic and sexual lines” (43). Eisenstein’s comment about the “complex invisibility” of certain women brings to mind Pumla Gqola’s argument that it is inaccurate to claim that black women’s bodies are invisible in South African society. Rather, it is black women’s hypervisibility in society, Gqola argues, that is used “as a way to violate them” (“Through Zanele Muholi’s Eyes” 84). In the case of the gender controversy surrounding Caster Semenya, her body was paradoxically and simultaneously rendered both hypervisible and invisible through patriarchal familial metaphors. In casting Semenya as the “daughter of the nation”, her symbolic body was made highly visible as the embodiment of national unity, while, at the same time, bodies that mirror hers were rendered invisible through Chuene’s and Malema’s denial of the very existence of gender-variant African bodies.

A photo shoot featuring Caster Semenya in *You/Huisgenoot* magazine of 10 September 2009 offers an excellent example of how the South African media manipulated

representations of Semenya's body to conform to a heteronormative performance of conventional femininity. *You/Huisgenoot* magazine is one of the most popular tabloid magazines in South Africa. The two magazines enjoy the largest circulation figures of all South African weekly magazines and have a combined readership of almost four million people.<sup>30</sup> Given the immense popularity of *You/Huisgenoot*, the magazine has the potential to reach, and potentially influence, a great number of South African readers.

The 10 September 2009 issue of *You/Huisgenoot* featured a typical "makeover" article in which Semenya is "transformed" from a powerful athlete to a conventionally feminine "glamour girl." *You*, the English language version of the magazine, sported the following title on the front cover of the 10 September 2009 issue: "Wow, look at Caster now!" The front cover features a smiling Semenya wearing a fashionable black cocktail dress, makeup and gold jewellery, with her hair loose and unbraided, and her hands lying limply and passively in her lap. The magazine proudly claims to have turned a "power girl" into a "glamour girl", and, even more tellingly, that "she loves it!" The image of Semenya's victory in Berlin, where her hand is raised in an active gesture of victory, is inserted behind her left shoulder, as if to make this transformation from a "power girl" into a "glamour girl" apparent to even the most casual observer. In his thorough analysis of the genre of the makeover, Luke Winslow argues that the "purpose of the makeover is to fix a flaw" (303). In order to "qualify" for a makeover, Winslow argues, Semenya first has to assume "an unsatisfactory before image" (303). This is suggested by the inclusion of the image of Semenya winning the 800 metres in Berlin behind the shoulder of the new "glamour girl". In this way, the image of an active, fit, powerful and muscular athletic body is deemed an "unsatisfactory" performance of gender for the "daughter of the nation", suggesting that the makeover can "fix" Semenya's gender performance to conform to a more "acceptable" convention of femininity. As Nyong'o argues, the makeover which Semenya "quickly received upon her return to South Africa was a transparent bid to render her a more suitable standard bearer for national femininity" (96).

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<sup>30</sup> According to the latest statistics on the Media 24 website, the total readership for *You* magazine is estimated at 2, 084, 000 people, while its Afrikaans sister magazine, *Huisgenoot*, enjoys a readership of 1, 908, 000 people. The statistics for *You* magazine can be viewed at: <http://www.media24.com/magazines/you/>. The statistics for *Huisgenoot* magazine can be viewed at: <http://www.media24.com/magazines/huisgenoot/>. Sites accessed 5 February 2018.

The photo shoot therefore relies on all the conventional markers of a stereotypical interpretation of heteronormative femininity: short dresses, high heels, painted nails, makeup and jewellery. It recasts Semenya's powerful, muscular body in a trope of conventional feminine passivity, as Semenya either poses demurely, her legs neatly crossed and her hands hanging limply in her lap, or seductively, with one hand on her hip and her body tilted towards the camera. The position of her hands are particularly interesting in this photo shoot, as it turns the active image of her finger raised in victory in Berlin to a hand gesture of either limp compliance or of overt sexuality. This suggests that the South African media could only write in defence of Semenya as long as they could re-inscribe her gender, sexuality and embodiment into the trope of conventional, heteronormative femininity.

The makeover genre, as Winslow argues, "influences audience members by using the featured subjects as exemplary models, capable of serving as patterns for imitation. The audience learns what they should do, and how they should live, by emulating these models" (306). In this way, the makeover genre "circulates powerful, but subtle, guidelines for living" (Winslow 306). Semenya's makeover in *You/Huisgenoot* therefore suggests, somewhat ironically, that the South African media could only defend Semenya's body from an immense symbolic violence if it could, in turn, deny the existence of any alternative expressions of gender and embodiment with equal symbolic violence. Rather than generating discussion about what constitutes gender performativity in the first place, such representations subtly – and perhaps not so subtly – convey the message to its South African readership that any transgression of conservative gender norms will not be allowed. As Christi van der Westhuizen succinctly noted: "The media-facilitated hounding of Semenya sends a message to all women and to all men: stick to gender script, or else" (21).

I find the framing of one of the photographs in the *You/Huisgenoot* photo shoot particularly interesting. In this photograph, Semenya sits on a sofa in a decidedly Victorian style, its fabric sporting the type of floral design often found on Victorian

“fancy cases” containing highly sexualised representations of African women (see Helen Bradford 73). While the photographer of the *You/Huisgenoot* photo shoot was not, in all probability, creating a deliberate visual reference to a Victorian “fancy case”, the framing device of the Victorian-style furniture and the particular framing device of the “fancy case” fabric strikes me as noteworthy. In all of the other photographs in the photo shoot, Semenya is pictured either against a plain white background, or against modern furniture. In the majority of these photographs, she is positioned in sexually alluring poses; she stands with her hands on her hips, dressed in high-heeled stilettos, black leather trousers or a sparkly mini-dress. In the picture where she is seated on the Victorian sofa, she strikes a sexually modest pose, with her legs crossed demurely. The fact that the sexually “passive” photo is framed by an oblique visual reference to Victorian ideals of feminine sexual modesty ironically evokes colonial assumptions about supposed African hypersexuality. At the same time, this particular photograph serves the rhetoric of postcolonial nationalism which needs Semenya to be the nation’s demure “little girl” in order to validate the nation state as national home.

