‘Is it possible to represent her freshly without reproducing sexist and racist appropriation?’[1]

The case of Sarah Bartmann

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Abstract: When black South African artist Willie Bester, whose art persistently criticizes the colonial and totalitarian history of his country, created a sculpture of Sarah Bartmann (or Saartjie Bartmann) out of recycled material, one wouldn’t have imagined so many ruptures from this work. Buikema (2007) clinically unpacks the first rupture at the University of Cape Town by deploying politics of representation as presence and symbolic. And she questions: Is it possible to represent Sarah Bartmann freshly without reproducing sexist and racist appropriations? In this article, I unpick Buikema’s article while putting it into conversation with further ruptures that took place at UCT between 2015-2018 after the student protests calling for decolonisation of the university. I argue that it is through such critical engagements and discomforts that transformation towards dignifying and humanising of Sarah Bartmann occurs; and by extension, epistemic justice.

Keywords: Sarah Bartmann, politics of representation, South Africa

The legacy of politics of mis/representation

The title of this piece is a direct quote from Buikema’s (2007) insightful writing on the politics of representation of Sarah Bartmann (also called Saartjie Bartmann) – *The arena of imaginings: Sarah Bartmann and the ethics of representation*. I got acquainted with this text not only because Rosemarie was one of my doctoral supervisors, but it

1 Title worked with here is a direct quote from Buikema’s text (Buikema 2007, 81).

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also held a lot of theoretical framings for my doctoral thesis, which looked at African sexuality. A context riddled and rife with historical misrepresentation, as Buikema alludes. Noting African sexuality was especially central to the colonial project exposing the contradictory frame that marked 'unnatural acts' as homosexual on the one hand (devising the homo/hetero binary) and the myth that constructed Africans as predominantly heterosexual on the other (Mbasalaki, 2020). Indeed, McClintock (1994) posits how African bodies and sexualities became focal points for the justification and legitimisation of the fundamental objectives of colonialism: to civilise the barbarian and savage natives of the 'dark continent'. In my own work, I interrogate this colonial imagination and framing drawing on some continuities that Buikema posits. I illustrate how the colonial project's preoccupation with African female sexuality manifests itself in many forms. Exemplary of this being the nineteenth-century imagining of Sarah Bartmann, who was exhibited in France and Britain as the 'Hottentot Venus'. Working within the racist and colonial framework, authors of one of the earliest studies of African women's sexuality – Georges Cuvier (a zoologist) and Henri de Blainville – engaged with the Darwinian perspective (Buikema, 2007; Stephens and Phillips, 2003). According to Stephens and Phillips (2003), "social Darwinism is based on the survival of the fittest model (…) [according to which] the African 'race' is the lowest in the hierarchy of humans in terms of intelligence, health, civility, and basic reasoning" (6). And in this, we see an archive of white supremacy that forms part of the organising order of the 'African other' especially as it relates to African sexuality.

Drawing on Buikema (2007), my own work centres racialised framings in their intersection with gender and African sexuality. Such as colonial processes that have curved out certain spaces – such as townships in South Africa – as predominantly heterosexual. And how some of this can be traced to Sarah Bartmann. Within this framework, South African historian Yvette Abrahams (1997) illustrates how Western scientists' fixation on Sarah Bartmann's genitalia facilitated the institutionalisation of the definition of black female bodies as objects of classification, academic scrutiny, and sexual fantasy. Which underlines misrepresentations of African sexuality as it relates to knowledge production. Lewis (2011) further contends that the "extravagant myth-making and invention associated with Bartmann explicitly indicates how bodies – marked according to racial and gendered inferiority – carry dense cultural meaning and how African female bodies easily became sites for others' inscription" (205). She additionally suggests that "African sexuality, therefore, was often defined as that of 'natural beings', especially in relation to reproduction. The assumption was that Africans could not possibly display homoerotic desires or agencies, as these were associated with sophisticated human desires and eroticism" (208) – an idea that extended all the way from colonial administration to ethnographic scholarship. Colonial and early anthropological representations of sexuality (especially as it coerced heterosexuality as

an institution) have therefore been central to many present-day taboos, laws, attitudes, knowledges, and scholarship surrounding sexuality in Africa (Tamale, 2011, Mbasalaki, 2020). What I am driving at here is that questions of representation, in this case in relation to knowledge production and how Buikema eloquently writes in the cultural field, remain of grave importance especially when Sarah Bartmann is centred.

