

Whose Trauma? Discursive Practices in Saartjie Baartman's Literary Afterlives

Giuliana Iannaccaro

Università di Milano

“*S*arah Bartmann [...] has, at last, returned to her people”. These words were uttered on 9 August 2002 by Thabo Mbeki,¹ then President of South Africa, on the occasion of Saartjie Baartman's ‘funeral’, which took place in the Eastern Cape Province. She was buried on the outskirts of the town of Hankey, possibly not far from the place where she was born in the 1770s or 1780s². The remains of the body of the South African woman of Khoisan descent reached their land of origin after several years of negotiation between South Africa and France, begun by President Nelson Mandela in 1995 and concluded by his successor Mbeki in 2002. Until as late as 1974 a full cast of her body and skeleton were on exhibition at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, together with her bottled organs (brain and genitalia). Her body parts were then removed from display and held in storage, until they were repatriated to South Africa and solemnly buried.

Saartjie Baartman³ was brought from Cape Town to London in 1810 to be exhibited at 225 Piccadilly as a freak and scientific curiosity for the price of two shillings. The shape of her body (short in stature with protruding buttocks) – unusual for European audiences but rather common among some populations of southern Africa – was exploited to titillate the morbid curiosity of the public⁴. After earning success in London and touring the provinces, the “Hottentot Venus” was put on display in the shows of Paris in 1814; in a few months she came to the attention of Georges Cuvier, the great anatomist and chief surgeon to Napoleon Bonaparte. Cuvier obtained

permission to examine her body and have it reproduced in painting; after Baartman's death (December 1815) he made a plaster cast of her corpse and then dissected it. Her skeleton, preserved organs, and body cast were kept on display for almost 200 years in Paris.⁵

Yvette Abrahams speaks of a "great long national insult" to refer to the systematic denigration and subsequent enslavement of South African indigenous peoples like the Khoisan and the Xhosa by white travel writers, scientists and colonialists towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Within a larger history of national colonialism, it is possible to write more specific narratives – usually considered *lesser* narratives – exposing not only the physical violence, but also the "mental abuse" exercised on those 'rebellious' populations through belittlement and disparagement (36). Both in the form of neutral scientific discourse and of political diktats, the emerging systematic classification of human races enabled the Europeans to think, safely, that the people "they were killing and enslaving were less than human" (36). Abrahams's "national insult" thus brings together the South African nation and the specific ethnic groups it is composed of, since the trauma (long lasting and still effective "mental abuse") brought on the Khoisan populations stains the whole nation.

Also Thabo Mbeki's speech at the belated funeral of Saartjie Baartman employs rhetorical strategies that highlight the national and social identity of the person buried: she was African, South African, and Khoisan; she was a representative of the female sex, and an individual with universal human rights. In this way Mbeki is able to claim the traumatic experience of a whole nation: "The story of Sarah Bartmann is the story of the African people of our country in all their echelons. It is a story of the loss of our ancient freedom. It is a story of our dispossession of the land and the means that gave us an independent livelihood". Mbeki's is a carefully prepared speech that introduces us to the complex discursive practices drawing on Baartman's story. In addition to the question of nation-building – the reclamation of Saartjie's remains in the name of the whole people of South Africa – he touches upon the issue of the historical truth that must be told in order to restore "the dignity of Sarah Bartmann, of the Khoi-San, of the millions of Africans who have known centuries of wretchedness". Not less important is the question of Saartjie's even harder form of subjugation due to her gender. Mbeki takes advantage of her being a woman to solemnly confirm the South African's government obligation "to ensure that we move with greater speed towards the accomplishment of the goal of the creation

of a non-sexist society”.⁶ As can be seen from the weight of the issues raised in Mbeki’s speech, it is clear that the occasion of Saartjie Baartman’s burial is politically expedient to produce a ‘discourse of the nation’. The Khoisan woman becomes an icon of national unity, of political responsibility, and of the need of a firm ethical position on the question of human rights and dignity; her individual trauma, if remembered and reclaimed, can contribute to heal the collective trauma of an entire nation in the present.

Questions of remembrance, reclamation and restitution are embedded in the literary rewritings of Baartman’s story and in the attempts to recover her ‘voice’. Limiting our survey to works written in English, we can mention just a few examples belonging to different literary genres, like Elizabeth Alexander’s poem “The Venus Hottentot (1825)” (1990) and Diana Ferrus’ “A Poem for Sarah Baartman” (1998); Suzan-Lori Parks play *Venus* (1996); Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel, *Hottentot Venus. A Novel* (2003), Rachel Holmes’s biographical narrative, *The Hottentot Venus. The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman, Born 1789 – Buried 2002* (2007), and another biographical narrative, Clifton Crais’s and Pamela Scully’s *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus. A Ghost Story and a Biography* (2009). Not entirely dedicated to Baartman, but nevertheless dealing with her icon, are Zoë Wicomb’s novel *David’s Story* (2000) and, to a lesser extent, Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000) and Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003). There are also film productions, like Zola Maseko’s *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: “The Hottentot Venus”* (1998) and *The Return of Sara Baartman* (2002), together with the French-Tunisian director Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Vénus Noire* (2010).