The article accompanying the photo shoot takes particular care to represent Semenya as innocent and childlike, suggesting that she is innocent of willful “gender deception”, especially in terms of the IAAF’s “gender verification” test. The article also stresses how the process of the makeover teaches the “innocent girl” (*You*, 10 September 2009: 16) to perform her gender “correctly”, taking care to highlight the fact that Semenya enjoys this process and portraying her as a willing participant. At the start of the makeover, Semenya can barely stand in the high-heeled stilettos she is made to wear. “I’m used to running shoes, you know,” she tells the interviewer with a grin (*You*, 10 September 2009: 13). The article reassures readers that any perceived gender ambiguity is not Semenya’s fault, pointing out that Semenya “would like to dress up more often but [that] her gruelling training and study schedule keeps her so busy she seldom has the chance” (*You*, 10 September 2009: 14). The article also quotes Semenya as saying: “I’d like to dress up more often and wear dresses, but I never get the chance. I’d also like to do my own make-up” (*You*, 10 September 2009: 13). As the photo shoot proceeds, the article takes care to note how Semenya’s initial awkwardness in the high-heeled shoes changes; by the end of

the photo shoot, Semenya is “easing elegant heels onto her feet” (*You*, 10 September 2009: 14). Semenya tells the interviewer: “[N]ow that I know I can look like this, I’d like to dress like this more often” (*You*, 10 September 2009: 14). In this way, Winslow argues, the makeover genre “has opened Semenya’s eyes to a more appropriate feminine world and from now on, according to the article, she will perform her gender more appropriately” (305). The article concludes by noting that at the end of the photo shoot, when Semenya

walks into the street with her new hairstyle and perfect make-up, she suddenly looks like a new Caster. She’s the same innocent girl but it’s as though she’s gained a little more confidence and isn’t shy about looking strangers in the eye. It’s as though after all the gossip about her appearance she’s suddenly realised she’s simply gorgeous. (*You*, 10 September 2009: 16)

This conclusion suggests that the makeover article has “saved” Semenya’s sense of self-worth from the hurtful gossip about her appearance by showing her how to perform her gender “correctly”. However, as Nyong’o rightfully points out, such a response, even when in defence of Semenya, suggests that it is her many defenders who “were perhaps embarrassed and ashamed by her exuberant embodiment, more than [Semenya herself]” (96). “Young though she may be,” Nyong’o argues, “who is to say Semenya cannot know and enjoy who she is? Who is to say that her ‘profoundest sense of self’ lies with being considered and treated like a girl?” (96). For the *You/Huisgenoot* photo shoot not only positioned Semenya as a “girl” in terms of conventional, gendered markers of passive femininity, but particularly cast her as a young, vulnerable and innocent girl-child. In this way, *You/Huisgenoot*’s representation of Caster Semenya relied on an essentialist and generic figuring of “the” African female body as the embodiment of “innocent” and “simple” normative femininity, grounded in a stable and “natural” sex/gender binary.

In the case of the Semenya affair, such an “authentic” African identity would deny the existence of the gender-variant African body in order to imagine the nation state as the

new, national home. In positing Semenya as “our little girl”, such a nationalist discourse deploys her body as a symbolic site to rally around and “save” her from an imperialist violence that would subject the African female body to the scrutinising gaze of western science, while at the same time violently denying the existence of the gender-variant African body. Munro optimistically concludes that

it is remarkable to see two such powerful political figures [as Jacob Zuma and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela], who have been associated with homophobia in the past, aligning themselves in defence of this gender-queer girl – saying firmly that she has rights, that she belongs, and that she represents South Africa. (“Caster Semenya” 393)

However, Semenya only seems to “belong” as long as she is made to embody normative femininity. Indeed, even Munro’s analysis employs the term “girl” to refer to Semenya, highlighting the insidious power of these kinds of familial metaphors to both describe and prescribe the conditions for inclusion or exclusion from the national “home”. Semenya can seemingly embody the ideal of national unity, but only if the existence of bodies that mirror hers are either denied, or recast to conform to heteronormative stereotypes.

A more recent article by Zine Magubane (2014) offers a very different reading of the Semenya affair. Magubane argues that existing scholarship on the Semenya affair “failed to fully account for the role that race and nation have played historically in the production and reproduction of the concept of intersex” (“Spectacles” 761). Magubane is highly critical of the modes of analysis employed by Hoad, Munro, Nyong’o and Schuhmann. She tasks these scholars with the problem of “selective investigation”, arguing that “only the African National Congress (ANC) and the working-class black majority (the most vigorous defenders of Semenya) were subject to intersectional analyses and poststructuralist critique”, while “intersex – as a classificatory schema, an object of knowledge, and a technology of subject formation – was not” (“Spectacles” 761). Magubane’s central claim is that Caster Semenya’s body “became a vehicle for a larger meditation on sexuality and its relationship to South African modernity” (“Spectacles”

764). She argues that scholars too easily “conflated scientific progress and modernity with cultural ideas about gender” (Spectacles” 764). Scholars thus

alluded to the fact that the West’s superior access to scientific knowledge allowed for an acceptance of the ontological reality of intersex (and a more progressive stance on the relationship between gender role and physical embodiment) in ways that might not have been accessible (or even meaningful) to an entity like the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). (“Spectacles” 763)

Magubane reads the arguments of scholars such as Hoad, Munro, Nyong’o and Schuhmann as an “uncomfortable dilemma of how to reconcile the outpouring of support for Semenya”, as a “modern” and “progressive” act, with pre-modern assumptions about African sexualities (“Spectacles” 766). All of these scholars, according to Magubane, “explain the intractable position adopted by the ANC as an understandable (if unenlightened) response to the history of public shaming that black South African women have had to endure – Saartjie Baartman (the so-called Hottentot Venus) being the paradigmatic example” (“Spectacles” 767). Magubane writes that “[w]hen outspoken South African politician Julius Malema angrily proclaimed, ‘Don’t impose your hermaphrodite concepts on us!’, he was, according to Hoad, responding to the ‘shameful history of Sarah Baartman’” (“Spectacles” 767).

Thus far, all of the criticisms that Magubane levels against Hoad, Munro, Nyong’o and Schuhmann can just as easily be levelled against my own argument in this chapter. I will address this implied critique in three parts. First of all, as an initial and superficial response, I would simply point out that it is not only these scholars’ diverse readings of the position adopted by the ANC which makes the connection between the colonial history of Sara Baartman’s humiliation and a comment such as Malema’s. Local politicians invoked Baartman’s history themselves. Mark Gevisser notes the repeated and “conscious reference, by parliamentarians, to Saartjie Baartman” (Gevisser). It is

therefore not only a scholar such as Hoad who responds to the “shameful history” of Sara Baartman, but Semenya’s many defenders themselves (“Spectacles” 767).

Secondly, I would argue that Magubane greatly oversimplifies the nuance of the diverse arguments made by Hoad, Munro, Nyong’o and Schuhmann when she claims that they all “found it particularly hard to reconcile popular support for Semenya with South Africa’s purportedly rampant homophobia and endemic ‘homophobic hate crimes’ (Magubane quoting Schumann “Taming” 95, “Spectacles” 766). I would also point out that while all of these scholars do write about the ANC’s and ANCYL’s public defence of Semenya, they do so in very different ways. It therefore seems rather ungenerous to claim that their articles all struggle to “reconcile” problematic South African gender politics with the ANC’s and ANCYL’s “pro-Semenya stance” by “dismissing the support Semenya received as a manifestation of racially essentialist and chauvinistic black nationalism, which, by definition, could not accommodate identities that ‘complicate the male/female binary’ (Magubane quoting Munro “Semenya” 391, “Spectacles” 766-767).

