CONCLUSION

De-Aestheticizing Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n)

"I’ve come to take you home—
home, remember the veld?
the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees
the air is cool there and the sun does not burn.
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,
the proteas stand in yellow and white
and the water in the stream chuckle sing-songs
as it hobbles along over little stones.
—Diana Ferrus, “A Poem for Sarah Baartman”

In the spring of 2002, a delegation from South Africa traveled to France to escort the remains of Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) back to her homeland for burial. The resolution of the struggle between the South African and French governments over the Khoi-Khoi woman’s remains becomes a site from which we can engage with the issues of agency, reconciliation, and restitution central to beginning a process of healing cultures suffering under a legacy of racist destruction. The extrication of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s skeleton, brain, and genitals from museum curators at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris and French government officials was intended, in the words of poet Diana Ferrus, “to restore—to make good what was bad” (The Return of Sara Baartman). Ferrus’s poem, the first nine lines of which are the opening epigraph to these concluding remarks, played a central role in breaking the stalemate in the battle to return Ba(a)rtman(n) to South Africa. By employing an ethic of care, Ferrus disrupts a racist ideology predicated on ideals of rational observation and examination by focusing on the ideals of empathy rather than of rationalist knowledge-gathering. This movement from objectification to engagement, although complicated, holds the seeds of a strategy to disrupt a legacy of hatred.
Up to this point, this book has examined the processes by which white British Victorian writers represented race as an arrangement of competing tropes that led, ultimately, paradoxically, and seemingly unintentionally, to an unraveling of the rational basis of the category. The narrative crisis in each text results in an aesthetic turn, whether it is in the decision to fictionalize historical events while at the same time insisting on their accuracy, to dramatize the process of narrative interpretation, or to nostalgically reflect on an aesthetic remnant of home and of the British domestic realm. Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) has functioned throughout this study as a shadow figure, a woman who represents the literal human destruction produced when a culture chooses to aestheticize otherness in whatever form it appears. Ba(a)rtman(n) became the emblematic, aestheticized racial object or spectacle in early-nineteenth century England, the living embodiment of the social and racial metaphor. Her suffering stands as testimony to the destruction that can be produced when the aesthetic collides with oppression and returns to its origins in the body. In The Ideology of the Aesthetic, Terry Eagleton asserts that “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body” (Eagleton, 13). Her body was used both to construct and to modify the existing metaphor of racial and gender otherness, a process that has continued, even as her remains were brought back to South Africa, in the recent spate of fictional representations of her life. As South Africa’s ambassador to France, Thuthukile Skweyiya, suggested when asked about the return of Ba(a)rtman(n) to her homeland, Ba(a)rtman(n) became “the symbol of a nation’s need to confront and acknowledge its past, and of a nation’s overwhelming desire to restore and reaffirm dignity and honour to all its people” (qtd. in Hearst, 13). I want to suggest that it is in the ethic of care and love embodied in both Ferrus’s poem, and in the political act of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s return to South Africa, that we glimpse a way to enact the reconciliation required to begin to heal the wounds of ethnic violence and oppression, even as we recognize the danger that we may be simply recasting the terms of Ba(a)rtman(n) as a symbol or reverting to a simple sentimentalism in celebrating the return of her remains.

In a variety of fictional renderings of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s life, authors struggle with how to give this woman voice and agency within circumstances that reveal powerless victimization, loneliness, and misguided allegiance. All studies of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s experience agree that her life illustrates, in extreme form, how the positivist ideal of Western science fails to produce any real knowledge of another, the “other.” With all the microscopic data obtained about her body, we still do not know who she really was—and writers work to ascribe agency on her, to her, and from her.
Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *Venus*, Stephen Gray’s poem “Hottentot Venus,” and Elizabeth Alexander’s collection and poem *The Venus Hottentot* all celebrate the woman, express outrage, and attempt to dramatize the struggle for agency embedded in the severe exploitation of this woman. Perhaps most powerfully, Ferrus’s “A Poem for Sarah Baartman” and Barbara Chase Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus* portray the rage felt when one engages with this woman’s story and the act of rescuing her remains.

But does she become any less of a figurative construct in these texts than she was in Baron Georges Cuvier’s narrative of her anatomization, or in any number of outrageous or farcical treatments of her display in early-nineteenth century England and France? As I have argued throughout this book, the figurative nature of mid-Victorian racial discourse in narratives of racial conflict permitted the transmission of complex debates in concentrated moments. In a variety of different narrative forms, Victorians discussed such topics as the nature of the African subject, their fears about the eradication of slavery, and white panic over black self-determination. Fictional and nonfictional writings about race and colonial rebellion at the time used abolitionist, adventure, and gothic plot structures and themes that later evolved into the conflicted and ambiguous presentations that Patrick Brantlinger named the “Imperial Gothic” and H. L. Malchow termed the “Racial Gothic.” Each of these formal choices conveys different facets of debates about race in mid-Victorian England. The abolitionist narrative suggests the ideals of Enlightenment humanitarianism and Christian egalitarianism. The adventure tale represents the excitement of colonial travel, growing English nationalism, and intensifying arguments for white racial superiority. And, finally, the Gothic helps communicate the fears, anxieties, and uncertainties of a community experiencing changes in the hierarchical structures by which they ordered their lives.

