

Ambiguity is my middle name: A research diary

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All this that I am now telling you, you yourself know it to be true: you are in no position to force me back: it is I who can drive you off. You are free to put it to the test. Even little children know it for the truth, for they saw me circling around your settlement, and turning away; and they also saw you seek shelter at your place. I don't say this to boast before you, but it is the truth. And to speak and act the truth is righteous and good and brings blessings.¹ (Heywood & Maasdorp 1995: 26)

In 1996 I was requested to write up the historiography of Sarah Bartmann, a task I had up to then always managed to avoid. In fact, even in the face of a pointed request, I found the task impossible. I began writing this diary in order to understand why this was so. This chapter deals with my relationship to the academic world of knowledge surrounding the Sarah Bartmann story. It is a quest for self-understanding and self-retrieval from the obscurities of a language not created for my benefit, a turnaround polemic against racist and sexist cultural texts which silenced me through their animosity, and a contribution towards the communal project of creating a more hospitable mental environment for African creativity. It expresses my human need to understand, come to terms with, and move on from the historiography. Finally, this chapter is an exercise in womanist methodology. Because womanism considers race and gender identity important, I have occasionally specified the race and gender identity of the scholars I discuss. In this way, racism and sexism by exclusion – that is, to work on an assumption of racial and sexual homogeneity which in practice turns out to be a mainly white, mainly male reality – can be rendered visible. This should aid the process of examining the interconnections between identity, history and historiography, the focus of this investigation.

In this chapter I also hope to lay bare my prejudices, insights, and the importance of my experiences as a Black woman writing about Sarah Bartmann to a study of her historiography.

From the beginning, then

This diary is about my inability to be a disembodied academic dispassionately analysing some objectified specimen. My race and my gender follow me, even into my academic work. There is not, in the Sarah Bartmann historiography which has been written by white males, any symbolic role model where Black = good, woman = righteousness, or Brown = beauty. On the contrary, the quintessential experience of living my race and gender in the shadowy world which is the historiography of Sarah Bartmann has been well described by Lorraine Hansberry:

I can be coming home from eight hours on an assembly line or fourteen hours in Mrs. Halsey's kitchen. I can be all filled up that day with three hundred years of rage so that my eyes are flashing and my flesh is trembling – and the white boys in the streets, they look at me and think of sex. They look at me and that's all they think...Baby, you could be Jesus in drag – but if you're brown they're sure you're selling. (Hansberry 1969: 98)

My initial desire had been to leave my race and gender at home and be in some equitable world with other intellects. The assumption was always that, being Brown, I had to be selling, if not my body, then my credibility, or both.

I am a descendant of the Khoekhoe writing about Sarah Bartmann. My relationship to her is special. I remember reading the white man Sander Gilman's article:

Eighteenth century travelers to southern Africa, such as Francois Le Vaillant and John Barrow, had described the so-called Hottentot Apron, a hypertrophy of the labia and nymphae caused by the manipulation of the genitalia and serving as a sign of beauty among certain tribes, including the Hottentots and Bushmen. (Gilman 1986: 213)

The above was not my idea of refined intellectual intercourse, and most certainly not the search for truth I had been brought up to believe in. For white male academics, this may be an intellectual matter; indeed, at this point Gilman is making an argument about nineteenth century intellectual history. For me, this is personal. I am of these people: the 'Hottentot and Bushman' tribes which Gilman talks about.

In the rest of the article Gilman failed to demonstrate the existence of this 'apron'. He took its existence for granted, and chose never to point out that this 'apron' was a figment of the imagination.

My position does allow me certain privileged information. Until that time the mysteries of the 'Hottentot apron' had been hidden from me. For one brief moment, as I re-read those lines, I did toy with the idea of phoning my mother and aunt and asking them if they had ever seen or heard of this 'sign of beauty', but my heart quailed at the thought of that little bit of empirical research. My mother would certainly be offended, and begin to wonder audibly why she had wasted her time and money sending me to

university. My aunt would think I had lost my mind, and score points over my mother on the comparative mental stability of my cousins, less advanced academically but endlessly saner.

So I scotched the idea and got on with my work. Perhaps I should have called my mother instead; perhaps that way I would have discovered much sooner the truth that history is about identity. Historians have identities which seem to interact in strange ways with their studies. Researching Sarah Bartmann's life and talking to people about her was a process of learning for me: I would remain a Brown woman, no matter how many strings of degrees I trailed behind my name.

Unlike me, another white man liked Gilman's article because it was about science:

I would have enjoyed reading analyses not only of literary texts but also of political, scientific, and philosophical writings on the question of 'race' during the same period, since the subject we are interested in is ideology, the dividing line between fiction and non-fiction grows rather fuzzy, and it is clear that these texts had considerable influence on one another, no matter to what genre they belonged. (In this respect, Sander Gilman's essay...is the only exception.) (Todorov 1986: 377)

Enjoyment was not exactly my predominant emotion on reading Gilman's 'scientific' treatment; I have never been able to re-read it without getting angry at its racism and ignorance.²

Certainly Gilman was confronted with critiques. Nobody, however, confronted him on this central lie. Here is a white scholar who did an extended textual analysis of the article:

What, then, is the function of the images in this story? Within Gilman's shifting discourse the images can easily work as unbecoming confirmations of the critic's dubious position. They illustrate, and reconfirm, a positivistic belief in what one 'sees with one's very eyes'. Looking hovers between erotic reveling in, and scientific positing of, a particular version of 'reality', and the latter is easily put forward as an excuse for the former. Corbey thematizes that belief explicitly, thus attempting to distance himself from the fatal complicity à la Gilman. But when he reproduces and exhibits these postcards, he does so in order to use them as evidence. Evidence of what exactly? Not of the savage femininity of 'Africa' and 'Africans', but of the objectionable colonizing meaning production by the colonial. (Bal 1991: 33)

This begged the question of complicity, that is, how Gilman's culture and history produced such a man, and such a paper. 'Fatal complicity' could not be limited to one man alone. Gilman wrote in a time and place when the Khoekhoe were an unknown, savage people from an obscure corner of the earth. The thought that one day one of them would read it and say, 'Hey, where do you come on this nonsense?' probably never occurred to him.

Bal's distancing of herself from Gilman and Corbey was not, it seemed, in defence of Sarah Bartmann, nor an attack on unquestioned assumptions. It was in defence of the notion that there is somehow a 'proper' way in which the colonised can be used as text to aid colonial psychotherapy:

Postcolonial criticism can make a difference, but which difference it makes is not always clear...insight alone is not enough; we have to live our past traumas again, not looking at them from a false distance but immersing ourselves in them. (Bal 1991: 44)

I wish that Bal had spent less time reliving her past traumas and a little more time thinking of whether her actions were traumatising somebody else. Firstly, she wasn't confronting that genital lie. By not confronting it, she was practising passive acceptance. Secondly, she was recirculating that material. Her article contained no naked white men, together with false and probably libelous statements about their bodily parts. It contained only more naked women of colour, so in response to the naked women of colour in Bal's article, I felt the same anger aroused by Gilman's illustrations. The text of Bal's article may have been a postcolonial critique of the postcolonial, but the subtext was the same.

Compare Bal's critique to that of a Black man written '...in a voice characterized by an anger dangerously self-restrained' (Carby 1986: 310):

...one sometimes has the feeling that an imitation of science – conceived of as a neutral rationalist presentation of 'facts' or a rigorous cataloguing of 'instances' – is the only end. This end, lacking as it is in what might be called 'real side' referentiality and present-day political sensitivity, leads to frighteningly embarrassing moments such as Sander L. Gilman's...[article]. The only thing that can be said about this 'scientific' presentation with its simplistically contextualized illustrations and weak connectives is that it offers a fine illustration of Pratt's 'manners-and-customs' category, presenting yet again, and so dreadfully embarrassingly, a white male confessional. 'Look what we have done,' it naughtily delights, rubbing its hands and looking pruriently sidewise. (Baker 1986: 387–8)

I liked that anger. I have for long been aware that a non-racialised white feminism would end up sowing divisions in the Black community. Black men are sexist and the violent emanations of that sexism could well succeed in destroying the Black community. It made me think of the sexual politics of lynching, not to mention the sexual politics of Sarah Bartmann historiography, at least that part written by white males. Certainly Black men have a historical experience which should enable them to understand what Black women are going through. They have been subject to violent deformations of the body like we have, if not in the same manner or extent. It's about time that they begin to sort it out.

Having said that, I must go on to say that Baker did not go nearly far enough for me. Most of the time, it seemed to me as if this debate was missing the point. I mean, what

was all this ‘genital manipulation’ anyway? Here was Gilman, saying without hesitation in public that Khoekhoe women play with themselves, and nobody was contradicting the man.³ My response was a very vernacular, ‘Ooh pleeease!’ Like during 350 years of colonialism, war, measles, slavery and apartheid we had still found time, between raising families and liberating this country, to play with ourselves. Why did I find this a silly theory? Because it was not just Black, but Brown history. It was my history and Sarah Bartmann’s history. Before I could even begin to write that history, I found myself having to define my relationship to this, the silliest of theories.