In my own reading, I do not find that these scholars’ diverse arguments can all be reduced to similar attempts at reconciling the ANC’s and ANCYL’s support for Semenya with a larger problematic South African gender politics. Indeed, I would argue that these scholars are not trying to reconcile anything at all, but instead are highlighting various constitutive ironies and contradictions in the ruling party’s engagement with gendered and sexual identities in South Africa. For example, Munro does not, as Magubane claims, “wonder how it could be” that Jacob Zuma and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela would “come together” in defence of Semenya (“Spectacles” 766). Munro instead notes that it is “remarkable” to see two political figures who have been publically associated with homophobia in the past – especially given Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s “participation in arguably the most homophobic political trial in recent South African history” (Hoad 404) – now publically aligning themselves with Semenya (“Semenya” 393). Former President Jacob Zuma once boasted as part of a Heritage Day speech in 2006, before his election to the presidency, that, when he was growing up, an *unqingili* – the word for *homosexual* in Zulu – “would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out”

(quoted in Van der Vlies 142). Munro therefore optimistically concludes that it is “remarkable” to see two such powerful political figures saying that Caster Semenya “belongs”, that she “represents South Africa”, and that this could perhaps “reactivate the generous, queer-friendly spirit of the early days of the ‘rainbow’ nation” (“Semenya” 393).

Schuhmann never calls popular support for Semenya “illusory”, as Magubane claims; “Contextualised with what became known as the Caster Semenya saga and the lived realities of many women in South Africa,” Schuhmann actually writes, “a *simple positive reading* of the support Semenya received seems illusory” (“Taming” 96, emphasis added). Not one of these scholars offers a simple reading; instead, they explore ways in which popular support for Semenya celebrated the human rights of a gender-queer woman, while, at the same time, Semenya’s defenders, such as Malema and Chuene, insisted upon heteronormative and homogenising “natural” gender categories.

Magubane’s other main critique against Hoad, Munro, Nyong’o and Schuhmann is that they do not subject the category of intersex to analysis. As feminists, Magubane writes,

we may not agree with the stance that the ANC took toward intersex as an ontological possibility. We may find statements like “don’t impose your hermaphrodite concepts on us” to be inelegant. However, as feminist scholars we cannot ignore Malema’s provocation to consider the roles race and imperial history have played in constituting intersex. (“Spectacles” 768)

Magubane’s article offers a thorough analysis of historically differing attitudes and responses to white and black intersex bodies, concluding that an “ambiguously gendered white body needed to be corrected to retain its whiteness, whereas an ambiguously gendered black body was seen as confirming the essential biological difference between whites and blacks” (“Spectacles” 781). According to Magubane, this is why people like Malema and Chuene resisted imposing the category of intersex onto Semenya (see “Spectacles” 780). For her, Malema’s and Chuene’s responses capture “the centrality of

whiteness to the construction of intersex subjectivity” (“Spectacles” 781). She argues that since “the archetypal intersex body was presumed to be white”, it “helps us understand why feminist scholarship, anchored as it is in the sex/gender distinction, has found race to be such an intractable problem”, for “even when the idea that the truth of sex is anchored in the body is thrown radically into doubt, race still provides an anchor” (“Spectacles” 781). Magubane concludes that an analysis of the category intersex “suggests that it is not simply the intractable nature of white feminism that is the problem but rather that the concept of gender [...] had an exclusionary racial impulse written into it at its very inception” (“Spectacles” 782).<sup>31</sup>

Lindsay Parks Pieper, writing specifically about the history of sex testing/gender verification in elite sport, would agree with Magubane that “Euro-centred medical science in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries promoted sex/gender and racial difference” (1559). Pieper argues that colonisation first “created a dichotomous social order that eliminated the possibility for sex/gender fluidity” (1559). However, she then further argues that the IAAF still utilises conservative medical judgments – “influenced by a Eurocentric belief in natural, dimorphic sex/gender difference – to sanction a policy of sex/gender conformity” (1558). She concludes that the IAAF’s gender verification thereby outlines “a specific category of ‘woman’ for sport, one which require[s] female athletes to demonstrate conventional ‘Western’ femininity. Through these regulations,” Pieper argues, the IAAF “reaffirm[s] a binary notion of sex and privilege[s] white, Western gender norms” (1558). This highlights the irony that when Malema and Chuene insists upon a binary notion of sex/gender somehow “truly” African, they were inadvertently defending the IAAF’s own insistence upon a binary sex/gender system.

Magubane’s insistence that the gendered categories of “masculine” and “feminine” are themselves “inherently coded as white” certainly rings true, considering how the

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<sup>31</sup> See David A. Rubin, “‘An Unnamed Blank That Craved a Name’: A Genealogy of Intersex as Gender,” *Signs* 37(4), 2012: 883-908. Rubin offers a fascinating alternative reading to the history of intersex, arguing that the very “concept of intersex paradoxically preceded and inaugurated what we would today call the sex/gender distinction” (883). For Rubin, the category of intersex was itself “integral to the historical emergence of the category *gender* as distinct from *sex* in the mid-twentieth-century English-speaking world” (883-884, emphasis in original).

*You/Huisgenoot* makeover positioned Semenya as thoroughly Westernised in order to assert a normative representation of conventional femininity (see “Spectacles” 781). However, I would add that by denying the existence of the intersex African body, it is ironically Semenya’s passionate defenders, like Chuene and Malema, who turn to race to anchor the “truth of sex” in the normative, naturalised African body, and thereby reiterate a stable sex/gender binary. The analyses of Hoad, Munro, Nyong’o and Schuhmann – and, I hope, my own – instead cast doubt on the idea of a naturalised and racialised sex/gender distinction by refusing to assign any one particular racial, gendered or sexual identity to the gender-variant body.

At the same time that media representations of the gender controversy surrounding Caster Semenya entrenched hegemonic and heteronormative understandings of gender on a daily basis, the then South African Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, refused to open *Innovative Women*, an art exhibition by young South African female artists. Xingwana’s excuse was that she deemed the exhibition, including, in particular, visual activist Zanele Muholi’s nude photographs of black lesbians, to be “pornographic”, “immoral” and “offensive”, and that such images “worked against nation-building” (quoted in Van Wyk). In the next chapter, I turn to the work of Zanele Muholi in order to suggest a different strategy for reading and representing the black female body, one which does not need to invoke the “Baartman trope” as its theoretical and emotive anchor.