Far from being reclaimed only by her mother country, Baartman has become a transnational icon; Desiree Lewis remarks that “from the middle of the twentieth century [...] there has been a deluge of artwork, poetry, autobiography, documentaries, drama, and academic writing” dealing with her figure (101). Of the works mentioned above, Alexander’s poems, Park’s play, and Chase-Riboud’s novel are the expression of African American feminist aesthetics, whereas both Holmes’s and Crais’s and Scully’s biographical narratives are the fruit of (respectively) British and North American cultural historian’s archival research.⁷ Zoë Wicomb and Zakes Mda are South African, although both writers mainly live and work in the UK and USA. Of the global surge of scholarly work on Baartman (greatly increased after 2002) a major part comes from the United States and Europe; for this reason, the introduction to the collection of essays edited by Natasha

Gordon-Chipembere in 2011 claims an Africanist outlook on the legacy of Sarah Baartman, even if the editor herself comes from the Caribbean. Along with transnational feminist movements of artists and cultural critics, Saartjie Baartman's icon is significant for anti-racist movements worldwide: being a woman and a black colonial subject, "[Baartman's] story was particularly compelling for anyone interested in deconstructing difference and analyzing the 'othering' process" (Magubane 47).

The present contribution deals with two very different novels – Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000) and Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus. A Novel* (2003) – not only because their dissimilarity can tell us much on the discursive practices concerning the figure of Saartjie Baartman, but also because they are bound by the same wish to shed light on the present by investigating the past. They also share an overall structural complexity. In the case of *David's Story*, the postmodern features of a fragmented and multi-layered narration are easily perceived: the novel carefully avoids granting authority to a single narrator and to a single version of history, including the life-history of the alleged protagonist, David, which is the very object of a painstaking and dubitative process of research and reconsideration on his part. Past and present judgments on events alternate continuously; a gendered gaze renders the interpretation of the same issues many-sided and by no means 'fixed'. Also Chase-Riboud chooses a complex structure for her novel: *Hottentot Venus* begins at the end of the protagonist's life, and the whole narrative could be defined, paradoxically, a 'fictional multi-voiced pseudo-historical (auto)biography'. Sarah Baartman's voice, allegedly the privileged source of knowledge on her own existence, alternates with other narrators who provide their own point of view on her life's story, thus crossing the border of fictional autobiography; the narrative, besides, swerves more than once from the (few) known facts of Baartman's life to propose different versions of events. I will argue that similar narrative techniques in both works – the manipulation of time and the intertwining of past and present, the challenge to received versions of history, the questioning of the very possibility of autobiography by negating the singular source of authority in a text – lead to unequal literary achievements. To be more specific, I find Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* unsatisfactory for reasons that have first and foremost to do with the generally disregarded question of its literary value, although that aspect inevitably affects also the efficacy of its socio-political stances.

A further, relevant link between *David's Story* and *Hottentot Venus*

specifically relates to the main topic of this article: a trauma narrative is actually detectable in both novels, even if the lens of trauma are employed in radically different ways. As Thabo Mbeki's speech has already made clear, though, the trauma relating to the story of Saartjie Baartman is of complex definition. The bodily and mental trauma of an individual who lost mother and father at an early age, was dislocated from her rural birthplace and brought to live in an urban environment (Cape Town), was made a servant to strangers, and was eventually transported to a world totally unknown to her (Europe) in order to be exhibited as a freak, conflates into the collective trauma claimed by Khoisan populations like the Griqua,⁸ by her recently constituted democratic nation (South Africa), by her African-American 'diasporic sisters', and by anti-racist movements denouncing the still widespread emarginated and subjugated condition of the blacks.

Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga discuss at length the possibility to apply a 'Western' conception of trauma to the South African situation in their introduction to the collection of essays *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel* (2012). They question Western trauma theories, which "focus on the individual who has been traumatized by a single identifiable event that causes what is defined PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)" (xi). For South Africa they claim instead a *historicized* conception of trauma, "an understanding of trauma that sees it not only as a result of an identifiable event but as the consequence of a condition that came about historically – in the case of South Africa, that of colonialism, and, more specifically, of apartheid" (xi). Wary of the fact that the 'postcolonial/trauma nexus' can be seen as an additional neo-colonial category imposed on former colonies, they strongly criticize the line of argument of trauma studies informed on deconstruction – like Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), "considered *the* canonical text of trauma theory in Western universities" (Mengel and Borzaga xiii). What they object to is the broad definition of trauma as "an unclaimed (and unclaimable) experience [...] in this way precluding any possibility of healing for individuals or entire nations" (xiii).

Interestingly enough, Caruth's work – in close dialogue with Freud's writings – does raise the question of historical trauma. In the first chapter, entitled "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History", Caruth affirms that the central insight in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* regards the connection between history, trauma, and the presence of the Other outside the self: "[...] history, like trauma, is never simply one's own

[...] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). Far from embarking in an investigation concerning the pertinence of Caruth's theory of trauma to the South African situation (which is beyond the limits of this article⁹), I just wish to point out a flaw in Mengel and Borzaga's argument. They regard the Western mode of thought inadequate to the interpretation of the postcolonial situation, because it is still structurally 'Cartesian': "The Cartesian subject's tendency to think in clear-cut dichotomies of black and white, body and mind, individual and society – which has become the Western mode of thought – proves untenable with regard to the historical and cultural situation of the postcolony." (xi). By so saying, nevertheless, they make use of precisely the same binary oppositions they want to stigmatize: they appear to consider Western thought as a monolithic block with no internal dialogue, nuances and inner contradictions – that is, totally deprived of the virtue of complexity, which instead has to be applied not only to the modalities of thought themselves, but also to the very category of "Western" thinking subjects, which is at least as debatable as that of postcolonial subjects. The same literary voices mentioned above in relation to Saartjie Baartman are just a few examples of the difficulty of labelling people who are 'Western' and 'non-Western' at the same time, beginning with Afro-American writers like Chase-Riboud and Suzan-Lori Parks, to the South African and deeply 'westernized' Zoë Wicomb and Zakes Mda.