Before going on, I need to explain that what you have just read is all there is in terms of a ‘Sarah Bartmann historiography’. There is a resounding silence in the texts which you will read from now on about what previous writers have said. You might find it in the endnotes and references, but the one thing which we require of any graduate student – a survey of the literature which has gone before – is missing. The reason for this may be that the text is *never* about Sarah Bartmann. It is always about something else in which she is being used as an example, or as evidence. The effect of this is that the object under discussion can never be a subject. Instead, she is presented in a timeless, unstable present in which all connections to her history and selfhood are lost. This makes it that much easier to objectify her and exploit her for whatever textual purpose is at stake. Gilman, writing at a time when at least three other contemporary authors had written about Sarah Bartmann, did not appraise any of them.

Both the unstable present and its function are revealed in this argument from Jay Gould:

Khoekhoe women do exaggerate two features of their sexual anatomy...Linnaeus was only saying that African women have a genital flap...He was also wrong because only the Khoekhoe and a few related peoples develop this feature...the *labia minora* or ‘inner lips’ of ordinary female genitalia are greatly enlarged in Khoekhoe women and may hang down three or four inches below the vagina when women stand. (Gould 1982: 22–3)

This is ostensibly an intellectual argument, this time about taxonomy. I could deal with it on that basis. I could even take it seriously enough to demand empirical evidence. Sarah Bartmann’s body is their empirical evidence. What Jay Gould is saying is not only that Khoekhoe women play with themselves, but that this is what matters about us. This is our point of entry into academic discourses.

The Khoekhoe are the native South Africans. Our history here stretches back some 25 millennia, and yet how are we brought into white male history? The answer, in my native idiom, is unprintable and yet white academic language was not only saying it, but saying it in such a way that it legitimises the speaking of the unspeakable. By now I could see that I was not taking on Gilman alone. This was about his history, his people; my history, my people and the fight, not just to take our land and make us slaves, but to determine our very identity through racial and gendered power. The ‘genital flap’ was an expression of undiluted racism and sexism. And I had become its object.

Finding an aunt

I could never be right. Reading the white historiography of Sarah Bartmann, there was no place, and no identity, which would let me feel right about myself. I was not alone. As Kimberlé Crenshaw said, in the twilight zone of being a Black woman, the most incredible things happen:

The particular experience of black women in the dominant cultural ideology of American society can be conceptualized as intersectional. Intersectionality captures the way in which the particular location of black women in dominant American social relations is unique, and in some senses unassimilable into the discursive paradigms of gender and race domination. One commonly noted aspect of this location is that black women are in a sense doubly burdened, subject in some ways to the dominating practices of both a sexual hierarchy and a racial one. In addition to this added dimension, intersectionality also refers to ways that black women's marginalization within the dominant discourses of resistance limits the means available to relate and conceptualize our experiences as black women. (Crenshaw 1992: 271)

'Unassimilable', my symbolic selves in these texts, Khoekhoe women, were limited to one bodily part, used and abused in the 'othering' discourses on art history, taxonomy or postcolonial criticism. I was the only one in my university admitting consciousness, hurt, confusion and anger about this putative bodily part debate. It is the weirdest feeling when something in the historiography drives you to tears and most people don't seem to notice anything wrong; I thought I was the crazy one.

I began to realise that to identify myself as an intellectual was to make myself a fish out of water. Academic discourse held no place for our brains, only for our bodies. Gould only confirmed my suspicions:

[In the museum of Man] I saw a little exhibit that provided an immediate and chilling insight...in three smaller jars I saw the dissected genitalia of Third World women. I found no brains of women...[and no] male genitalia graced the collection. (Gould 1982: 20)

This liberal genuflection – the lifting of the hands and raising of eyes and moaning, 'Oh how terrible this all is!' could not release Gould's text from its terrible assumptions. What really needed to be dissected here was the fact that Gould was still the one to observe, women of colour still the ones to be observed. To be a Brown woman observing is, in the white male narratives surrounding Sarah Bartmann, a contradiction in terms. There was no place for me in this discourse. It seemed as if I was going to have to choose between identities. In the dominant white narrative, wanting to observe, to study and understand was going to also make of me a non-white.⁴ Here, I could find no path to follow which would allow me to be simultaneously a historian and a woman of colour.

Researching the story of Sarah Bartmann within the context of the white male meta-narrative meant reversing the positions which were regarded as proper within our native narrative. In my culture, there is simply no way for me to relate to a woman almost two centuries older than me other than by treating her with extreme respect. If we had only a passing acquaintance, I would have addressed her as 'Mrs Bartmann', but by this time we were meeting on a daily basis. So, although we are not blood relatives, I should call her 'auntie' and address her at all times in the third person. This was not a problem for me, since I am old-fashioned about manners. In the home I began to talk about 'auntie Sarah'.

The aunt/niece relationship is more about respect than about hierarchy, but if there was a hierarchy at all it would certainly have to go one way only. The power relation implied by auntie Sarah being observed by my observer self was all wrong. It was at this point that I chose to reject the position of intellectual that the white male historiography placed me in – an unsolvable dilemma. I simply cannot say in my native idiom, 'Have you seen that picture purporting to represent auntie Sarah's...?' It is not thinkable. At least, to even think it is to be so rude that I make myself an outcast in my own culture. So powerful is this convention that it has taken me years even to phrase my dilemma. At the time I tried to cope by using two languages. I wrote about 'Sarah Bartmann' and thought about 'auntie Sarah'.

Paranoid schizophrenia was an old coping mechanism, and one which had proved a passable defence against racism and sexism. The problem was that this time it was a coping mechanism which estranged me from the native culture which gave me strength. In the past I had coped with difficult discourses by thinking in vernacular and then carefully translating in my written work. This worked well as long as the field I was studying was one where my history had been suppressed or subverted, violent, but not sexually so. With Sarah Bartmann's story, the leering preoccupations of white male historiography operated so as to turn my own vernacular against me. A problem that I could not even begin to phrase in my language was a problem I could not solve.

I did try. It was hard to do without a linguistic habit which had served me for years. I do remember occasionally trying to translate the white male historiography. Every time I tried, there was only one native narrative tradition I could possibly begin to cast it in, that of swear words and insults.

There is another tradition, that of women talking amongst themselves, which can be very open and to the point. Yet white male concerns did not in any way translate into that. The thought of women sitting around discussing somebody's hypothetical bodily deformations is just absurd. I found myself forced to write about her solely in academic English, a position which I had already rejected.

Paranoid schizophrenia is not a good state for analytic thinking. I did reach some conclusions, though, but only through the medium of story and analogy. Past and present came together for me as I began to understand that, although some Brown women were invited in from the kitchen and allowed to sit in the lounge, served tea

even, we were being offered an uncomfortable seat. I felt like Jadine in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* in that scene where she is sitting at table with the master and mistress, making polite conversation while her uncle Sydney is serving (Morrison 1981). I was being made welcome at the academic table with auntie Sarah being served up for dinner. The seemingly benign, abstract intellectual conversation had become, in my vernacular, a discussion of an aunt's own business. For me to participate would have been the academic equivalent of passing for white.

The experience made me sick and the tidbits served for dessert did not help. Gordon cited a study from 1937 to support his contention that '*the tablier* enjoys a wide distribution in Africa' (Gordon 1992: 187). For the brief moment that I had been able to approach this purely intellectually it had been an interesting study. Gordon is that anomaly in the Sarah Bartmann discourse, a man knowledgeable in Khoekhoe history and therefore able to put those white male fantasies in as much of a historical context as anthropology will allow him. But from the point of view of my identity, he was being difficult. He could not concede that this central white male preoccupation was a fantasy. The thought that all those 'respected' scientists suffered racist and sexist delusions may have been beyond him. Patricia Hill Collins writes:

The fact that Sarah Bartmann was both African and a woman underscores the importance of gender in mentioning notions of racial purity. In this case Bartmann symbolized Blacks as a 'race'. Thus the creation of the icon applied to Black women demonstrates the notions of gender, race and sexuality were linked in overarching structures of political domination and economic exploitation. (Hill Collins 1990: 169)

With regard to white male sexuality, Hill Collins's description was precise. White men must have expected enough pleasure out of this display to be prepared to pay for it. Over time, these expectations were built into the symbolic system. Gordon's place in those overarching structures of political domination did not seem to allow him to undermine the wet dream it was built on. This despite his overt purpose, which was to argue that Black woman = sexual icon was not natural, but created to enable economic exploitation.