## Chapter 8

### Uncovering Bodies in the Postcolony

In August 2009, the then South African Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, refused to open *Innovative Women*, an art exhibition by young South African female artists. Xingwana's excuse was that she deemed the exhibition, including, in particular, visual activist Zanele Muholi's nude photographs of black lesbians, to be "pornographic", "immoral" and "offensive", and that such images "worked against nation-building" (quoted in Van Wyk). Numerous artists, critics, writers and feminist activists condemned Xingwana's homophobic stance, commenting on her failure to see what the artworks in question were trying to show her.<sup>32</sup> In her official response to media accusations of homophobia, Xingwana stated:

Upon my arrival at the Exhibition, I immediately saw images which I deemed offensive. The images in large frames were of naked bodies presumably involved in sexual acts. [...] Contrary to media reports, I was not even aware as to whether the "bodies" in the images were of men or women or both for that matter. [...] To my mind, these were not works of arts [sic] but crude misrepresentations of women (both black and white) masquerading as artworks rather than engaged in questioning or interrogating – which I believe is what art is about. Those particular works of art stereotyped black women.<sup>33</sup>

Two aspects of Xingwana's statement strike me as particularly noteworthy, especially when read in conjunction with her claim that the images she saw at the exhibition "worked against nation-building". The first is the use of inverted commas around the word "bodies". It suggests, firstly, that indeterminately gendered bodies are somehow not "real" bodies. Presumably this particular statement was meant to excuse former Minister

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Gunkel "Postcolonial Eyes", Matebeni, Munro *South Africa*, Van Wyk, Van der Vlies, Kylie Thomas "Intimate Archive" and Smith "South African Minister".

<sup>33</sup> For the full statement, visit: <http://www.gov.za/statement-minister-arts-and-culture-ms-lulu-xingwana-media-reports-around-innovative-art-exhibition>. Site accessed 5 May 2014.

Xingwana from accusations of homophobia by suggesting that, since she was unaware of the gender of the bodies in question, her reaction could not have been homophobic. However, in my reading, the use of the inverted commas implies that Xingwana could not see the bodies in question as “real” bodies, precisely because she could not determine their gender. The use of inverted commas around the word “bodies” further suggests that indeterminately gendered bodies will somehow disrupt a project of postapartheid nation-building, as I will go on to show in my discussion below.

The former minister’s discourse operates in a similar way to the urgency with which media representations of the Caster Semenya affair asserted a conservative, heteronormative feminine gender identity in order to cast her as the nation’s “little girl” and thereby legitimise a nation-building discourse of the nation as “family”. If the nation is posited as “home”, then a rhetoric of the nation as “family” can legitimise gendered and heteronormative hierarchical structures, where the racialised and gendered female body is cast as a cultural icon in the service of a nationalist rhetoric. The indeterminately gendered “bodies” which Xingwana saw at the *Innovative Women* exhibition would disrupt such an uncritical appropriation of the black female body as a discursive tool in the service of postapartheid nationalism, thereby signalling one reason why the former minister would dismiss Muholi’s photographs of nude black lesbians as seemingly working “against nation building” (Xingwana). Given that the *Innovative Women* exhibition was funded by the South African government, the fact that then Minister Xingwana refused to open an exhibition funded by her own Department of Arts and Culture strongly suggests that the ruling party did not see indeterminately gendered “bodies” as contributing to a postapartheid nation-building rhetoric.

The second important aspect of Xingwana’s statement is linked to both race and nudity. Xingwana’s statement makes it clear that she did not view the nude photographs at the exhibition as art, but as “crude misrepresentations” of both black and white women. However, she goes on to claim that such pictures stereotyped *black* women, with no further mention of white women in this regard. This suggests a way of seeing in which the naked black female body can only ever function as a sign of colonial

hypersexualisation. When looking at Muholi's photographic representations of sexual desire and intimacy between nude black female subjects, Xingwana could only see a history of colonial exploitation and victimisation.

A number of scholars have already suggested how the visual history of the colonial hypersexualisation of the black female body could inform the former minister's reaction to Muholi's work. Zethu Matebeni, for example, argues that Xingwana's misreading of Muholi's photographs "suggests the way in which the minister's gaze and self-looking [was] narrowed and clouded by histories of the violation of black female bodies. On seeing two black female bodies together and undressed, she could only imagine pain, violation, torture and a version of pornography" (405). For Brenna Munro, Muholi's "more erotic images wrestle with histories of colonial/racist hypersexualised representations of the black female body that are in themselves violations" (*South Africa* 225). Henriette Gunkel notes "the strong resistance to portraying the Black body naked" in responses to Muholi's work ("Postcolonial Eyes" 80). According to Gunkel, a common response to Muholi's work "is that her images of the Black female body are either degrading for all (Black) women or, alternatively, are demeaning for the community, the nation, or the race" ("Postcolonial Eyes" 80). Gunkel locates such responses within the larger "impact of colonialism and colonial discourses on postcolonial homophobia, particularly its underlying colonial constructions of sex/gender and race" (80).

Scholars who write about the fraught legacies of colonial hypersexualised representations of the black female body more often than not link their discussions to the history of Sara Baartman's exploitation. Mgcineni Pro'Sobopha, for example, writes that "racist, sexist and negative images of the black body... can be observed in the humiliating stereotypes attributed to Saartjie Baartman" (120). Writing about the "history of ethnographic photographing of types" and the accompanying "spectacularisation of the black body", Andrew van der Vlies suggests that readers "think for example of Sarah Bartmann, or Saartjie Baartman, the so-called 'Hottentot Venus'" (142). Matebeni, too, asserts that the "horrendous treatment and exhibition of Sara Baartman's body for 'scientific' investigations is a constant reminder of the torture and violation of black female bodies"

(405). Following Zine Magubane, Ayo A. Coly points out that Sara Baartman has indeed become “the theoretical apparatus for reading the black female body” (659).

In this chapter, I turn to the work of Zanele Muholi in order to suggest one possible strategy for reading and representing the black female body which does not need to invoke the ghost of Sara Baartman’s dissected body. It is Xingwana’s particular misreading of Muholi’s work, along with her insistence that Muholi’s photographs “worked against nation-building,” that highlight my most important concern in this chapter. When former Minister Xingwana, as an official spokesperson for the state, dismisses Muholi’s photographs on the grounds that they “stereotype black women” and work “against nation building”, the underlying history of the colonial hypersexualisation of black female bodies which informs such a response is subtly reiterated as part of the rhetoric of postapartheid nation building. If these kinds of responses are officially sanctioned, they will continue to influence the way people imagine race, gender and sexuality in contemporary South Africa. As Kylie Thomas also points out, such a statement “from those who hold power in our country” can actively “determine who is afforded a place in the nation-state” (“Critical Work”).

Indeed, responses very similar to that of former Minister Xingwana’s can be found in the visitors’ comment sheets accompanying Muholi’s exhibitions, where Muholi invites viewers to share their thoughts on her work. “It is truly unacceptable for you,” one viewer wrote, “to undermine our race’s [sic] especially black portraying nudity and sexual explicit content images as if they are the only one who are involved in these inhuman activities” (quoted in Gunkel “Postcolonial Eyes” 80). While the viewer’s syntax in this comment makes it slightly difficult to follow their argument upon first reading it, the viewer’s anger at Muholi’s “inhuman” portrayal of naked black bodies is immediately obvious. The viewer immediately reads the category of nudity as synonymous with hurtful colonial stereotypes of black bodies. “Yes, art is an African thing,” another viewer wrote. “However, when degrading of women’s (make that black woman) bodies, it is no longer a question of art and beauty but of discrimination – the nation cries” (quoted in Gunkel “Postcolonial Eyes” 80).