Mengel and Borzaga's introduction to *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative*, nevertheless, does raise pivotal issues: they ask whether it is really possible to speak of a collective historical trauma, encompassing both black and white South African population, and wonder whether we shouldn't even "differentiate between the ethnicities that make up the South African nation as a whole" (vii-viii). Also Shane Graham, in an article entitled "'This Text Deletes Itself': Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*" (2008), holds that in coming to terms with a collective and transgenerational conception of trauma "we need to understand the trauma of various groups in South Africa" (128). He contends that a careful reading of Wicomb's novel clarifies three points which are pivotal for his project: "[...] to deepen and expand our understanding of historical trauma in southern Africa while suggesting in particular that we must pay at least as much attention to the ways in which traumatic events are 1) *collective* – they create psychic disruption in whole families, clans, and communities; 2) *spatial* – memorialization is

contained or inhibited by particular configurations of space and place and by particular uses of the land; and 3) *material* – they involve the loss of not just language but also land, houses, shops and stocks” (128).

Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* actually puts the reader in front of such issues by going deep into the question of historical identity and national belonging. Dealing (also) with the history of the Khoi peoples of southern Africa and especially of the Griqua, and with the difficult position of ‘coloureds’ in the apartheid state, the book avoids the traditional dichotomy black vs. white in order to explore more nuanced social and political conflicts. The novel also evokes the figure of Saartjie Baartman from the very beginning, but without appropriating the Khoi woman’s story, which is just hinted at and never told: the few mentions of her name are outnumbered by frequent indirect references based on allusions and gaps. Employing postmodern representational strategies, the novel renders the issue of authoriality extremely problematic, because it questions the possibility of telling even an autobiographical (let alone a biographical) truth. Throughout the text, it is never clear who is entitled to interpret past and present history, and in the name of whom.

The story is set both in 1991 – after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the African National Congress was unbanned – and in the early twentieth century, during the struggle for independence and land restitution engaged by the Griqua community led by the historical figure of Andrew Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur (1867-1941). The novel’s parallel narratives are in constant dialogue through references, allusions, similar names, recurrent motives and themes; the alleged main character, David Dirske, links the two timespans by being both a protagonist of the 1980s and early 1990s struggle for liberation from apartheid (he is a guerilla fighter for uMkhonto we Sizwe, MK, the armed wing of the African National Congress), and a member of a Cape coloured community descended from the Griqua peoples who struggled for independence at the beginning of the century. In search of his origins, and trying to make sense of a life as a revolutionary that is rapidly falling to pieces on the edge of a new era, David attempts to put order into his life-story by having it recorded in written form. He hires an amanuensis because he feels incapable of taking the necessary distance from events, and his scribe turns out to be a learned woman of liberal and pacifist convictions, whom David accuses more than once of belonging to a different world: “People who tend their gardens and polish their sensibilities in the morality of art have no idea about

the business of survival out there in the bush with no resources” (196). Nevertheless, the two of them engage in an enterprise which soon proves impossible: that of giving order to chaos, of making sense of David’s story through a coherent narration of events that instead turns out to be intricate, contradictory and terrifying, soaked as it is in violence and blood.

The plot revolves around individual and collective forms of trauma: the personal trauma of a single character, Dulcie – a guerrilla comrade of David’s who is subjected to concealed forms of extreme violence (torture, rape) and becomes the obsession of both the protagonist and his scribe – and the collective trauma of at least three overlapping social groups: the women characters past and present, whose life stories are reflections of Dulcie’s (and of Saartjie Baartman’s, as we shall see); the Cape coloured population involved in the struggle for liberation from apartheid; and the Khoi and San peoples (within them, the Griqua), who lost their land and independence in the course of the nineteenth century and who are still waiting for restitution and full citizenship in the new South Africa. The kind of trauma depicted in the novel, therefore, is not only both individual and collective, but also transgenerational – in a word, historical. From the personal to the general and vice-versa: in this respect, Wicomb’s novel would seem to employ the same discursive practices we saw exemplified in Thabo Mbeki’s speech, with the pivotal difference that in *David’s Story* the individual trauma is far from being decontextualized and dehistoricized in order to be exploited for political ends, and it is given, instead, “a historical context and a political force” (Driver 232).