All this *tablier* discourse was, of course, there for a purpose. My feeling was that it was there to say, 'You, Yvette, are the respectable darkie, you have learned how to wash, you have learned how to use a knife and fork and converse about those other uncouth darkies in civilised language.' And if I did not want to, what was the option? In the discourse of the lounge, only to join the labia'd ones. I like dining out. But I could not eat hatred.

Hill Collins has put my dilemma in much more respectable language:

When an outsider group – in this case African-American woman – recognizes that an insider group – in this case white males – requires special privileges from larger society, a special problem arises of keeping the outsiders out and at the

same time having them acknowledge the legitimacy of this procedure. Accepting a few 'safe' outsiders addresses this legitimation problem. One way of excluding the majority of Black women from the knowledge validation process is to permit a few Black women to acquire positions of authority in institutions that legitimate knowledge, and to encourage us to work within the taken-for-granted assumptions of Black female inferiority shared by the scholarly community and by the culture at large. (Hill Collins 1990: 204)

It was possible that there were certain taken-for-granted assumptions about my inferiority which would not perturb me. As an undergraduate I would devote the first tutorial or two of each course to convincing my tutor (white male or female alike) that I had a brain. Each course, without fail, I would devour the reading material and prepare questions which would not only probe the material but also demonstrate my intelligence. It would sometimes be tricky to find a hook to hang my questions on in the actual tutorial, but I learned to improvise. Only once this was done would I relax and breathe, secure in the knowledge that I would be treated as of average human intelligence. I hated nothing more than people taking one look at my skin colour and gender and talking down to me. Still, I can't remember this antagonism ever discouraging me from desiring to teach, research and write in the future. This public discourse about private parts was another kettle of fish altogether. The price exacted from a Black woman was too high.

A mother's resistance

Like Brown girls are wont to do in times of trouble, I headed for my mother's house. She gave me, I think, her blessing. We cooked, ate and told stories. As I thought, there between the stove and the sink, of all the young ones who dreamed of an education, I realised I had work to do. Nourished anew by the root of my life I put myself back together again and headed for my alma mater.

The first thing I did was to take the insults seriously. I did this by tracking down white male sexual fantasies about Khoekhoe women from auntie Sarah's parents' time to after her death (the 1770s to the 1820s), a truly nasty job, but one that had to be done. I did not want to do the disproving by referring to the physical evidence; that was not the respectful thing to do. Rather, I thought, if I could discuss the history of ideas about the Khoekhoe I could show that this history had an existence unrelated to anatomical realities. I mean, Khoekhoe women did not suddenly develop physical conformations in the late eighteenth century. I was culturally unable to treat auntie Sarah as an object, so my solution was going to be to turn white male travel writers into the objects of my research. I wanted to turn the lens, to connect to a long tradition of Brown women observing white men and coming to some unflattering and mostly unprintable conclusions.

I wrote:

What did the Khoekhoe think about these obsessions? Again, it is hard to say. Certainly amongst their descendants it is considered extremely rude to mention someone's genitals. This is the more so when the genitals are those of an ancestor, and if the ancestor is female the very mention of them is considered an invitation to fight. So pervasive is this perception that if this paper were written for an audience in Mitchell's Plain, say, or the Richtersveld, a suitable title would have been 'Jou Ma se M---; or what white people have been saying about us for three hundred years.' (Abrahams 1997a: 67; cf. Hill Collins 1990)

It is clear to me now that what I really wanted was to be writing for an audience of my own community; it would have made my task simpler and my paper shorter. Instead, that fight was calling me. I then went on to relate the 'apron' idea to its specific historical context.

Off paper I began to argue. I kept saying, 'Look, we do not play with ourselves until our bodily parts hang down to our knees.' One scene would have been funny if it were not so silly: I was having lunch with a white man and, although I cannot remember the conversation verbatim, there was a sort of subtext where he conceded easily that I did not. After all, I was one of the citified Khoekhoe who had given over our ancient ways. Already I was uneasy, since this was not my idea of lunchtime conversation with a comparative stranger. My luncheon companion said to me:

Well, you know, in the desert where I work it is hot and dry, and I have often seen my daughters scratch themselves down there, because the dry desert air makes them itch. Perhaps that is what the Khoekhoe women did. (pers. comm.)

I recovered, I think, enough to make a snappy comeback. After all, something had been won in this encounter; he had conceded that it was something in the past, unlike Gilman whose phrase '*serving* as a sign of beauty' to me meant that he was arguing that we were still doing it. I said:

Well, *you* know, Sarah Bartmann grew up in the Eastern Cape, an area of South Africa which has year-round rainfall. I don't see why she should have scratched



herself. We had oils, you know, and medicines – is cortisone not won from a South African plant?⁵

It seemed enough to get him to change the subject. Unfortunately, by this stage I had lost my appetite, a sad thing for a student getting a free lunch. My victory, if anything, was extremely limited. A fact little known about me is the fact that I spent my first years in a dry desert area of southern Africa. Although I cannot honestly remember any itching, it was still in a sense my body lying there on the table, open to all to discuss. It may be argued that his daughter's bodies were also part of the story, yet their racial identity protected them. They were not in the position of having people looking at them and thinking about hanging labia. That was when I began to feel what it must have been like to be auntie Sarah.

This is still what it means to be auntie Sarah. After 185 years, her body is still lying on the table of countless undergraduate students swotting for their courses in race and representation, literature, art history, history, anthropology, archaeology or the history of medicine. That fighting year I protested as best I could from the position of powerlessness which casual temporary teaching staff inhabit. One course in particular I remember well. By the time I was hired the course reader had already been printed. I found myself in the position of having to teach that Gilman text (which seemed destined to haunt me over two continents).

There was little I could do, but that little I did. When teaching about auntie Sarah to first-year students I pasted pictures of indigenous flowers over that infamous page of Gilman's (Gilman 1986: 217). I recommended my students to do the same, and frowned heavily on any boy who dared to leave an unpasted page open in my class.

This course was an unending struggle. The white boys I taught were certainly not of Gilman's, Gould's or Gordon's ilk. This generation had lost everything their fathers had had: the racially restricted vote, segregated universities and neighbourhoods, and the taken-for-granted expectation of a comfortable job after graduation. The comfortable cushion which their race and gender had bought in the past was beginning to erode, and having to compete on however inadequately equal terms was for them a frightening experience. They still had the lifestyle: the Black maid, the Black gardener, the swimming pool and the two-car family. But a new world was beginning to open up and, I suspect, the very fact that a Black woman had the power to judge their work came to have a deeply symbolic meaning to them.

What I remember most was the sheer sense of entitlement they possessed, such that, although the white boys constituted only 25 per cent of the tutorial population, they insisted on occupying 90 per cent of the tutorial talking time, not to mention my attention. The assumptions of their race and their gender were never clearer than when they 'forgot' to give the Black student next to them space to speak, listen and be heard.

So, in that tutorial about Sarah Bartmann lines were drawn. When the white boys tried to be rude I quelled them with a glance. With the Black girls I did my best. I set an

essay on aspects of the history of sexism and racism and prescribed my own and other Black women's work, which up to that point had seemingly escaped the course co-ordinator's attention. I don't know how well I did with the Black girls. All I know is that one of them is handing in her honours thesis as I write.

It was a contradictory experience. I remember it as singularly humiliating: the very fact that the economic exploitation of my labour could put me in a situation where I was actually teaching racist and sexist texts is something to which I have never completely reconciled myself. I felt complicit in my own and others' oppression. I used to look at the young faces of the students, listen to their hopes and dreams, and think of the system which awaited their working lives.

There I was in the process of reproducing capitalist labour power, and this very same colonial capitalism demanded of me either complete assimilation or exposure to sexual ridicule. My economic exploitation was racialised and gendered in a particularly vicious way. Assimilation left me no choice but to be content with reproducing the racism and sexism which oppressed me. This would have rendered me complicit in my own oppression, with self-hatred and self-loathing the inevitable end result. Being economically exploited in a sexual manner is not an unusual position for a Black woman to be in. Like so many before me, I turned to struggle as a means to regain sanity.

There, as I taught, I formed a determination to write anti-texts, texts which did not 'other' Black women, texts which conceived the Black woman as Self. Then was born the decision to write a biography of Sarah Bartmann, a book which Black girls could safely take home to mother and study in the kitchen.