Contrary to what these two viewers' comments want to assert, Muholi's photography in fact subverts both colonial and apartheid visual stereotypes of the black female nude, as I will show in the course of this chapter. Most importantly, Muholi's work subverts these visual stereotypes in such a way that her photographs do not have to look to the theoretical anchor of Sara Baartman's colonial exploitation. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in Muholi's nude black female figures. I look to nudity as a category of representation which necessitates, as Coly argues, the "resignification of a colonial signifier" (659). As Coly eloquently puts it, the naked black female figure is a figure that is "overburdened" by colonial visual history (653). In Chapter Five, I discussed the negative visual history of colonial photography of the black female body in terms of ethnographic photography. Given this immensely exploitative and shameful history, it is not surprising that the figure of the naked black woman would still evoke the fraught legacies of colonial exploitation in responses such as Xingwana's and the two above-mentioned viewers. As a result, Coly argues, the "colonial visual practice of disrobing the black female body has generally prompted the postcolonial African discursive gesture of covering of that body" (653). Consequently, Coly suggests that "an epistemology of respectability is almost endemic to black visual treatments of the female body" (656-657).

To offer but one example of such an epistemology of respectability, in 2015, during the decolonisation movement of #RhodesMustFall, a group of students at the University of Cape Town performed a theatrical piece of protest art in front of Willie Bester's sculpture of Sara Baartman, titled *Sarah Bartmann*, which is permanently housed in the University of Cape Town's Chancellor Oppenheimer Library. The students concluded their performance by covering the sculpture's body in a piece of white cloth and fashioning a scarf around its head.



Fig. 4 Willie Bester's *Sarah Bartmann* in the University of Cape Town's Chancellor Oppenheimer Library. Photographed by the author on 15 July 2015.

In a published statement, the protesting students claimed that the sculpture was evidence of how “the black body has been exoticised and fetishised in a pornographic fashion” (quoted in Hoxworth 275). “We reject [Sara Baartman’s] presentation in the library,” the students wrote,

we reject that her standing naked commemorates her and retains her dignity. Further we see no difference in the racist, sexist methods used by the French and British in the freak show attraction than her presentation in the UCT Oppenheimer library. [...] There are Particular ways in which Saartjie Baartmans spirit and legacy can be contextualised and respected. Thus in our climactic end we Draped her and covered her hoping to show these violence’s inflicted on the black body and psychology still continue and we

will not stop until we **decolonise the black body and mind!** (quoted in Hoxworth 288, orthography and emphasis retained from the original)

The protesting students' invocation of a postcolonial discourse of "dignity" and "respect" as a response to colonial humiliation, as well as their marked emphasis on the "nakedness" of the sculpture, recalls Coly's argument that the colonial history of disrobing the black female body generally prompts a decolonial discursive gesture of re-covering the body (see Coly 653). As Kellen Hoxworth writes, the students clearly attempted "to remake the sculpture into a *respectable* representation by concealing its 'naked' form" (290, emphasis added). Sibongiseni Gwebani, a student who witnessed the performance, wrote in a blog post that the students' performance art piece was "fighting and protesting for the dignity of Sara Baartman." "Justice and human dignity for Sara Baartman," Gwebani wrote, "could be achieved through covering her exposed body years after she died."<sup>34</sup> In covering the sculpture's body, the students evidently felt that they were recovering Sara Baartman's dignity from the injustices of a colonial past where her body was exposed and put on display, even after her death. This gesture of re-covering substantiates Coly's argument about the postcolonial discursive gesture of re-covering the naked black body (see Coly 653).

Coly traces this gesture of re-covering explicitly to the violation of Sara Baartman's body, writing that the colonial history of the "disrobing of Sarah Baartman" informs ways of reading the black female body to this day (659). Brenna Munro also writes that "Baartman's body functions as a sign, then, of the postcolonial politics of stigma: imperial shaming at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender and the corresponding emergence of a desire for postcolonial 'dignity'" (Munro *South Africa* xvi). Meg Samuelson notes how the "almost-naked body that was enacted in Bartmann's display in Piccadilly" underlies "the fervent act of covering the body"; however, she also notes her concern at how this gesture of re-covering "both replicates other acts of violence ... and covers over continuities between past and present violations of female bodies" (*Remembering* 98). Coly raises a related concern, speculating as to how one would go

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<sup>34</sup> The blog entry can be accessed online at: <https://sibongisenigwebs7.wordpress.com/>

about uncovering the “discursively overburdened” black female body “without reinstalling it within a colonial visual economy” (653).

As a possible answer to both Coly’s and Samuelson’s concerns, I look to Zanele Muholi’s photographic portrayal of intimacy, embodied experience and self-definition as a way of countering over-determined and essentialising colonial stereotypes of black feminine sexuality. Furthermore, what I hope to add to Coly’s discussion is that it is not only the category of nudity in itself which can offer new possibilities for representation. When it comes to representations of nudity, the representational category of intimacy can radically change the relationship between the viewer and the subject. Whereas the hypersexualised black female body would only have figured as a stereotypical object in colonial photography, either as an eroticised object for the viewer’s desire alone, or as some supposed “proof” of perceived “difference”, intimacy changes that relationship to a reciprocal desire between two mutually constituted subjects. Muholi’s project is therefore neither a recovering nor a “re-covering” of the naked black female body, in the same sense that the protesting students aimed to recover Sara Baartman’s dignity from a colonial history of discrimination and degradation by “re-covering” her symbolic body. Rather, I see Muholi’s project as an *uncovering*, both literal and symbolic. Her portrayal of the categories of nudity and intimacy insists upon the specificity and embodied experience of her subjects, thereby resisting essentialising stereotypes.

Indeed, while Muholi’s photographs may draw on the history of colonial and apartheid visual archives by making use of the conventions of documentary photography and portraiture, she subverts the essentialising stereotypes inherent to both colonial and apartheid representations of the black female body by highlighting the individuality of each of the subjects of her photographs. According to Van der Vlies, Muholi’s photographs invite the viewer “to think about the particularity of the subject” (145). Desiree Lewis writes that Muholi’s photographs employ “conventions of documentary photography that have a history of appropriation and objectification”, but that the composition of her photographs “transcend standard images of African women as victims” (“Against the Grain” 15).

Furthermore, Muholi's photographs not only document intimate moments, they also suggest a sense of intimacy between Muholi as photographer and the subjects of her photographs. In an essay that was published along with Muholi's photographs in the collection *Only Half the Picture*, Pumla Dineo Gqola writes that Muholi knows and interacts with the subjects of her photographs on a personal level ("Through Zanele Muholi's Eyes" 83). "Muholi," Gabeba Baderoon also writes, "acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between photographer and subject, between photographer and viewer" ("Composing Selves" 335). Muholi's photographs can therefore be read as an intimate "choreography of presence" between the photographer and subject, to borrow Baderoon's evocative phrase ("Composing Selves" 335). Baderoon's use of the word "presence" suggests that Muholi is present in the exchanges between herself, as photographer, and the subjects of her photographs. Indeed, Baderoon writes that Muholi herself feels that "a photographic relation of mutual presence and co-production between photographer and subject (a term she does not use) could be a powerfully collective and carefully navigated space" ("Composing Selves" 335).