It would be impossible here to give justice to a rich and complex novel like *David’s Story*; I will just try to shed light on the presence of Saartjie Baartman and her numerous ‘incarnations’, conscious of the fact that much has to be left out, but also that the narrative strand of women’s history past and present is one of the leading constituents of the story. Baartman’s name appears from the very beginning, in a preface in which the narrator (the anonymous amanuensis) reveals the uncertain, fragmented, and constantly negotiated nature of her narrative:

David’s story started at the Cape with Eva/Krotoa, the first Khoi woman in the Dutch castle, the only section I have left out. He eventually agreed to that but was adamant about including a piece on Saartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus placed on display in Europe. One cannot write nowadays, he said, without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself. (1)

The narrator objects to this mode of writing about the past, a practice that evokes historical icons¹⁰ without contextualizing them and rather exploits their momentary public resonance for propagandistic and political ends – or even just to give prestige to a text perceived as not learned enough. David also shows elsewhere his superficiality in treating the figure of Baartman, as when he naively affirms that “Baartman belongs to all of us” (135): by “us” he means the same undifferentiated South African nation to which Mbeki’s speech was addressed, as if forgetful of the heterogeneity of his country and of the tremendous conflicts that century-long struggles for power have generated. Despite David’s wishes, therefore, the alleged scribe (who turns out to be at least the co-author of the novel) ultimately incorporates Saartjie Baartman’s story in the text just as a quick survey of the renowned bits and pieces of her biography, together with some of the “novelistic details” that must be included in an otherwise scanty, because very poorly documented, narration about her – thus also making a metanarrative ironical reference to the way in which many stories on Baartman are constructed:

[...] he brought along the meticulously researched monograph, complete with novelistic detail: Saartje’s foolish vanity, the treachery of white men, the Boer mistress who would not let her go, whose prophetic words rang in her ears, 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. And the bitter cold of a northern winter that lasted all year long.” (134-135)

The narrator does not see the usefulness of yet another stereotypical representation of the story of the Khoi woman; since David insists, she appeals to his specific historical interest in the Griqua people: “But she may not even have been a Griqua. David gives me a withering look. Baartman belongs to all of us” (135). The woman seems to capitulate, and condescends to the fact that “the Baartman piece will have to stay” (135); instead, it will never appear in the finished book. Being the one who, for once, can take the final decision on the written record, this woman writer opts for leaving out yet another representation of Saartjie Baartman which, playing both on the icon of ‘savage Hottentot’ and on that of ‘mother of the nation’, perpetrates the exploitation of her name for discursive practices which have nothing to do with her story.

David wants his book to incorporate the historical figures of Eva/Krotoa and Saartjie Baartman, but at the same time he seems unable to deal with an icon much closer to himself, that of his already ‘mythical’ guerrilla comrade Dulcie Oliphant. The character of Dulcie is complex and elusive, not least because she never speaks for herself, but is always recounted, evoked or painfully remembered by someone else – mainly by David and the narrator, but at times also by David’s wife Sally. She is a leading figure in the struggle because of her courage and total dedication to the cause, but the situation in which she finds herself as a woman of military power is contradictory to the point of being paradoxical. The novel raises the issue of women fighters against the apartheid state, who were accepted as long as the liberation movement needed them, but could be reminded of their naturally subjected position vis-à-vis their male comrades through a sort of ‘regular’, established form of rape – and even, the novel suggests, outright torture. In addition, once it became clear that ANC cadres had to prepare themselves to become the leading figures of the upcoming democratic nation, it was similarly well-understood that there was no place for women of (real) power in the rainbow nation. Women fighters in the novel must be prepared to abandon military life in order to embrace the role of wives and mothers, confined to a domesticity they had previously learned to erase. Dulcie’s worst traumatic experience, her imprisonment in an ANC detention camp in Angola,¹¹ haunts the novel in the form of brief narrations of uncertain status and provenience: they could be actual events (more rapes, more torture) as well as fragmented memories or hallucinations, and even outright inventions on the part of the narrator. The reader never comes to know anything for certain, and yet the post-traumatic nature of those textual portions is clear: they deal with experiences which cannot be told and yet must be somehow brought to the surface. Dulcie’s trauma becomes David’s and even the narrator’s trauma, seen their inability either to keep silent about it or to make light on shameful practices that would bring discredit on the liberation movement.¹²

Since David cannot speak of Dulcie, the amanuensis-narrator suggests that “he chose to displace her by working on the historical figure of Saartje Baartman instead” (134). There are many elements linking the various female characters in the novel; in Graham’s words, “both women’s stories [Krotoa’s and Saartjie’s] become ur-texts of a sort for the situation of the women in David’s life – in other words, they are phantoms whose later incarnations include Dulcie, the narrator, and David’s wife Sally

(called 'Saartje' as a child)" (130). David's wife shares with Baartman both her name and 'steatopygia', those layers of natural fat on the buttocks that rendered Saartjie Baartman's body so peculiar in the eyes of European audiences. She is also coloured, possibly of Khoisan origin, possibly Griqua – like Saartjie, like David, like Dulcie. With Dulcie (who is also 'steatopygous') she shares the destiny of a female member of the movement driven, when no longer useful, to embrace domestic life; unlike Dulcie she complies and bravely faces the various phases of depression, feeling of displacement and inferiority complex that the new situation of confined wife and mother entails. Other steatopygous characters are the historical Lady Kok and Rachel Susanna Kok, both strong Griqua women who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and who held and relinquished power for the benefit of their community, without social or historical recognition. Unexpectedly, we learn on page 201 that also the amanuensis-narrator is steatopygous, and that she has to face the "complexities of walking" among people who "stride purposefully, mark out their paths mentally and do not expect to deviate, so that anyone else, especially a clumsy, steatopygous woman like myself, simply has to get out of the way or risk being knocked down". The metaphor of a way of walking which is not straight and purposeful but tentative and clumsy clearly alludes to a similarly non-linear narrative, "not seamless and entire to itself [...] but fractured and fissured, and self-critical, even self-mocking" (Driver 217).