I also learned that no oppression can stop you from learning. Giddings writes:

It is no coincidence that Sarah Bartmann became a spectacle in a period when the British were debating the prohibition of slavery...Euro-Americans had to resolve the contradictions between their own struggle for political freedom and



the black men and women they still enslaved. This contradiction was resolved (by both pro- and anti-slavery whites) by racialism: inscribing certain inherited characteristics to blacks, characteristics that made them unworthy of first class citizenship. At the core of these characteristics was the projection of the dark side of sexuality, now literally embodied by black females...By the turn of [the] nineteenth century, then, race had become an ideology, and a basis of that ideology had become sexual difference. (Giddings 1992: 445–6)

I began to see that these scenes where my body kept on coming onto the table were happening to me because auntie Sarah and I shared a history shaped by racism, sexism and economic exploitation. The fight I was fighting was about me. This realisation helped me solve an intellectual problem: as a historian, I study change over time, yet the more I began to challenge white male rights to call us names, the more I was beginning to think that nothing had changed. Now I saw that change was in fact the issue. White males were saying to me subtly and sometimes more directly, ‘You want to insist on being Khoekhoe, you are going to have to accept our identity: Brown = sex object.’ They were saying this precisely because the fight of people of colour around the world against racism had forced them to change, precisely because we had challenged their nice resolutions of their own little contradictions. What I was experiencing was (I hope) the last-ditch battle. The historical process begun in auntie Sarah’s time was ending in mine, provided (I thought) I could keep up the fight.

I also began to understand that the reproduction of Gilman’s text in the context of a university course in Cape Town in 1995 was not ideologically innocent. Its content and location was designed to reinforce at an ideological level the bastions of race and gender which were beginning, however slowly, to crumble. I might have taken longer to realise this had it not been for an incident in which I was killed before my own eyes. It was towards the end of a slightly tense tutors’ meeting at which we had discussed the



teaching of a module on Khoekhoe history. One tutor asked the course co-ordinator idly, as the meeting was winding down, ‘So do you think there are any Khoekhoe still around, you know, people who still practise their culture, I mean?’ The co-ordinator replied, ‘No, physically there may be some genetic mixtures still around [with a sidelong glance at me] but their culture is extinct. You might find some remote tribes, but even there their culture is dying out in the face of westernisation.’

What really brought this incident into the realm of the surreal was the fact that I was at that very moment sitting and chewing on a piece of biltong. They always liked to have tutors’ meetings during the lunch hour. This was a piece of home-made biltong, lovingly made by my aunt and sent to me by my mother.

Such was my state of mind, as near as I can describe it, when this white man came to extinguish my community and my culture in a sentence. And me with them, for who am I without my community and culture? I could not prevent what happened next. I looked at the biltong, looked at him, looked at the biltong again and burst out laughing. The meeting broke up somewhat hurriedly, with me still wavering between hysterical giggles and perfectly distracted stares.

With hindsight, I regret that I could not take this symbolic genocide more seriously. Had I bent my mind to it I could possibly have started a small revolution on that sentence. But to see him denying my material culture while it was being consumed in front of their own eyes was too much. I don’t know who they thought had taught my aunt to make biltong.

If I have learned anything from my great-grandmother it is that they cannot stop us from laughing. They dispossessed us of our land, took our cattle, made us slaves and stole our language. We don’t have much left besides our sense of humour. Colonialism is a very serious matter – except when it is completely ludicrous. Vine Deloria says:

When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that people can survive.⁶ (Deloria 1992: 346)

And, survive I did.

A daughter digresses

I learned from this experience to respect auntie Sarah’s strength. This continual exposure in public was a trial to me. How much worse must it not have been for her? Although I knew that a comparison between oppressions is not really meaningful, I infinitely preferred the symbolic exploitation to her real exploitation: I would rather dance in front of seminars with all my clothes on, than perform in a cage in a thin costume. My conditions of labour felt still easier than hers.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt that it was time to expose the exposers. Giddings had made me think about the construction of racism: ‘this contradiction was

resolved...by racialism.’ Seeing the functioning of racism in my own times let me see more clearly how it functioned in auntie Sarah’s time. One of the things I did during the fighting period was to think seriously about this identity white males had created for us, and how it had shaped both our lives and theirs. So I wrote a paper on British imperial history. I wanted to explain how the exhibition of auntie Sarah served a purpose in the fabrication of an imperial culture, one which both built ideologies of racism, and divided constructions of gender by race. I wrote that:

Ideas of race from Sarah Bartmann’s time on were to be inextricably entwined with the struggle over gender definitions. In that sense it is bizarrely fitting that, as European scientific ideas about the Khoekhoe were extended to include all Blacks, and eventually all people of colour, the grand edifice of scientific racism came to be built on Sarah Bartmann’s body...This paper...rests on the conviction that the various uses of Sarah Bartmann, the metaphor, underpinned and reinforced the relations of power in which the living woman was embedded. (Abrahams 1997b: 134; cf. Deloria 1992)

Then, this seemed like progress, since the very fact that I was able to write about auntie Sarah at all seemed to show that I was finding a way out of my language problem.

What I was trying to do was to restore Sarah Bartmann to history, and her history to auntie Sarah. I felt the paper was a good reaction to the kind of British imperial history which was all about causes emanating from the metropole and effects in the periphery. It could work the other way round too, I argued, and I felt this was an important point to make. I was never quite easy in my mind, though, that I had made a solid case. For one, the relations of power were so hopelessly unequal. Auntie Sarah may have intervened in the discursive construction of gender in Britain, but she had very little influence over the process. For another, writing about ‘Sarah Bartmann, the metaphor’ felt like reducing her to object status again.

After all, what was the real difference between what I was writing and the Comaroffs’ contribution to the historiography?

One item among the potpourri of curiosities in the *Animal Kingdom* was a description of the ‘Hottentot Venus’, an ‘essential black’ from the Cape Colony. This unfortunate ‘wild woman’ of Khoi ancestry had been taken to Europe and ...ended up on Cuvier’s dissecting table. His famous account of her autopsy was to be reprinted twice within a decade of its publication; it centered on the anomalies of her ‘organ of generation’, which, in its excessive development of the *labia minora*, was held to set her kind apart from human beings. (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 104)

It took me a while to see the similarity because this kind of sophisticated text requires some decoding. It takes a stance which distances itself from the people under discussion through coy quotation marks and passive terminology: ‘had been taken...centered...ended

up...was held'. Another way of putting it: 'Oops, these things just happened.' The Comaroffs do not approve of Cuvier, it is clear, but it didn't seem to me as if they were particularly concerned about the fate of this nameless 'wild woman' either. Perhaps it was not their business. The text, this time, was about Cuvier, or was it about the process whereby '...the bourgeois subject of the new Age of Capitalism, already secure in the Protestant ethic and rational Philosophy, was given uncontested grounding in biological nature' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 101)? What the text was not about was mine and auntie Sarah's history, except insofar as she functioned as an object in aiding the Euroamerican understanding of itself. There is a sense in which the Comaroffs were doing precisely that, you may note, which Cuvier was doing.

I have found that, like Bal's text, this kind of quasi-liberal text tends to be an exercise in modern white people using Black people as objects in trying to excuse/understand the sins of their academic fathers and, therefore, themselves. This method decontextualises what to us is the crucial subject: Black history. And the more it decontextualises, the more conservative and downright racist meanings begin to creep in. I am not talking about simple things like the fact that white people have names and Black people do not. No. Just see how that 'excessive development of the *labia minora*' creeps in at the end. The distancing technique and the fact that this phrase is not in quotation marks (our attention being diverted elsewhere, you see) lends this remark authenticity. The shape, cause or history of this idea is not an issue, except as a minor footnote in the history of white ideas. This kind of analysis makes reality by omission.

To me, it was the issue for the longest time; not by choice but out of necessity – the necessity to be a self-defined, biltong-chewing subject with a sense of humour – I had devoted a considerable amount of effort to investigating the manipulation that went into creating the 'Sarah Bartmann anomaly'. This exposure quite logically revealed some most distasteful details about colonising science and culture. The study of physical manipulations succeeded in shedding light on the culture which, almost two centuries later, produced the papers I have been discussing. My imperial paper was an attempt to relate this manipulation to the process of creating a colonial culture. I did this via 'Sarah Bartmann, metaphor'. But another word for metaphor is 'thing'. There is a sense in which I was doing precisely that, you may note, which the Comaroffs were doing.

Restoring, recontextualising, rebutting can be very good and probably necessary work. Still, all this time, what I actually wanted to do was to write about auntie Sarah, the woman. I wanted to tell the story of who she was, what she ate, how she lived – a biography. A question which had been troubling me from the start was: why the Khoekhoe? The Khoekhoe have functioned as an archetype for centuries. Some of the most racist ideas thought up by Europeans were first elucidated about the Khoekhoe and then extended to apply to other oppressed peoples. I wanted to approach this question by exploring the triple intersection of the identity African/native/slave. Yet I could not. Even had I been able to find the words, I simply did not have the time. All this re-work was getting in the way.

The process of rebutting white male identities was making it impossible for me to simply affirm auntie Sarah's. And because she was part of my history, I was making myself an orphan in the process. The more I could not write her history, the less I was opposing the colonial process which had deprived me of my history.