In a short Human Rights Watch documentary on the impact of her work, Muholi states explicitly that she does not refer to the people she photographs as "subjects", but as "participants".<sup>35</sup> The viewer sees Muholi engaging with Tumi Nkopane, one of the "participants" in her *Faces and Phases* series, as they prepare for a photo shoot in Kwa-Thema. The two women talk and laugh about trivial matters, such as dog ownership and hair styling, but also discuss the pervasiveness of violent hate crimes against the LGBTI community in that particular area – "the killings", as they refer to it.<sup>36</sup> There is an easy familiarity between Muholi and Nkopane that attests to a mutual respect and trust. The viewer is left with the sense that Muholi takes great care to get to know her "participants" and to portray them as individuals. There is nothing to suggest that she merely uses her "participants" for her own artistic ends. For example, the viewer sees Muholi style Nkopane's hair before their photo shoot. "'Transformation', by Zanele Muholi," Nkopane jokes as she watches how Muholi styles her hair in a small hand mirror. "By you,"

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<sup>35</sup> The documentary can be viewed online at: <http://mg.co.za/multimedia/2013-11-26-zanele-muholi-we-live-in-fear>.

<sup>36</sup> South African lesbian soccer star, Eudy Simelane, was raped and murdered in Kwa-Thema.

Muholi immediately assures her. “This is your head.”

Muholi’s first solo exhibition, titled *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, was held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004. This collection of photographs was later extended and re-exhibited as part of the collection *Only Half the Picture* at the Michael Stevenson Gallery (now the Stevenson) in 2006. *Only Half the Picture* contains a number of photographs of the survivors of hate crimes. The photograph “Aftermath” (2004) from *Only Half the Picture* may be considered as Muholi’s most famous and influential photograph, given that the majority of scholars who write about Muholi’s work have commented on this particular picture.



Fig. 5 *Aftermath*, 2004.

© Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

The photograph shows a woman's lower torso and thighs. She is only wearing underwear, with the brand name, "Jockey", clearly visible on the elasticised waistband. Andrew van der Vlies offers a nuanced analysis of the "host of complex and complicated cultural signifiers" which the "Jockey" logo invokes, only one of which is that the brand name "might be read as signifying lesbian identity", since Jockey has traditionally been a range of men's underwear (143). There is a very long and very prominent scar running down the length of the woman's one thigh, all the way down to her knee. Her hands are curled protectively over her genitals. Kylie Thomas reads the positioning of the woman's hands as a "metonym for her violated vagina" ("Intimate Archive" 430). The woman's hands "seek to shield her, to protect her," Thomas argues,

in this instance from our gaze as much as from the traumatic memory of attack; but at the same time they are passive, they are hands that speak of a history of defeat. If there is a *punctum* here, it is not the scar – which we cannot fail to see – but the light as it catches the thumb of this woman, her curled fingers, the vulnerability of her being that is encoded in her hands.<sup>37</sup>  
(Kylie Thomas "Intimate Archive" 430)

While I agree with Thomas that the woman's hands form the *punctum* of the photograph, and that the precarity of her being is encoded in her hands, I also wish to offer a more positive reading of "Aftermath". The light in the photograph highlights the woman's thumb and forefinger, instead of the scar, thereby deliberately not portraying the scar as the site of her precarity. The prominence of the scar could have cast the woman as a stereotype of the African woman as a silent, suffering victim. However, Muholi's photograph subverts this stereotype in two important ways. Firstly, she does not portray the woman's face, thereby respecting her dignity and her privacy. Secondly, the lighting in the photograph emphasises the woman's hands, not only further accentuating her privacy, but also insisting upon her individuality and agency. "While the impression

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas is referring to Roland Barthes' concepts of the *stadium* and the *punctum*. "Most photographs," Thomas explains, "belong to the *stadium*, that which I have learned to see by acculturation and that which cannot really reach me. And then there are photographs that arrest my gaze, photographs that disturb the *stadium* of my gaze, photographs that wound me, photographs that I love... It is this that Barthes terms the *punctum*" (Kylie Thomas "Intimate Archive" 426-427).

created by her scarred thigh and traumatised body may be one of victimisation,” Desiree Lewis writes, “another current insists on the agency of a woman with choices, with dignity and with self-possession” (“Against the Grain” 15). Gqola argues that it is not only *what* Muholi makes visible, but *how* she does it, “not just whom she positions at centre stage, but the gamut of techniques and effects which she garners to such ends” (“Through Zanele Muholi’s Eyes” 83). By focusing the light in the photograph on the woman’s hands, rather than the scar, Muholi not only subverts the stereotype of victimisation, but also insists upon the embodied specificity of the woman and on her status as subject – or rather, to use Muholi’s preferred phrase – as a *participant* in this image.

The fact that Muholi sees the woman in “Aftermath” as a participant raises a number of crucial points. First of all, it not only suggests that the subject of this photograph is willing to be represented in this way, but also that she is actively involved in the production of her own representation. Secondly, it further suggests that the photographer and her subject are producing this image together, as equal participants, and that “Aftermath” is thus created out of an intimate collaboration. Given that “Aftermath” is recording a personal history of suffering and victimisation, the fact that the woman is not the object *of* the image, but rather a participant *in* the production of the image, marks an important distinction in how her precarity is being represented. Furthermore, as Muholi does not portray the face of the woman in “Aftermath”, she is not subjected to the viewer’s prying gaze. “She is an individual whose dignity is respected,” Van der Vlies writes, “whose privacy is restored, whose experience is recorded – and whose scars can be read as standing for the scars of others” (144). Nevertheless, Van der Vlies also notes the “startling intimacy” of the photograph, due to the very close “proximity of the lens to the subject” (145). In this way, even though her face is not represented, the viewer is still arrested by her precarity, by the “vulnerability of her being that is encoded in her hands” (Kylie Thomas “Intimate Archive” 430).

In her discussion of Levinas and the notion of the “face”, Judith Butler argues that the symbolic violence of representation happens precisely through the representation of the

face of the “other” (see *Precarious Life* 144). According to Butler, when we are truly confronted with the precarity of the life of the “other”, no representation can succeed, since representation is precisely the means for the capture, effacement or appropriation of the “other”. Butler therefore argues that the face of the “other” is that which is beyond representation, and that any attempt to represent it would be to lose it. She writes that there is “something unrepresentable” in the face of the “other” that we “nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (*Precarious Life* 144). This does not mean that Butler entirely abandons the idea of representation; rather, she insists that an ethical representation of the “other” would visibly show its failure to ever truly represent another person’s embodied precarity.