Thus Wicomb draws a lively picture of a transgenerational community of women which is at times tragic and often ironic – the multiplication of steatopygous buttocks being the most obvious ironical strategy to deconstruct the way in which the 'savage' African female body was perceived and scientifically exploited by Europeans. The women characters of the novel turn out to be incarnations of Saartjie Baartman in more than one way: for their origins and the colour of their skin, for the shape of their body, in many cases for their name, and above all for their common destiny. These strong and resourceful women are linked by similar experiences when it comes to struggling against prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes so firmly rooted in the collective unconscious as to prove almost invincible. "How many exceptions does an intelligent person have to come across before he sees that it is the definition of the category itself that is wanting?" (*David's Story* 80). *David's Story* is made of 'exceptions', of textual portions that specify and contextualize the stories they tell; one may like or dislike the self-reflexive, metanarrative quality of the book, but

it would be impossible to accuse it of ‘postmodern futility’ and of lack of political commitment.¹³ If readers are willing to work through the novel, it does reward them for their effort.

Less rewarding is Chase-Riboud’s book, *Hottentot Venus* (subtitled *A Novel*), which is a fictional reconstruction of Saartjie Baartman’s life. Published in 2003, in the wake of the repatriation of Baartman’s remains, it goes in search of the ‘true Sarah’ by intertwining imaginary characters and events with historical figures and data. The acknowledgments at the end of the book list a number of libraries and archives where the author did research; she thanks various academics who helped throughout and mentions eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers whose works she quotes. Sheila Lloyd considers *Hottentot Venus* a “historical novel” (221); she maintains that its structure is devised in such a way as to give readers a multiple perspective on events, which should help them to comprehend “what perspective on history is most fitting when telling the story of Sara Baartman” (222). Actually, Baartman’s story is told by several narrators, the most important being the Venus herself, who alternates with her British master Alexander Dunlop, the anti-slavery campaigner Robert Wedderburn, the novelist Jane Austen, her French master Réaux, her fictional friend Alice Unicorn, the French painter Nicolas Tiedeman, and even with the scientist who finally disposed of her body, Baron Georges Cuvier. The “heterogeneity needed to account historically for Baartman” (Lloyd 222), is also assured by the various typologies of texts included in the narration (advertisements, letters, journal articles, scientific reports, court transcripts); being explicitly a novel, the text can avoid distinguishing between historical, fictional, and semi-fictional sources.

Sheila Lloyd’s analysis of the book, though, deals only tangentially with narratological issues, and does not really consider the literary aspects of the novel. What Lloyd remarks is that Chase-Riboud’s narrative constitutes a challenge to present-day hegemonic forms of neoliberalism and transnational market relations, whose ideological and economic roots can be traced back to the period in which Baartman lived. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy praises *Hottentot Venus* because, being the fifth of a series of novels by Chase-Riboud focused on the subject of slavery, it is part of a “large-scale philosophical project [...] in which her primary subject is precisely the complex, fragile and contradictory dynamic of the master-slave dialectic” (758). He points out that *Hottentot Venus* exposes the fallacy of scientific racism and identifies “Western science as a prominent

source of the cultural dynamic in the master-slave dialectic” (769). From economic to pseudo-philosophical issues, it is clear that for both Lloyd and Rushdy the interest of the novel lies in its ideological significance, and that the aesthetic question – *Hottentot Venus* as literature – does not emerge from their investigations. Miranda and Spencer do engage in a discussion of the language of Chase-Riboud’s novel (in the light of Judith Butler’s critical work), and contend that Baartman’s narrating mode, together with her “abject articulation of self [...] cut several ways – figuring and acting as both subjection and meta-historical critique” (920). Nevertheless, although they go deep into the analysis of “The Heroine’s Note” and of the first chapter, they never consider the functioning of the novel as a whole, and thus do not really provide a discussion of *Hottentot Venus* as a literary product.

What I suggest here is that the novel, *as a novel*, is weak, and that its literary weakness diminishes the strength of its socio-political stances. The plot is loosely based on the few known events in Baartman’s life, to which are added the “novelistic details” mentioned by Wicomb’s narrator in *David’s Story* (see above). In a number of cases Chase-Riboud’s narrative swerves from Baartman’s ascertained biography and gives different versions of her life story; clearly interested in granting voice to the colonized subject and to the other exploited and emarginated characters who can be found at the very heart of ‘civilized’ Europe, the novel employs both traditional and more experimental narrative modes, but the final result has more to do with confusion and inconsistency than with complexity.¹⁴

Before hinting at some of the reasons why this literary Sarah Baartman is unsatisfactory, I wish to highlight the way in which *Hottentot Venus* is built as a ‘trauma narrative’. The novel is conceived as the multi-voiced (auto)biography of a woman who cannot free herself from her personal trauma until it is recognized as collective and, accordingly, granted atonement and restitution. The underlying structure, although fairly traditional, is well-conceived: a childhood trauma, the psychological wound it inflicts upon the mind, and its periodic re-emergence in symbolic form until it is fully recognized by the adult individual and overcome. The *fil rouge* of trauma appears very soon, when Sarah (her Khoikhoi name in the novel is Ssehura) begins to tell her story, set in the Eastern Cape towards the end of the eighteenth century. As a child of almost four, she witnesses the murder of her mother Aya Ma on the very beach where she used to play with other children:

Even after they had taken everything of value – the land, the cattle, the gold – the English still raided our settlements for sport, hunting trophies to hang on their walls or send back to England. [...] Severed heads were very much prized [...]. When I was almost four, my mother was killed in one of these raids. With the eyes of a child, I remember her severed head rolling along the beach and stopping at the water's edge, then being scooped up by a yellow-haired horseman riding hard as if it were a plaything that he had to retrieve. As Aya Ma tried to outrun him she had taken wing like a heron, her elbows flapping in a futile effort to fly away, her lips jutting out like a beak, her neck outstretched in a bird's landing position. (14-15)¹⁵

Ssehura's father suffers the same fate five years later, in an extremely violent raid. The Khoikhoi herders minding their cattle are beheaded while running for their life, and the people of the nearby village are massacred. The orphaned Ssehura is sold by her aunt to a Wesleyan missionary, who takes her to Cape Town and changes her name to Saartjie.¹⁶ On his death, she tries to reconstruct her life with a young man from her own clan; they have a child, who dies shortly after his father. Saartjie is once more alone in the world and decides to leave her clan and return to the Cape Town orphanage; it is during that journey – the last free period of her life – that the first manifestation of her trauma appears. Pausing along the edge of a river, Saartjie sees a great purple heron standing in the water, and she is “suddenly seized by the sense that this was someone I knew, not merely a bird” (30). The heron is lonely, an “exiled bird” like herself who seems to have a message to deliver. She is sure that it is a spirit, and when it glides towards her, its neck “bent forward in a double curve as if someone had broken it”, she knows that it must have something to do with her mother: “Was this my mother's spirit? Had that bird been a real heron or a ghost in the form of a heron?” (31).

The heron-mother reappears in the course of the narrative. After living for some time in the surroundings of Cape Town as a nurse and domestic servant, Sarah is smuggled to England in 1810 by her master Hendrick Caesar and a British surgeon named Alexander Dunlop (both historical figures) to be exhibited as the first Hottentot woman in London. Exploited and betrayed by the man she loves, “Master Dunlop”, the Hottentot Venus becomes the main attraction of London high and low society, until her humiliating show draws the attention of anti-slavery campaigners, who manage to open a court case against her keepers. Sarah refuses to witness against Dunlop and Caesar, and the case is dismissed.¹⁷ In June 1811 the

tour of the English provinces begins, and it is in Manchester that Sarah gets to know the destitute conditions of the English working class. On entering Manchester, a filthy woman in rags starts running after their carriage, grasping the door handle and crying for help, before dropping back. “As I looked back, I had the sense that I had already lived this scene long, long ago” (171), thinks Sarah. The full recollection comes a little later: “Suddenly I knew what the forlorn, ragged girl reminded me of. Running alongside the carriage with her elbows flapping, her neck outstretched and despair in her eyes, she made me think of my mother trying to escape the guns of the Boer patrols” (172).¹⁸ Since the girl in rags proves to be Alice Unicorn, the only real friend Sarah finds in her life, the scene suggests to the reader what the protagonist has not yet understood: that the image of the mother-heron, albeit tragic and deeply unsettling, is also the sign that her dead mother is somehow protecting her daughter, in this case by sending her a fellow creature who can understand, and help alleviate, her condition of subjection and economic exploitation. Alice’s presence in the story puts together feminist and anti-capitalist stances; the narrator tells us that she “had a life more wretched than a Hottentot’s” (177). In 1814 Sarah is taken to Paris by the animal trainer Réaux. In the freak shows of Paris, the Venus is a tremendous success, until Baron Georges Cuvier obtains permission to examine her body at the Botanical Gardens; his desire for her transcends scientific curiosity, and he becomes sexually obsessed by her. Sarah refuses him, and here the novel takes its revenge not only on the white scientist, but also on the man Georges Cuvier, who is reduced to the role of a desperate stalker. In the Botanical Gardens, Sarah meets a great purple heron staring at her; “Suddenly she opened her wings as if in an embrace, hopping pitifully” (223). The heron hops because her legs are fettered with brass weights to hinder her flight, and Sarah waits for the first opportunity to free all the birds of the aviary at the Botanical Gardens – a foreboding of her own liberating flight at the end of the novel. Overwhelmed by a life of shame and exploitation, Sarah, who had long before started to drink heavily, becomes a drug addict and a whore, and finally dies on New Year’s Day 1816. The story is not finished with her death: since Sarah is the main narrator and tells her autobiography in the first person, she couldn’t have witnessed the moment of her own death unless in the form of a spirit. Actually, towards the end of the novel the reader understands that it is her ‘ghost’ who has told her story all along, and who, detached from her body after death, describes its dissection by the triumphant Cuvier. The spirit goes on to tell the reader

about the two centuries in which she was displayed in a museum before being repatriated; in the last scene of the book, a finally 'emancipated' Sarah (315) is lifted on a plane in a coffin and taken 'home'. The last flight of the heron is in the form of a South African jet:

The plane lifted, the great black-tipped wings of the purple heron bore me up and out, her long feathers hissing in the wind, her black-tipped beak pointed outwards, her long neck stretching endlessly in a horizontal line above the coast: like the final underline of a signature (315-16).