We have a proverb: '*slim vang sy baas*' (clever catches his boss).⁷ White male insistence on the essentially sexual nature of our identity was forcing me to think seriously about sexuality, or the lack of it, and the way I finally thought myself out of this bind was through a debate on sexuality. Washington argues that the identity 'Black woman = sex' has, in fact, shaped over a century of African women's writing in America:

Women's sexuality is another subject treated very differently by men and women writers. In the male slave narrative, for example, sexuality is nearly always avoided, and when it does surface it is to report the sexual abuse of female slaves. The male slave narrator was under no compulsion to discuss his own sexuality nor that of other men. As far as we know, the only slave narrator forced to admit a sexual life was Linda Brent...sexuality literally made women an unfit subject for literature. In Harlem Renaissance literature, as Barbara Christian reminds us, only male writers felt free to celebrate eroticised sexuality: 'The garb of uninhibited passion wears better on a male, who after all, does not have to carry the burden of the race's morality or lack of it.' (Washington 1990: 36–7)

I need to digress for a moment to make this point absolutely lucid: the necessity which confronted me in writing about the misuses of auntie Sarah's story was the same which confronted other Black women writing about slavery, namely, the gendered obligation to defend the nation's morality. For an African woman this is a particularly hazardous road. As Amadiume says:

The greatest insult to an African is to curse his or her mother or to refer to his or her mother's vagina (which explains the angry reactions of many Africans to the insults heaped on Africans by bourgeois women on the issue of women's circumcision). (Amadiume 1997: 165)

This cultural attribute originates from respect for motherhood, and is a token of the historically great respect paid to motherhood. The very nature of blasphemy, after all, rests on insulting that which we hold most holy. Yet it has become the old colonial story. That which originally was good and wholesome – respect for motherhood – has become yet another tool for oppression. Obbo notes that:

Women's roles and contributions in the rural areas as farmers, wives, mothers and homemakers often prove a hindrance to female emancipation. In order to keep women in the villages, the majority of men have developed arguments justifying women's role as part of African tradition. However, even rural women insisted: 'Traditions that break women's backs, that take women's work for

granted without any reward, that keep women at home, that insist on morality for women only, must be forgotten.' (Obbo 1980: 28)

The burden of the race's morality has become an oppressive one. In carrying it, it seems that African women have enabled a gendered morality which operates in such a way that the men are exempted from the necessity of acting morally. To insist that this is 'tradition' is to ignore the very history which created the burden of the race's morality in the first place. For, although colonialism has oppressed all of us, it oppresses women in specific ways from which men largely are exempted. I cannot understand why she who is doubly oppressed should have extra burdens to carry.

The prohibition on mentioning female private parts is the reason why there is so little open debate about women's sexuality in Africa. The sexual abuse of women is also a part of that debate. There is no language into which it can fit. Ideally, a respectful debate can happen only in gender-segregated environments. It is a 'woman's issue', since here too, the burden of the nation's morality is borne by women. With this I have no problem, since it is right and proper that history should be written without insults. Occasional gender separation is a custom I am comfortable with.

The problem is that African women sometimes need to oppose the mutilation of female bodies in the public, multiracial and multi-gendered sphere where it can make a difference, for the power and the violence which makes it possible for this mutilation to take place is not solely a 'woman's issue'. And it is precisely our role as guardians of the family which impels us to speak of this monstrous threat to the lives and happiness of young women. We then find ourselves in the position of first having to invent a language. But African women place themselves outside their culture when they do, for the 'bearers of morality' should respect themselves first. So our culture, which is otherwise a source of strength, operates against us in this matter. In order to demand an end to the violation of female bodies, it is necessary to mention the unmentionable in public.

I do not know if this African custom was so strong before colonialism. I do have a problem if custom becomes a means of silencing African women. This seems to me to go against the very grain of tradition, in the African sense of a series of negotiated settlements aimed at preserving community and a sense of collective history. Yet so strong is this custom that debates which are of life-sustaining importance to us as women are being silenced.

Like the rural women who sought freedom and independence in the cities, African women who wish to protest sexual violence are having to do so without the comfort of respectability. As long as they are prepared to be symbols of morality, it is all right, but as soon as they want to become empowered beings through language, they can no longer be respectable. It must be a sad and brittle respectability which is so easily lost. Yet African women may hang on to it because, in the midst of multiple dispossessions, it is all they have. Many feel that it is better to be the oppressed wife, respected in theory although despised in practice, than to be branded a prostitute. So the hatred which was exerted against us becomes internalised. Sexual violence, refracted through our own

gendered morality, has rendered women mute. It is no wonder that Awa Thiam begins her book with a discussion of voice:

Black women have been silent for far too long. Are they now beginning to find their voices? Are they claiming the right to speak for themselves? Is it not high time that they discovered voices, that – even if they are unused to speaking for themselves – they now take the floor, if only to say they exist, that they are human beings – something that is not always immediately obvious – and that, as such, they have a right to liberty, respect and dignity? (Thiam 1978: 11)

Sexual violence against African women has aimed to deprive us of our humanity. As such it is not only a ‘women’s issue’. That we have at all needed to assert the existence of our humanity is testimony to how far generations of sexual violence waged against us have succeeded. To be human is to speak. We need a language, and a custom, which will enable us to speak of our experience and needs.

I have digressed enough. What I began to think about at this stage of writing about auntie Sarah’s story was generations of rebuttal. Our post-emancipation, neocolonial history was all about proving that we were so much more than sex. In the process, just like I never came round to writing auntie Sarah’s history, we never became all we could be.

Carby reached a point like this and found power:

But instead of concentrating upon the domination of a white feminist theoretical discourse which marginalizes non-white women, I focus on the production of a discourse of sexuality by black women. By focusing on the sexual and cultural politics of black women who constructed themselves as sexual subjects through song, in particular the blues, I want to assert an empowered presence. (Carby 1999: 8)

‘Empowered presence’ sounded like just the thing for me. Constructing ourselves as self-loving subjects sounded just like what I needed. I wanted to be finished with rehashing old white insults. The very next thing I wanted to do was that biography.

Rebels

When I wrote the imperial paper I was at the height of my re-fighting period. I couldn’t stop because the more I fought, the angrier I grew. Nor is this surprising since the pettiest things about the research process itself were enough to drive anyone to violence. I don’t know what offensive name the whites called your people, but they used to call us ‘Hottentots and Bushmen’. I could not find a library computer on two continents which listed literature on auntie Sarah under anything other than ‘Hottentot Venus’. Try ‘Bartmann, Sarah’ and you would come up blank. I am happy to say that the University of Cape Town library is now an exception to this rule. Book indexes were a nightmare.

So the only way I could even begin to do research about auntie Sarah was by using a rude and offensive term. Imagine what it would be like to have to look up facts about Sojourner Truth under a term like ‘nigger’! That was my position.

All that fighting was making me tired. I started to wonder if I could make it through enough years and, more and more, I began to wonder if I was using the right weapons. To make matters worse, auntie Sarah was starting to hit the news in South Africa. The text this time was different; it was about the movement to bring her home again for burial. Still, the same images were recycled as offensively as before. At my breakfast table I opened up the paper and stared a caricature, purporting to be her naked body, in the face. I attended one conference where a white man showed me a whole file full of these clippings. It was, to him, the token of his political conscience. It began to seem that in political as in academic discourses – not that academic discourses are not political in nature – Khoekhoe women had but one thing to offer.

I knew that the re-emergence of these decontextualising texts in modern times is intimately linked to the success we have had (albeit contradictory) in decolonising our minds and our lands. Wilmsen writes:

Clearly, the discourse of Stone Age savagery has changed little during the...years it has been part of the existential Euroamerican consciousness. And it continues to play the role initially reserved for it, that of metaphoric underpinning for the self-recognition of that consciousness. In the nineteenth century, living persons were taken from their homelands to be displayed in colonial capitals as representatives of their savage state...Ethnography now fulfils this need; it can do so for modern tastes grown somewhat squeamish about using actual bodies because...displaying difference and writing about it serve the same ideological function. (Wilmsen 1989: 35)

I am not in a position to comment on the criticisms which have been made on Wilmsen’s use of evidence (cf. Lee & Guenther 1991). I am not entirely happy with the structuralist nature of his history, though, where the Khoekhoe easily become little more than hapless victims of insuperable economic forces. But in his critique of the intellectual antecedents of the two great master sciences in Khoekhoe studies, namely archaeology and anthropology, he is spot on. He puts his finger on the method with which these sciences operate: by cutting off their victims from the social and economic reality around them. Cheikh Anta Diop writes:

It is recognized that a biased anthropologist can whiten a Black or blacken a White by a tendentious interpretation of measurements and carefully selected partial analyses. (Diop 1991: 2)

In writing of Sarah Bartmann without writing about her, anthropologists succeeded in lining her up for symbolic display without making any sense of her life and times. A carefully selected partial analysis succeeded in confirming ‘facts’ about her which were

not, in fact, facts. The symbolic function was to buttress white male supremacy. The male 'existential Euroamerican consciousness' cannot continue to exist without such constant buttressing. It is in this context that we must understand the tremendous proliferation of Sarah Bartmann texts in the late twentieth century, which mention her without granting her life. Her literary function was to be abused, by any one of the textual mechanisms in use: decontextualisation, depersonalisation, objectification and insult.