In the artist’s statement to her *Faces and Phases* series, Muholi herself suggests a possible interpretation of the notion of the “face” in her work. “*Faces*”, she writes, “is also about the *face-to-face* confrontation between myself as the photographer/activist and the many lesbians, women and transmen I have interacted with from different places” (6, emphasis added). In a conversation with Gabeba Baderoon, Muholi further expounds on the meaning of the “face” in her work:

The face speaks to me. The face presents what I am that I am not able to confirm or confront. The face has a voice. The face means a presence and an existence. When you are alone, in a space of solitude, your face says something even if you don’t see it, and a portrait says something even if you don’t say it. (quoted in Baderoon “Gender” 411)

Muholi’s emphasis on such a *face-to-face* confrontation immediately highlights a sense of mutual exchange, conversation, presence and reciprocity between both herself as photographer and the participants in her work, as well as between the subject of the photograph and the viewer, which is very different to Levinas’ and Butler’s understanding of the ethical imperative of being confronted with the face of the “other”. I again draw attention to Baderoon’s description of Muholi’s work as an intimate “choreography of presence”, as this complicates Butler’s argument that representation

can only efface the precarity of the “other” through capture or appropriation (Baderon “Composing Selves” 335). Muholi’s representations of precarious lives do not attempt to appropriate the face of the “other”; rather, Muholi sees both herself and her participants as equally present in the production of the image. I therefore turn to the possibilities of intimacy as a category of representation in the remainder of this chapter. Given that a number of scholars have already written at length about “Aftermath”, I want to focus the remainder of my discussion on a lesser known photograph from the series *Only Half the Picture*, titled “Reclining Figure, 2006”.



Fig. 6 *Reclining Figure, 2006*.

© Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

The photograph features a full-figured black woman, lying on her front on a low bed. The bed appears to only consist of a mattress lying on a floor, covered by a white sheet. This not only suggests an intimate, private setting, but also suggests a history of hardship and poverty, where the suggested bedroom setting is neither opulent nor luxurious. The woman’s soft hand gestures suggest that she is comfortable and relaxed; neither of her hands is rigid or clenched. The soft folds in the white sheet, as well as the warm, subdued

tone of the lighting, help to create a peaceful, tender setting. Her one hand rests on the mattress, with her open fingers curling towards the viewer. Her other hand partly hides her face, so that even though the woman is naked, she retains a measure of privacy. These two hand gestures seem to simultaneously draw the viewer in, but also tell the viewer exactly to what extent she will allow herself to be watched. Even though the woman is naked, Muholi does not portray her as sexualised. Her breasts, genitals and face remain private. Indeed, the representation of this naked figure is permeated with a sense of tenderness, intimacy and closeness, rather than overt sexuality.

Munro argues that this particular photograph “invokes both the European painted nude and images of Sara Baartman” and “invites us to wonder why such a body is not usually included in archives of classical ‘art’ or modern ‘beauty’” (*South Africa* 226). While I agree with Munro’s valid question as to why an image such as “Reclining Figure, 2006” will not commonly be found in the archives of either classical or modern art, in the same way that the European nude female figure would be, I am nevertheless disturbed by her claim that the photograph invokes images of Sara Baartman. “Reclining Figure, 2006” is a contemporary photograph of a woman in a private, domestic space. There is not a single visual reference in this photograph which either suggests the particular history or the personhood of Sara Baartman. I read nothing in the participant’s body language which suggests discomfort, exploitation, humiliation or victimisation. The woman is not portrayed as hypersexualised, since the positioning of her body insists upon her privacy. Alarming, then, Munro’s reading seems to suggest that one cannot look at a representation of the black female body – and, in this particular case, a representation of the undressed full-figured black female body – without invoking “images of Sara Baartman.” Such a reading is exemplary of the “Baartman trope’s” flattening out of all historic and embodied specificity.

Muholi herself invokes the figure of Sara Baartman in relation to her work, but in a way that is very different to Munro’s reading of the image above. Gabeba Baderoon recalls “The Meanings of Sara Baartman” colloquium, held at Pennsylvania State University on the first of March 2010, where Muholi presented some of her work. During her

presentation, Muholi proposed a new way to look at Sara Baartman, “through a gaze that does not allude to the history of violation that generally characterises images of Baartman, even if only to contest it, but which sees her instead as a lover” (Baderoon “Baartman and the Private” 79).

“I want to see Sara as my lover,” Muholi said during her presentation, pointing to the photograph “Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007”, part of her *Being* (2007) series, as exemplifying how she saw a beloved person. (Baderoon “Baartman and the Private” 79)



Fig. 7 *Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007*.

© Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

The photograph which Muholi referred to, “Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007”, is,

in many ways, remarkably similar to “Reclining Figure, 2006”. This photograph also features a full-figured naked black female figure in an intimate, domestic setting. Once again, the subject rests on a low mattress on a floor, covered with a white sheet. The soft folds in the sheet create a similar feeling of tenderness and intimacy. The lighting in this photograph makes more use of bright white highlights, giving the woman’s skin a glossy, glowing quality. Still, even though her naked skin appears more highlighted than that of “Reclining Figure, 2006”, Muholi does not focus on her participant’s sexuality, hiding her breasts, genitals and face from view. Once again, the viewer cannot quite see the woman’s face. Like “Reclining Figure, 2006”, her body language suggests that she is comfortable being photographed naked, but that she will also decide the extent to which the viewer is allowed to watch her. This idea is further emphasised by the curtain in the picture, dividing the intimate bedroom setting from what one assumes to be the rest of the house. The visual presence of the curtain suggests that the woman decides who is allowed to watch her in such an intimate setting. “This is an intimate photograph,” Baderoon writes, “but it also signals to us the rules of a necessary discretion” (“Baartman and the Private” 82).

Baderoon’s comment about a “necessary discretion” is crucial to understanding both Muholi’s comment about seeing Sara Baartman as her lover, as well as the way in which Muholi invokes Baartman’s name to refer to the woman in “Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007”. This “necessary discretion” is closely linked to an acknowledgement of the “unknowability” of Sara Baartman herself, as I will go on to show in my discussion below (Gqola “Sarah Bartmann” 102). There is a very different dynamic at play when Muholi invokes Sara Baartman’s memory in reference to “Nomshado” than when Munro claims that a photograph such as “Reclining Figure, 2006” invokes “images of Sara Baartman.” Unlike Munro, Muholi is not suggesting that her nude representation of “Nomshado” must necessarily be read through the theoretical framework of the “Baartman trope”. Rather, Muholi is gesturing to an intimate photograph and suggesting a different way of reading representations of Sara Baartman’s body; she is not urging her viewers to see “Nomshado” as Sara Baartman, but rather suggesting that viewers see Sara Baartman in the same way in which she has chosen to portray “Nomshado”. Baderoon

therefore concludes that both the name and the image of “Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007” has been invoked in the name of Sara Baartman, a woman “who was looked at too much” (“Baartman and the Private” 83). A photograph such as “Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007”, Baderoon insists, “teaches us how to look at her differently” (“Baartman and the Private” 83).