The novel is weak not because it mixes history and fiction, which is a legitimate and widely employed literary practice. It certainly has a redundancy which is not pleasant, above all towards the end, when it always seems on the brink of concluding and instead carries on beyond the protagonist's death until present times. It abandons too often the narrative mode to give room to tirades, either against the chauvinist practices of predatory males (be they interested in sex, in gaining money or in gaining power through scientific fame), or against the racist outlook of European eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intelligentsia. Instead of reinforcing the political stances of the novel, the reiterated invectives against the 'villains of history' simplify things excessively, and reduce the efficacy of the arguments. But what is perhaps the greatest weakness of the novel is that the character of Sarah Baartman is inconsistent. In search of the 'true voice' of the Khoikhoi woman, this novel in the final reckoning finds none. Chase-Riboud's Sarah wavers between the submissive and excessively trusting colonized subject and the fully conscious spokeswoman for Western feminism and anti-racism. She is (and remains until the end) both a helpless girl thrown into the grips of white people whose ways and language are alien to her, and a post-1968 young feminist who develops a subtle political understanding of her oppressed situation; sometimes she discusses things on the same level as her (white, male, learned) interlocutor, employing a fully articulate English language.¹⁹ Moreover, she is psychologically subjected to all her white male exploiters to the point of addressing them as 'Master', not only when talking to them, but also in her thoughts, and until the very end of the novel. Nevertheless, her deeply interiorized inferiority complex does not hinder her from lucidly denouncing the ravenous practices of the whites, and from exploding in a liberating "fuck you sirs!" directed to all the 'masters' who profit from the "slaughterhouse of science" (285).

In spite of the sophisticated architecture of the novel, *Hottentot Venus*'s discursive practices on Saartjie Baartman are too simplistic to treat complex historical and political issues in a satisfactory way – issues that draw on the colonial past to throw light on the way in which “Africa and Diasporic women are represented in the twenty-first century” (Gordon-Chipembere, *Representation and Black Womanhood* 10). Overtly against all forms of exploitation, be they sexual, political, or economic, the novel seems to go against its own assumptions already from the title, which exploits a colonial icon – that of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ – obviously seductive for the reading public and therefore more appealing to the publishing industry. One wonders whether Chase-Riboud couldn't have been more daring and ideologically more consistent by choosing a different, albeit less easily attractive, title for her story.

Both Zoë Wicomb and Barbara Chase-Riboud use Saartjie Baartman's icon to raise issues that transcend the life-story of a single person and open a dialogue between past and present, individual and collective. Not only interested in the re-emergence of one of the ‘lesser narratives’ of history, they explore the way in which it sheds light on contemporary political and economic practices. Both novelists look at past and recent events through the lens of trauma – trauma being, according to the South African writer Sindiwe Magona, “*in the blood* for the people of South Africa; they can neither escape nor ignore it” (93). Yet, the different ways in which their narratives are built prove meaningful, not only as far as the aesthetic aspect of reading is concerned, but also in the light of their (implicit or explicit) political aim: that of enhancing the reader's awareness of why we live in the present world. Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* actually tries to shed light on some of the interlaced ideological stances that ‘produced’ Saartjie Baartman as a “relic and a symbol. A relic of the past, but a symbol of centuries of suffering under the yoke of apartheid and colonization” (Chase-Riboud 313). Only, she does so at the expense of the novel itself, to the point of using it more than once just as a platform from which to denounce colonialism, neo-colonialism, and ruthless capitalism. In *David's Story*, instead, Zoë Wicomb's engagement is both aesthetic and political. The novel functions as literature not because of its postmodern features, by no means unavoidable in a literary work, but rather because its design, characters and language are consistent and effective. The multi-layered structure of *David's Story* does not hinder comprehension but rather enhances it, and its underlying irony suggests that investigating the

purposes of past and present discursive practices certainly helps to avoid a simplistic approach to history – but it never protects us once and for all from further mystifications, including our own.



- 1 See Mbeki's "Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Bartmann" on the official website of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation.
- 2 The conventional year of Baartman's birth is 1789; the date was inferred from her own declarations when her case was examined by the London court of the King's Bench in November 1810. The legal proceedings were started by some anti-slavery campaigners, members of the African Institution, who wanted to ascertain whether the woman was a free subject in London or her keepers' slave. The transcripts of the various affidavits, including Baartman's own, constitute the major source of information on her life ("Examination of the Hottentot Venus", 27 Nov. 1810, King's Bench, Court Records, The National Archives, London. See Holmes and Crais & Scully). Crais and Scully, nevertheless, challenge some of the conjectures of other researchers; they argue, for instance, that she was born a decade earlier (see p. 7 and note 1 p. 184).
- 3 There is no record of an original Khoisan name for this woman. Holmes discusses Saartjie's name in "A Note on Naming" placed at the beginning of her biography, and justifies her choice of the Afrikaans version rather than the anglicized Sarah, or Sara – preferred by those who want to take a distance from the legacy of the 'Boer' name. Actually Saartjie – a diminutive of Sarah with the Dutch suffix '-tjie' – can express endearment but also subordination, since it was often used by whites to belittle black servants, and it can therefore be considered a "racist speech act" (Holmes xiv). Nevertheless, Holmes prefers the historical Saartjie to the 'ideological' Sarah. I basically agree with Holmes and use Saartjie Baartman in my contribution; yet, I reproduce faithfully the different versions of her name and surname as I find them in quotations: Saartjie and Saartje, Sarah and Sara; Baartman, Bartmann, Bartman, and Baartmann.
- 4 The recent bibliography on Baartman's body and its cultural significance is copious. A few exemplary titles will suffice here: Gilman "Black Bodies, White Bodies"; Abrahams "The Great Long National Insult"; Strother "Display of the Body Hottentot"; Magubane "Which Bodies Matter?"; Qureshi "Displaying Sara Baartman"; Hobson *Venus in the Dark*; Gordon-Chipembere "Even with the Best Intentions" and *Representation and Black Womanhood*; Willis *Black Venus 2010*.