Two examples: Altick could do no better for Sarah Bartmann than to list her as a 'heavy arsed heathen' (Altick 1978: 269). Lindfors not only cites this but also continues to refer to her as a 'fat-arsed female' (Lindfors 1983: 100). The perpetuation of ridicule serves a purpose: Auntie Sarah is exhumed only to be insulted.

It is not just that this display is not benign. As I have already said, the white male historiography was inhospitable to me simply because there were no good symbolic role models for me. These texts went one step further by positing Black womanhood as nothing more than the subject of ridicule and insult. We have a proverb: '*As jy niks goed kan sê nie, sê dan liewer niks*' (If you can't say anything good, rather say nothing). It is the prevalence of texts which rather say something nasty than nothing at all which disturbs me.

Altick's study is revealing about the function of symbolic display in freak shows and circuses. At times, he deals with his freakish material by distancing himself through a dry irony:

No longer did much aura of sentimental primitivism surround such people. Instead, besides the perennial interest any strange-looking and -acting human being had for the show-going public and the proof such creatures presented of mankind's variety, they owed their appeal to a new climate of interest in nineteenth century England. In the preceding century, what small knowledge of human behaviour and primitive culture had been obtained from imported savages remained for the most part unorganized and unscientific...Now appeared the first stirrings of what would become, by the late 1840s the infant science of ethnology, for which, of course, living specimens of barbaric or savage races constituted prime raw material. Simultaneously, the imperialism which accompanied the early *pax Victoriana* was weaving ethnology, geography and the nation's economic and geopolitical aspirations into a single seamless pattern. (Altick 1978: 268)

Heavy going, and had it been about a white male instead of auntie Sarah I could have forgiven the temptation to leaven it with a little irony. But humour is culture contingent – and what can one possibly say about a scholarly culture that would find this acceptable? In Altick's work, the freakishness of the business he is studying is all too often reproduced in his text. This causes problems of representation. 'Primitivism', 'strange-looking', 'savages', 'barbaric' on the one side; 'a single seamless pattern' on the other.

In Lindfors's hands, this mindless racism is taken one step further. The hatred drips from the text:

She was willing to collaborate in her own degradation in order to earn more money...She had agreed to allow herself to be exhibited indecently to the European public, and she persisted in this tawdry occupation for more than five years, stopping only when her health finally broke down. She may have been the victim of the cruelest kind of predatory ruthlessness, but her collusion in her own victimization was unmistakable. (Lindfors 1985: 148)

But this is not history. It is an exercise in racial and sexual hatred. Lindfors, citing a French anthropologist's 1915 speech in which he repeated rumours he had heard in 1875, concluded:

To put it plainly, she may have engaged in prostitution as well as exhibitionism. Her degradation may have been complete. (Lindfors 1985: 148)

As the Sarah Bartmann story grew stale by repetition, it seemed as if white males had to think up ever more emotionally charged stories to get the same excitement quotient out of it. There was more, even more offensive, which I shall spare you. By this time I was sick of analysing racist texts.

Hatred and insult have just one effect on those who are at the receiving end. It makes 'one' tired. Researching Sarah Bartmann's life is the most exhausting job I have ever had; it is treading a heavy winepress.

This is not to say that the politicisation of auntie Sarah's story was not in itself a good thing. For one thing, her life was obviously very much about politics from the beginning, and for another, some victories just cannot be won in the academic sphere, but only on the streets outside. It gave me a curious feeling of satisfaction when the Griquas, a section of the Khoekhoe people who can trace their tradition of resistance way back to 1656, took up auntie Sarah's cause. Still, the publicity accompanying it brought some unexpected consequences. Journalists did not scruple to argue against the Griqua position in the guise of 'objective' reportage:

The fact that Saartje pleaded in a court case that she did not perform under duress and received half the profits did not change the Griqua perspective on her 'undignified' exploitation. (*Toronto Globe and Mail* 01.01.1996)

I was getting emotionally exhausted because nobody was looking at the conditions of her labour. So long as these writers could make out that she was complicit in her own oppression, nobody cared about its economics. All that de-stuff I've been talking about concentrated on Sarah Bartmann, the thing-as-metaphor. While white male authors were getting excited writing about her body, it seems that they were forgetting that she was a human being who laboured in a capitalist system.

In this respect, complicity has been one of the fundamental myths in the Sarah Bartmann story. Most accounts do not mention her status as worker at all, since most accounts are only interested in one thing. The ones that do mention her status as worker

implicitly deny any link between slavery and the creation of Sarah Bartmann as the ultimate sexual signifier by the simple expedient of not making any link. Slavery is, of course, a matter which is of crucial importance to the descendants of slaves because it defines our identity. Being a descendant of slaves writing about slaves has taught me of this double bind – I am a person whose name was lost studying people whose names were taken. Far be it from me to suggest that the name my mother gave me is not a ‘proper’ name. What I am saying here is that it is not the name she would have chosen, had we not been colonised.

So there I was: tired, exhausted and still angry. I had defined a relationship to auntie Sarah, *but I did not know her birth name*. In principle we were both fine with that – after a century or so you learn to have relationships where neither party has an African name and we converse in English, in a metaphorical sense – but not knowing her birth name was an important clue. Since she was born in the 1780s on the eastern Cape frontier, she must have had a Khoekhoe name. It was far too early, and too far out in the country, for her parents to have been so colonised that they would not have given her a native name. So she must have had one. How and at what point did she then lose this name and come into the records as ‘Sarah Bartmann’? In Africa there are only two ways – through religious colonisation or through slavery. But auntie Sarah was baptised much later, in Manchester in 1811, so it was unlikely that she could have been baptised in the Cape. Brooding about names led me to the conclusion that she must have been a slave.

The other point, of course, is geography. Somewhere between 1790 and 1809 auntie Sarah would have had to pass through the heartland of Khoekhoe slavery – the wine districts of the southern and southwestern Cape – in order to get from her birthplace to the ship which took her to England. She may have spent years in this passage. To be Black and to live in these areas without being a slave was so unusual at the time that it was explained and specified. Black people who were not slaves were such an anomaly that they had to carry papers to that effect: these named them ‘Free Blacks’. Khoekhoe were not ‘Free Blacks’ because they were not legally enslaved. But the customary enslavement of the Khoekhoe was such an established social fact that those who were free enough to travel from one place to another had to have official pieces of paper to that effect. These pieces of paper were called passes, and Sarah Bartmann did not possess one. So she must have been a slave.

Up to this point in my personal history the slave story had been for me an intellectual issue, a matter of evidence and methodology. Watching the myth that was being built up around her being used against the struggle of her own people, I saw the politics of it. Maybe all that fighting was misdirected. Maybe the issue was not which weapons I used. Knowledge is power, and I knew auntie Sarah was a slave. I knew it, but to whom was I saying this?

So I wrote a paper on Khoekhoe slavery. I took the evidence and methodology and turned it around. I took auntie Sarah seriously and connected her personal history to the history of Khoekhoe. I argued that the reason why historians could get away with

pretending that she wasn't a slave was because of their historical refusal to acknowledge Khoekhoe slavery.

To me this paper was fundamentally important. Oddly enough, it was precisely at the moment when I defined auntie Sarah as in a position of complete objectification, as a slave, that I began to see agency in her story. I wrote:

To expect her in these circumstances to tell the truth would be to ignore the likely effects of the culture born of slavery in which she was brought up. The historical experience of her people had given her reasonable grounds to expect that her testimony against a white man was not likely to be credited, and the consequences for herself were likely to be terrible; in short, that justice would be administered on a racial basis. In view of Mr Gaseley's expressed ideas about Khoekhoe people, there is a strong possibility that she was right. (Abrahams 1996: 94)

It is sad that the thing I thought auntie Sarah did with this agency was to lie. But I suggested she lied because she had to. I argued that when she saw herself as having only two choices – that of telling the truth and possibly spending the rest of her life in jail, or of lying and returning to a state of slavery outside jail – she lied.

The good part was that here I was doing all those things I had previously found so hard: writing history and writing in that language. Best of all I was finding such lovely turns of phrase: 'she was brought up', she 'expected', 'she was right'. What lovely sentences can be created with the Black woman as a restored subject.