Emotive contestations on cultural representations

The above discussion points to the fact that I was and continue to be inspired by Buikema's (2007) text. Here, I would like to take a moment – shift gears and point out the continued contestation of cultural representation as it relates to Sarah Bartmann. Especially because Willie Bester's sculpture of Sarah Bartmann has had multiple eruptions or perhaps ruptures since Buikema's article on the same matter, becoming a recurrent story. Buikema notes how the "statue was crafted by Willie Bester, a South African artist who is known for often working with recycled material. He uses his art to persistently criticize the colonial and totalitarian history of his country. He made this sculpture in the late 1990s, prompted by a poem read by a poet friend, Diana Ferrus" (71). She further points out that

> [W]hen the University of Cape Town acquired this work of art and placed it in the library, a fierce controversy arose, both in the corridors of the university and in university bulletins. It turned out that many students were offended by the exhibition of Sarah Bartmann in a Science and Engineering Department. It was as if history was repeated once again: after her dramatic wanderings in colonial Europe, Sarah Bartmann had been put on display yet again, her nakedness once more subject to scientific interrogation. (Buikema, 2007, 72)

This first eruption occurred in the early 2000s. Further pronounced ruptures occurred between 2015-2018 largely under the #RhodesMustFall movement as part of the call to decolonise the university in South Africa. Some of the contestations here were around the 'nakedness' of Sarah Bartmann resulting in 'robing'/dressing her up. During that time, black womxn and students clothed the sculpture in a kanga and a headwrap to give Bartmann her dignity. This provoked debates and evoked strong emotions (Cloete 2018). This is in strong resonance with Buikema's (2007) observations, who writes how "[w]henever an image of Sarah Bartmann appears or a story about her is told, emotions invariably flare up, followed by heated debate" (72). Which Nomusa Makhubu, a dear friend and former colleague, an art historian at the University of Cape Town (UCT), speaks of as well. She articulates these emotions during a round table event with Willie Bester as part of the exhibition that

was taking place at the Ritchie Gallery on the University of Cape Town's Hiddingh campus in 2018. The round table formed part of an ongoing process and dialogue about the display of artworks at the university, with the intention of creating a more open and inclusive space (Cloete, 2018). Makhubu adds that "[t]his sculpture has become a very significant catalyst for that intellectual discourse, about a number of things, but also focusing on the narrative of Sarah Baartman" (n.d.).

Indeed, there were several events surrounding this rupture, not only exhibitions but also various forms of intellectual and artistic dialogue within the framework of 'dignifying Sarah Bartmann'; all of which allude to a critical engagement with representation. What lies at the heart of the desire to 'dignify' Bartmann speaks to both representation as presence and symbolic. Both these aspects play out in Willie Bester's statue. From the angle of representation as presence, Willie Bester's naked sculpture of Bartmann simultaneously critiques colonial and totalitarian history surrounding Bartmann, while at the same time reinforcing the colonial gaze through her nakedness. This is what Buikema alludes to, that even critical art pieces like that of Willie Bester are not neutral, so to speak. Perhaps more so when they relate to representing Sarah Bartmann, whose body bore the brunt of various forms of racialised and gendered violence. It is in this framing that Makhubu's words become poignant, when she states that "[w]e have had to deal with an intricate and complex set of debates about whether it should be left robed, or the robes taken off" (ibid.). Indeed, Willie Bester was part of one of the round table discussions surrounding this rupture and was open to reimaginations of the sculpture including clothing.

As poignantly put in one of the quotes/texts pinned on the robe put on Sarah Bartmann's body on display at the exhibition in the Richie Gallery at UCT in 2018, "It is not just a sculpture… It is not just a piece of cloth… It is centuries of trauma". And another one "Sara[h] Bartmann once again a series of body parts" (Cloete, 2018). How can one represent someone like Sarah Bartmann without reinforcing or being complicit to centuries of trauma? Is this even possible? Perhaps, perhaps not. But perhaps it is through such critical engagement that we even begin the process of dismantling centuries of trauma brought on by colonisation and coloniality. This becomes a process of beginning to heal from trauma brought on by the colonial wound. This then engages with the symbolic aspect of representation, where dignifying of Sarah Bartmann extends to humanising those who are constantly dehumanised by violent processes embedded in coloniality and knowledge production.

And so, in conclusion, I return to Buikema's (2007) main question in the title of this piece – if it is possible to represent Sarah Bartmann without reproducing racist and gendered appropriations. Is this even possible given the history and legacy of colonialism, where the colonial wound still sits deep for the formally colonised subjects? In Buikema's concluding remarks, she posits how the "acknowledgement that Sarah

Bartmann's history is exemplary for South Africa's national identity is an important reflection of the view that, in South Africa, no one has emerged unharmed from what is, in many respects, a tragic past" (83). And no doubt we will see more ruptures/eruptions surrounding representations of Sarah Bartmann. But I would argue that the discourse is moving more towards opening up space: for critical dialogue and possibly the beginning of processes of healing. As long as we continue to have at times uncomfortable dialogues and eruptions, it is through these discomforts that transformations occur – of representation both as presence and as symbolic, as Buikema suggests. For instance, the reimagination of cultural pieces that represent Sarah Bartmann in a dignified way then speaks to the presence whereas the knowledge produced from these forms of representations works towards epistemic justice – a true symbolic gesture. And with this, the process of 'undoing' of violence(s) and misrepresentation of Sarah Bartmann takes shape. It is not a one-off, it is a continuous process.

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