Muholi achieves this through a representation of intimacy. Intimacy, as a category of representation, changes the relationship between both the photographer and the subject, as well as the subject and the viewer, to a moment of reciprocity between two mutually constituted subjects. It no longer marks a relation of “self” and “other”, but rather acknowledges the relationship between two subjects, or, to use Muholi’s own preferred term, the relationship between two participants. In this way, it is not only the category of nudity which disrupts the “epistemology of respectability” mentioned at the start of this chapter (Coly 656-657). Rather, representations of intimacy radically change the very category of nudity itself to signal a different way of seeing and representing bodies. Levinas’ notion of the face of the “other”, as well as Butler’s argument that an ethical representation of the “other” must show its failure to ever truly convey the precarity of another life, is deepened through the representational category of intimacy. Muholi’s work insists that both the photographer and the subject are equally present in the act of representation. Therefore, there is no confrontation with the face of the “other”; rather, there is a face-to-face relation which confronts the shared precarity of mutually constituted participants. This, however, does not imply that the viewer suddenly and miraculously has full access to and knowledge of the interiority, the precarity and the full humanity of the subjects in Muholi’s photographs. It does not mean that invoking the name of Sara Baartman in relation to an intimate photograph, such as “Nomshado”, will suddenly reveal some “true” representation of Sara Baartman’s subjectivity. The portrayal of intimacy in Muholi’s work does not signal a *failure* of representation, in the same sense in which Butler, following Levinas, writes about it. Instead, it signals the “necessary discretion” on Baderoon insists, which is a subtle, yet important, distinction.

The presence of the curtain in “Nomshado, Queensgate, Parktown, 2007” is a visual

manifestation of this necessary discretion, as it suggests that, even in this intimate portrayal, there are registers of experience and subjectivity to which the viewer does not, and will not, have access. This argument is similar to Butler's, yet more attuned to the notions of intimacy and reciprocity. For it is not because "Nomshado" is reduced to the "other", or because we can never fully represent or comprehend the full humanity of the "other", that we do not gain full access to her subjectivity; rather, it is because the production of such an intimate portrayal *can* recognise "Nomshado" as a subject with her own precarious subjectivity, that it also recognises her agency to decide to what extent she will allow herself to be watched.

When Muholi invokes Sara Baartman's name in relation to "Nomshado", this sense of intimacy deepens an understanding of the "(im)possibility of representing Sarah Bartmann" (Gqola "Sarah Bartmann" 70). Gqola argues it is by acknowledging the very "unknowability" of Baartman's life that one can more fully signal her humanity ("Sarah Bartmann" 102). Baderoon posits this "unknowability" as the opposite of the "invasive visibility" to which Sara Baartman was subjected during her lifetime ("Baartman and the Private" 71). If one acknowledges the "unknowability" of Sara Baartman not as a failure of representation to "capture" the "other", but as the "necessary discretion" exemplified by Muholi's photography, as well as an act of intimacy which recognises Sara Baartman's right to privacy, then the "Baartman trope" would no longer be the organising trope through which to read representations of the naked black female body.

## Afterword

### Laying the Colonial Spectres to Rest

In the opening pages of this thesis, I argued that few bodies have been made to bear the symbolic weight of as many cultural and academic discourses as that of Sara Baartman's. I argued that the ghost of Sara Baartman's dissected body is almost habitually evoked as an affective argument against problematic portrayals of the black body, even in as incongruous an example and as tentative a connection as that of the supposed "Sara Baartmanisation" of former President Jacob Zuma in *The Spear*. I argued that when a painting such as *The Spear* challenges the symbolic body of ruling patriarchy, or the nation-building rhetoric of postapartheid nationalism, the black female body still remains the symbolic site where the discourses of colonialism and postapartheid nationalism are both played out and rigidly maintained. All of this, I argued, suggests that the intersecting tropes of race, gender and sexuality which underlie postapartheid nation-building discourses are repeatedly and uncritically invoked through the figure of Sara Baartman.

Throughout the course of this thesis, I aimed to show how the "Baartman trope" is only made possible through a highly reductive mode of representation, which reduces Sara Baartman's name, her body and her history to an essentialist concept noun. As long as the myriad and complex lived experiences of any given body are diminished to serve reductive interpretations – in the way that Sara Baartman's body and her particular history have come to stand either for the archetypal hypersexualised victim of colonial exploitation and humiliation, or for the symbolic mother of the "new" South African postcolony – such interpretations will limit and hinder new ways of representing bodies, which could finally dislodge the fraught legacies of colonialist representation. Furthermore, the fact that colonial systems of signification still underpin and influence postcolonial representations, albeit in new ways and to different purposes, highlights the inevitably ambiguous, unstable and hybridised nature of representing race, gender and sexuality in the South African postcolony.

Both performativity theory and the representational category of intimacy can offer a more nuanced critical approach to the problem of representation, since both performativity theory and intimacy offer certain discursive strategies for disrupting essentialist stereotypes. Throughout this thesis, I aimed to illustrate exactly *how* performativity theory shows that there is no reason why a discursive construct such as the “Bartman trope” necessarily has to correspond to any one particular material body. Performativity theory disrupts the tendency to read the “Bartman trope” as somehow being about a particular body, about particular “differences”, even when scholars and writers deliberately set out to challenge essentialist colonial stereotypes.

Intimacy, in conjunction with performativity theory, offers a serious ethical response to the politics of representation. According to Judith Butler, when we are truly and intimately confronted with the face of the “other”, no representation can succeed, since representation is precisely the means for the capture, effacement or appropriation of the “other”. Butler argues that the face of the “other” is that which is beyond representation, and that any attempt to represent it would be to lose it. For Butler, an ethical representation of the “other” would thus mark the very failure of that representation in the first place. Muholi’s work, however, emphasises mutual exchange, presence and reciprocity, and thus offers a very different understanding of the ethical imperative of being confronted with the face of the “other” than that of Butler’s theory. However, in Muholi’s work, there is no confrontation with the face of the “other”; rather, there is a face-to-face relation which confronts the shared precarity of mutually constituted subjects. In this way, Muholi’s representations of intimacy powerfully disrupt essentialist representation by insisting upon relationality and reciprocity. Her portrayal of intimacy as a category of representation recognises “difference” very differently from the way it functions in essentialist stereotypes of race and gender, thereby signalling a radically different way of both seeing and representing bodies.

Ultimately, Zanele Muholi’s photographs of intimate naked black female figures clearly signal one possible way of looking at the black female body in a manner that is not overburdened by the weight of colonial visual history’s essentialist representations.

Instead, through her portrayal of nudity and intimacy, Muholi's photographs insist upon the specificity and the embodied experience of her participants. In this way, Muholi's work suggests a different strategy for reading and representing the black female body, one which does not need to invoke the ghost of Sara Baartman's dissected body. Her photographic portrayals of intimacy, embodied experience and self-definition effectively counter the over-determined and essentialising colonial stereotypes of black feminine sexuality inherent to the "Baartman trope". It offers one possible strategy to radically disrupt the reductive and impoverished mode of representation which makes a comparison of former President Jacob Zuma to *a* Sara Baartman possible.

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