This paper let me bring auntie Sarah home, not just to Khoekhoe history but to the history of Black women all over the world. It allowed me to make connections between her personal experience of being colonised and our collective colonial history. Joan Martin says:

The nature of moral goodness and its relation to enslaved women's work is the underlying theme for the third characterization of Black women's work. Here, Black women's control of their own bodies and sexuality, and their reproductive capacities make a work ethic a complex matter fraught with ambiguity. Enslaved women were exploited for their labor power. This included exploitation as sexual objects and as breeders of the slave owner's human capital. According to Joanne Braxton, enslaved women knew that they were 'sexual laborers' and producers of children for the slave market, and that these factors made women a commodity different and unique from men. (Martin 1995: 72)

As I reproduced human capital and endured sexual harassment, I realised that there was no time limit to the after-effects of slavery. As long as Black women's material exploitation oscillates between those two poles, the ambiguities will remain. The least I could do as a historian, I thought, was to attempt to put things into perspective so that those who wondered about these things would understand. The ambiguities come out of slavery; I published that paper.

Whenever I think about my evolving relation to auntie Sarah's story, I suspect I am not as bright as my mother always said. Up to this point I had retained a naïve belief that 'the truth' mattered. I still thought that if I played by their rules and presented all my evidence, I could manage to convince white scholars that Sarah Bartmann did not choose her fate.

Until then, I had never thought of this 'ambiguity' manuscript as serious academic work. I thought of the truth as 'out there', and of evidence and methodology as something I was doing in the context of auntie Sarah's story, not my own. The idea that my emotions were data which could lead me to the truth, or that my inner truth mattered, in an intellectual sense, was not something I understood, then. The thought that these emotions could provide an academic methodology was not one which occurred to me in all of this time. Still I wrote, hurriedly before returning to my 'real' work, not knowing what I was writing this for.

The strange thing was that in my work and life outside this intellectual world, I would be the first to claim that Black women were expert witnesses to racism and sexism. If a Black person said something was racist I would take her word before a white person's. If a woman said it was sexist I would take her word before a man's. And what was auntie Sarah's story about, then, if not about racism and sexism creating the conditions under which she had to make her choices for good or evil? Yet I was denying my emotional expertise in these matters by refusing to make it part of my academic work.

The change, for me, came when I moved beyond the re-work. There is a difference between re-butting, re-researching, re-contextualising and re-calling names, on the one hand, and an autonomous self-named story on the other. In the first, I am still allowing white males to set the terms of debate. I am fighting on their territory. This is a cardinal mistake oom !Nanseb /Gabemab (Captain Hendrik Witbooi)⁸ had warned against. So I spent much time reading writers and practitioners of resistance, searching for tactics. I learned that guerrilla warfare is about forcing your enemies to come and look for you on territory of your choosing.

I learned from Captain Witbooi about the rightness of time. A great strategist is one who does things in the right and proper season. So oom !Nanseb wrote in his youth: *'Toro-/garu tama ta ha. Amase ni //nati habatsi sa oms \kat ge gowa !Kuub ei-!a khemi'* (I did not come intending war. But truly, now I shall come over you, because you have invited this war into your home, [so I shall come] in the power of the Almighty).⁹ In the wisdom of his later years, he wrote: 'Everything I can say has already been written, all I could do has been done.'¹⁰ And it was with an eye towards that latter time, when I would be able to say the same, that I read on about the art of war. I needed the power to say what I needed to say. So I went right back to the beginning of my work, and practised becoming my own terrain of struggle. In the context of this symbolic struggle, I had to learn to become a self-definer. Here, in this manuscript, I set the stage. Here, I have power. This is my world.

Oddly enough, or perhaps not so, it was through reading white feminists on auntie Sarah that I came to this conclusion. Schiebinger, for instance, was a hard-working historian. Unlike many of those mentioned up to now, she went out of her way to find new sources of evidence about auntie Sarah and, very importantly, had these translated into English. She also evinced a proper concern with auntie Sarah's agency. The problem was that Schiebinger did not relate to her as 'auntie Sarah' at all. For one, Schiebinger's consistent use of the words 'Hottentot' and 'Bushman', without a shadow of a quotation mark, was lacking in respect, not to mention sensitivity. Also, at the same time as she was searching for agency, she seemed to be writing auntie Sarah out of the script:

...neither the dominant theory of race nor of sex in this period applied to women of non-European descent, particularly black women. Like other females, they did not fit comfortably into the great chain of being. Like other Africans, they did not fit European gender ideals. (Schiebinger 1993: 160)

That the white male scientists who were creating 'dominant theories of race or of sex' might have been thinking that these were separate theories was perhaps uncontroversial. That Schiebinger, after over a decade of Black feminist polemics, still thought so, was inexcusable. The dominant theory of race was eminently gendered, and the dominant theory of gender was racialised from the time auntie Sarah came on the scene. By arguing that dominant discourses on gender and race developed separately, Schiebinger ignored much of the evidence she herself presented on the way the Khoekhoe in particular had been characterised as sexually deviant from the inception of European colonialism in southern Africa (cf. Schiebinger 1993: 91, 115, 135–6). To then end her discussion of Sarah Bartmann with the question, 'Why, then, did anatomists and anthropologists privilege *male* bodies when investigating race and *European* bodies when examining sex?' missed the point (Schiebinger 1993: 172). Why are we not displaying naked anthropologists and anatomists, if they are the subjects of our text?

Fausto-Sterling gave yet another demonstration of the tendency to lose sight of Sarah Bartmann altogether and instead to consider the ideas and feelings of the white participants in her life story. This is not unexpected, considering the postmodern emphasis on human subjectivity and academic construction. In fact, the modern resurgence of texts on Sarah Bartmann must be seen in the light of these changing emphases. Fausto-Sterling pointed out the historical parallels between the early nineteenth century and our time, but still with such a familiar segregated mindset:

These new accounts are significant. Just as during the nineteenth century she became a vehicle for the redefinitions of our concepts of race, gender and sexuality, her present recasting occurs in an era in which the bonds of empire have broken apart, and the fabric of the cultural systems of the nations of the north Atlantic has come under critical scrutiny. (Fausto-Sterling 1996: 20)

Just whose is 'our'? The personal history of auntie Sarah just became irrelevant. Just consider the questions which Fausto-Sterling asked:

What was the importance of these dissections to the scientists who did them and the society that supported them? What social, cultural and personal work did these scientific forays accomplish, and how did they accomplish it? Why did the anatomical descriptions of women of color seem to be of such importance to biologists of the nineteenth century? (Fausto-Sterling 1996: 20)

While the honesty may be refreshing, it may be seen that auntie Sarah's role in this story was still limited to that of a dead body. What is more, this body was relevant only insofar as it allowed us to shed light on western culture and science. The concern with subjectivity and social construction is, it seems, limited to that of western observation. This article has no intentions of relating to the Khoekhoe, or indeed to Africans at all. In this sense, these writings about auntie Sarah are not histories at all, at least with regard to her and her people. Rather, they represent a renewed use of her body.

It remains for me to shed light on what was not said. I need to speak about the symbolic sexual abuse which I was experiencing in my life. It has taken me a long time to understand that there are places where the symbolic is as real as it can be, and that the violation of the space between my ears is not in my imagination.

Now, I wonder that I could have been so slow. For of course auntie Sarah was violated, and of course there is a need to write about it. Some key definitions: rape is an act of sexual violence, an expression of male power and female vulnerability. So let me go back to that first Gilman paper, and my experiences upon reading it. Was it not rape of a symbolic sort to parade the degradation and humiliation of auntie Sarah before me? Was it not a sexually violent act which expressed male power and my vulnerability to pain? Has not each male author I have brought before you been unable to resist the temptation of demonstrating their psychosexual power and auntie Sarah's inability to resist? Michele Jacques writes of Black bodies as evidence of a singular sort:

Black bodies testify to our strength, endurance, love of spirituality and oneness with earth and sky. From...slavery forward, devilish untruths about our embodiment have hindered the power of this testimony. Too often 'the rocks have spoken' in our place and a false witness has been given. (Jacques 1995: 129)

In place of false witness it is time to speak the truth. I name the posthumous abuse and degradation of auntie Sarah's body, rape. The rape of her body is a rape of my mind. That this takes place on a symbolic level does not make it any less real than Cuvier's dissection and re-engineering of auntie Sarah's mortal remains. Altick lived to tell the tale, Lindfors to make fun of it. I find this to be surrogate violence against women. That auntie Sarah was dead and could not feel the abuse in her body makes this difference: I am alive and can feel it. The difference it makes to practise sexual abuse at a symbolic

level is that the perpetrators are undetected: the act is not named as such and occasionally even passes for 'history'.