- 5 See Crais and Scully (142) for the various locations in which Baartman's remains were placed in the course of the twentieth century in Paris.
- 6 Significantly, the 9th of August, when the funeral took place, is also *National Women's Day* in South Africa, and *International Day of the World's Indigenous People*; the dates were made to coincide (see Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade* 282).
- 7 Crais and Scully are aware of the limits of the biographical genre when applied to humble people whose life is poorly recorded (see 5).
- 8 The Griqua National Conference asked the French Government to return Baartman's remains in 1995. Dorothy Driver wrote in 2000 that "Members of the newly established Khoisan Movement in the Cape claim her as an icon" ("Afterword" 230). Zoë Wicomb raised the question of Baartman's "contested ethnicity (Black, Khoi or 'coloured?')" already in 1998, and remarked that her "very name indicates her cultural hybridity" ("Shame and Identity" 93).
- 9 Before Mengel and Borzaga, other theorists of culture and literary critics have questioned the assumptions derived from Freudian conceptions of trauma when applied to the postcolonial situation. Particularly pertinent to this contribution is Shane Graham's article on traumatic memory in Wicomb's *David's Story*, where he considers the work of theorists of trauma like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra inadequate "to account for the complex dynamics that emerged from and shaped South Africa's revolutionary transition due to that paradigm's tendency toward a depoliticized individualist psychology" (127-28).
- 10 Krotoa was a Khoi woman who lived at the time of the Dutch settlement in the Cape (mid-seventeenth century). Employed as domestic worker for the whites, she soon became fluent in Dutch and proved extremely useful as an interpreter and cultural mediator. She was baptized and renamed Eva; when her Dutch husband died, her living conditions deteriorated, and she eventually died banished to Robben Island.
- 11 Dulcie, like David before her, is suspected of having betrayed the movement and is accordingly imprisoned and tortured before being acquitted and released. Meg Samuelson sheds light on the historical circumstances: "Following the unveiling of an apartheid spy within the ANC inner circle in 1981, an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion pervaded the movement in exile, while a group of MK combatants rebelled against the high command. Mutineers and suspected spies were imprisoned in a detention center established in Angola, which came to be known as Quatro and where conditions matched those of the notorious prison in Johannesburg known as Number Four" (843-844).
- 12 For an analysis of the novel in the light of women's role in the liberation struggle see Samuelson "The Disfigured Body", which deals with the figure

- of the female militant and her violated body – a site of contending feminist discourses and of still too many silences.
- 13 Shane Graham believes that *David's Story* represents the “the spatial-material dimensions of trauma” (135) in dealing both with the shameful treatment of ANC women fighters, and with the loss of the land and the destitute material conditions of a great part of the South African population. He maintains that Wicomb’s novel “calls into question the adequacy of narrative alone to enable healing and the restoration of agency; it implies that such recovery of language must be joined by material compensation and a fundamental refiguring of socio-spatial relationships in the post-apartheid dispensation” (129).
 - 14 In her introduction to a collection of essays on Baartman’s legacy, Gordon-Chipembere makes the following consideration: “[...] after Baartman’s burial in 2002, there were a number of celebrated African American women writers, such as Barbara Chase-Riboud and Suzan-Lori Parks, who took on Baartman’s story as a way of claiming diasporic sisterhood. Ultimately, their literary productions have been critiqued as producing a Baartman who is a self-destructive, sexually excessive, drunken stereotype, echoing Cuvier” (8). See also, by the same author, “Even with the Best Intentions”.
 - 15 The struggle for land and cattle possession between Europeans and the African populations of the Eastern Cape became particularly violent towards the end of the eighteenth century, when Saartjie was born. ‘Commandos’ formed by settlers began hunting people for sport and for punishment, killing hundreds of adults and capturing children (see Crais and Scully 17-20).
 - 16 Saartjie will become Sarah when she gets her passport for England, see Chase-Riboud 70-71.
 - 17 The court case is historical, as well as the figures of Lord Ellenborough (the judge) and of Zachary Macauley [*sic*] and Peter Van Wageninge (members of the African Institution).
 - 18 As can be seen from the quotation above, those who raided the beach and killed her mother were English, not Boer patrols. This is just one of the inconsistencies that can be found in the book, but it wouldn’t be possible to discuss them all here.
 - 19 See for instance the dialogue between Sarah and Dunlop on the ship that takes them to England (74-75); her long talk with the members of the African Institution (131-137); her answers to the questions of the judge Lord Ellenborough during her examination at the King’s Court (147-150). Actually, the level of the protagonist’s knowledge of English is never clear, and the way in which the story is told is confusing. For instance, she appears at the King’s Court with two Dutch interpreters (138), but when she is questioned by the judge a few pages ahead there is no hint of the fact that her answers are being translated. She answers in a fully articulate English, and the reader is

the more confused by the fact that, after the interrogation, the judge himself should raise the language question, as if he had never spoken to her: “*Lord Ellenborough*: Does anyone understand her language? *Solicitor general*: Not the Hottentot language; but it is stated in my affidavit that her keeper and the representatives of the Court state that she understands and speaks Low Dutch, imperfectly” (151).



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