In order to clarify the meaning of this symbolic sexual violence, our definition of rape can be both refined and broadened. Toinette Eugene provides a womanist definition:

...the elements of sexual abuse are the violation of a person's integrity by force and/or threat of physical violence, dishonouring the ethic of mutuality and care in relationships of domination, and an infraction of one's psycho-spiritual-sexual integrity. Sexual abuse is a sacrilege of God's Spirit in each of us. (Eugene 1995: 105)

If it is auntie Sarah's credibility as a witness which shall determine the case, I shall lay the evidence before you. If it is my credibility as a witness which is at stake, the evidence lies before you here. I claim for us both the status as expert witnesses to the violence of which I speak.

I have documented the violence and shall do so again. I have shown that there has been a 'dishonouring [of] the ethic of mutuality and care' that should exist between the researcher and the researched. That there exists instead a relationship of domination between the white males who have written and the Black woman who has been 'written', is clear. I have made the case that auntie Sarah's integrity – and my own – has been diminished thereby. My full humanity has been denied me.

As one Khoekhoe woman to another, I wanted to write a biography of a human life. This would have fulfilled me as a human being. I would have felt I lived a life worth living. This choice has been foreclosed by sexual abuse. My choice was only one of two: to pretend that none of this abuse was going on; or to confront it, admit it, and admit that it is happening to me. To choose the first is too dangerous. The chance would always exist that another white male would replay these abusive texts at a time of threat. In fact, wherever I look I see Black women working, striving to get by and struggling for a better world. It is very likely that white, property-owning males will feel very threatened in time to come.

Racism, sexism and their sexually abusive confluence have created the conditions in which I was not free to choose to be a biographer. Hill Collins explains how the system works:

These violent acts are the visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression. Violence against Black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned while the same acts visited on other groups may remain nonlegitimated and nonexcusable. Certain forms of violence may garner the backing and control of the state...Specific acts of sexual violence visited on African...women reflect a broader process by which violence is socially constructed in a race- and gender-specific manner. (Hill Collins 1990: 177)

The social construction of racism and sexism has rendered the abuse which was performed against auntie Sarah Bartmann's body and her image socially invisible to the

perpetrators and, sometimes, to the victims. Instead, it has been represented as an ideologically innocuous activity. This academic violence has been state-subsidised and state-supported, represented as innocent by the mass media. In the process, it has rendered the violence done to other Black women, such as myself, invisible.

We should not make easy distinctions between symbolic and physical sexual abuse. An act has to be thinkable before you can commit it. In this sense, symbolic violence against women can be analysed by analogy with theories of physical violence. For example, Crenshaw argues that:

Rape and other sexual abuses in the work context, now termed sexual harassment, have been a condition of black women's work life for centuries. Forced sexual access to black women was of course institutionalized in slavery and was central to its reproduction...The stereotypes and myths that justified the sexual abuse of black women in slavery continue to be played out in current society. (Crenshaw 1992: 411)

I have discussed these stereotypes and myths at length. It remains only to mention that they have victimised me, and to demand that it comes to an end. If this chapter has done nothing more than render this abuse visible, it shall have served its purpose well.

Forced sexual abuse of Black women was institutionalised in slavery. Slavery was a point at which Black people were completely objectified: they were defined, by those who claimed the power to define, as being devoid of motive will. Choice in this context is meaningless. White law, white justice and white custom define rape as sexual violence without consent. Under slavery Black women could legally not be raped because they could legally neither consent nor dissent. They were not people. Does this mean they were not raped? Black women know the answer.

Black women know about the impossibility of choice through their historical experience. Today, rape is still defined in the courts as a matter of individual consent. It is also defined as an act against an individual woman. This is a definition which does not take into account the historical reality of Black women's lives. We know that the ruling culture retains the norm that Black women have no right not to consent. Lorraine Hansberry's heroine cited at the beginning of this chapter put her finger on it when she said 'if you're Brown, they're sure you're selling'. She was not free to choose the ruling culture which set the conditions under which she was sexually harassed; neither am I nor any other Black woman or girl. The ruling narrative structures create the conditions under which our consent is irrelevant. The question auntie Sarah and all other slaves had to answer was: what can choice really mean under conditions of absolute unfreedom? In our symbolic world, ruled by white supremacist, woman-hating narrative structures, this question still remains. Our only choice must be to choose to cease forthwith to practise violence against those of our own race and gender. In our relationships with one another we create our world. Here, we have power.

Conclusion

I have always believed that, in trying to understand the world, the answers are only as important as the way you phrase the questions. Let me endeavour again: is there a 'right' history to be written about the crimes which were committed against us? This may be a strange question for a historian, but I am starting to see my elders' reasoning. My elders chose, often, not to tell me of my history because the pain, anger and hatred were considered not suitable for children. Only with the attainment of a certain age and seniority have I, cautiously, been allowed to hear the stories. I wonder still, and often, if all this were not better forgotten. My grandmother-in-law used to try to teach me to forgive my enemies. For years I shrugged it off as turn-the-other-cheek stuff which had no place in our struggle. Then I began to think about this clever woman who is never too old to learn. My grandmother-in-law has certainly survived a life I would be too frightened to live. Now, I have come to understand that it was the other tradition of my people – that side by side with our struggle to be free, there lived a struggle to remain human. Forgiving your enemies is not about them – they can see to themselves – it is about us.

To write the history of pain, hatred and anger, without replicating and passing on the heavy burden of those unresolved emotions, would be a truly humane history of Africa.

I realised this when one Sunday afternoon at the South African National Gallery in 1996, at a meeting where Brown people from all over the country came together to protest against the continued exhibition of our ancestors' bodies, I finally managed to find myself underneath years of academic socialisation. A slim Brown girl from the Kalahari said to the exhibitors, 'If you knew our culture, you would not have done this thing.'

On that sunny afternoon on the slopes of Taub Homi¹¹ – the last place Sarah Bartmann saw as she was removed from the shores of Africa – I came to connect with my humanness. I spoke very little. There was no need when my people were all gathered together to speak. What I did say came from the heart. I said, 'It hurts us.' And now I understand that it was my humanness speaking, that it is precisely my native African self, the descendant of slaves, who has all these problems and issues of morality.

Our meeting, predictably perhaps, ended with a discussion of identity. A stout Brown man from Cape Town, in trying to find words to explain our sense of who we are now, said, 'To be Khoekhoe means suffering.' It means that exactly. What is this 'I' which feels pain? It is the hurt I feel when any of my people are objectified which forms the meeting between auntie Sarah Bartmann and myself. I do not seek to claim her suffering. There is more than enough of that going around to need to take another's share. I do identify with it. Pain, though unendurable at the time, is easily forgotten when it is over. Ultimately, all that is going to matter is that we can be Khoekhoe again.

As a Brown woman, I know it must come to an end. As an academic, my particular part in this process has been to write the history of dehumanised colonial imaginings, but also the history of humanness against all odds. The former matters only because it measures the obstacles which we have overcome.

I will work out a way to explain to our children how it came about that things which we teach them are private and not a subject for public discussion in fact were a subject for white public discussion for three centuries, a process which necessitates my mentioning the unmentionable. Then I will teach them that it is not important, as long as we are good, as long as we retain faith in our power to be good. I have not yet managed to resolve all the ambiguities. I suspect the only way I will ever resolve them is when it is, in the colloquial sense, history. Until then, I can at least realise that I do not bring these contradictions on myself. Until then, I can realise my power to choose humanity.

NOTES

- 1 Captain Witbooi to Manasse !Noreseb, Lidfontein 10.12.1888.
- 2 Sander Gilman has since publicly distanced himself from his 1985 paper, at a seminar held at the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, May 1996; a seminar at which the first part of this manuscript was presented in its original form.
- 3 Bal does raise the question (cf. Bal 1991: 29). She just doesn't answer it.
- 4 'Non-white' means the same as 'uncle Tom' in African American idiom. Its origin lies in the joke: 'Take away the "white" part and what are you left with? Nothing!'
- 5 About *Dioroscea Elephantipes* and the extraction of cortisone, cf. Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk (1972: 82). About *Bulbine* spp. of the eastern Cape, cf. Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk (1972: 12).
- 6 Another gem from this collection: 'It is said that when Columbus landed, one Indian turned to another and said: "Well, there goes the neighbourhood" ' (Deloria 1992: 342).
- 7 This means that people who try to be too clever eventually get themselves into trouble.
- 8 Captain Hendrik Witbooi was a Khoe guerilla leader in the nineteenth and early twentieth century trans-Gariep region (present-day Namibia).
- 9 Captain Hendrik Witbooi to Chief Maharero, senior, !Ga-os, 30.10.1885, cited in Heywood and Maasdorp (1995: 9).
- 10 Captain Witbooi to Captain Leutwein, Tsaam, 10.09.1894, in Heywood and Maasdorp (1995: 180).
- 11 The Khoekhoe name of Table Mountain means 'place of the Supreme Being'.

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