Representations of Ba(a)rtman(n) cross the boundaries of scientific, popular, and gothic genres. As Malchow argues in *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, the display of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s anatomy as “aberrant” was cast in discourses crossing a variety of generic lines and served to fuel anti-egalitarian arguments in an environment grappling with the question of the slave trade: “The exhibition of this indentured black woman, Saartjie Baartman, to curious crowds in Regency London, the extraordinary interest taken in her physical form by the press, and the way her body, after death, was literally disassembled to prove spurious theories about Negro nature, is a reminder of the way the cultural prejudices, fears, and deep-seated neuroses of the observer may impinge on ‘science’ and literature, and wander from one arena to another” (13).
It is not surprising that one element of the aestheticizing of Bartman(n) found her victim to a process by which the Gothic was used to enhance racial characteristics that buttressed increasingly reactionary and jingoistic ideologies of race and colonialism. Early Gothic writers such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis referenced, commented on, and manipulated fears of social unrest, domestic insecurity, and sexual danger felt by many readers in the late-eighteenth century. Reports from a virtually continuous stream of colonial uprisings after Emancipation sparked similarly intense public reactions and anxieties that reached a zenith of concern with the safety and plight of white women in the 1857 Indian Rebellion. These events became part of the narrative palette used in the “Imperial” or “Racial” Gothic.

As the Victorians read about racial violence in the colonies over the first half of the nineteenth century, narratives become increasingly concerned with dramatizing the creation of ethnic and racial distinctions among different human communities, a process in which the public obsession over Bartman(n) played a critical role. In Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins’s fictionalizing of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners” (1857), the authors created a story fraught with putative boundary violations and focused on the problem of reasserting those limits. My analysis of this quite conventionally racist text shows how Victorian racial discourse often enacted the process of creating safe distances from other communities perceived as dangerous. In “Perils,” racial “others” are collected together into a band of renegade pirates who, in one image, combine all that is fearful and that threatened the English way of life. Although the killing of the story’s villain, Christian George King, conveys all the earmarks of literary catharsis, I argued that the story ultimately fails to release fictional and cultural racial anxieties. For reasons I also enumerated, the parallel humiliation of the pirate captain also failed to provide a clean cathartic release for the Victorian reader. These failures suggest the frustration and rage experienced by the authors in response to initial accounts of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, as well as their perception of sympathy from the reading public.

My analysis of James Grant’s First Love and Last Love (1868) in this study’s final chapter returns to many of these same issues in its representation of the Indian Rebellion. However, Grant’s text works with the actual historical events rather than an allegorical representation of the dynamics involved. I argue that the novel illustrates how the confusion, anger, and frustration experienced by many English readers in response to colonial rebellions found expression in the use of gothic themes and patterns in
mid-Victorian fiction. *First Love and Last Love* is a particularly vivid example of the overlap of colonialism, violence, gender, and nationalism. The ruin sites in which the English found shelter become spatial metaphors for conflicts underpinning much Victorian racial thinking: past civilizations, exotic religions and cultures, strange natives, and terrifying violence. Ultimately the sites become representations of the racial others themselves—inanimate symbols of the dangerous rebelling Indian Sepoys and an important trope for the “Imperial” or “Racial” gothic. In this genre, the social upheaval caused by rebellions in the colonial context—coupled with anxiety experienced by the metropolitan public’s reading of sustained, inaccurate, and inflammatory accounts of the events of these rebellions—finds expression and realization.

**Resensitizing the Viewer**

Readers may find my reluctance to repeat the details of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s life and anatomy frustrating. In studies of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s experiences, the details of what was constructed as her “aberrant” physicality, as well as the dissection of her body post-mortem, are endlessly repeated in the ostensible service of unmasking the horror of her life and death. In a way, what happens in these narratives becomes another act of violence. Pictures of her genitalia litter articles. Yuko Edwards’s short film, *Politics from a Black Woman’s Insides*, brilliantly resensitizes the viewer to this violent act by interlacing discussion of Edwards’s attempt to gain access to Cuvier’s monograph on Ba(a)rtman(n), narratives of contemporary African American women negotiating the medical establishment, and film from an actual autopsy. What this film does is to add the element of time to the drawings of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s anatomy, which triggers horror in the viewer. This short documentary suggests that, as we wince at the graphic, close-up, violent still images of Ba(a)rtman(n) represented in numerous articles, we find ourselves, at the same time, placed unavoidably in the position of voyeurs, examining materials that we should not have ever been allowed to see.

The central studies of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s life all recount the details of the woman’s exploitation and violation, whether in pictures or in narrative, with varying degrees of sensitivity. Presenting the specifics of her treatment and perceptions of her otherness in these early treatments is justified by the relative paucity of information regarding her life. In three of the first studies of Ba(a)rtman(n), Sander L. Gilman, Richard D. Altick, and
Stephen Jay Gould each discuss the horror of this woman's experience. Gilman's account, perhaps the most frequently cited of these studies, reproduces drawings of Bar(n)mann(n), even the most graphic ones of her genitalia drawn after her death. Gilman asserts that “Sarah Bartmann's genitalia and buttocks summarized her essence for the nineteenth-century observer” (235). Although the shock of these images can make one turn away from the page, the frequency with which Bar(n)mann(n) appears as pieces of her body is both representative and disturbing. Altick, identified by Abrams as “the modern rediscoverer of Sara Bartman” (“Images,” 221), describes her as “a heavy-arsed heathen” and then goes on to make the “joke,” “She may be said to have carried her fortune behind her, for she was steatopygic to a fault” (269). He later refers to “her monumental haunch-es” (272).

These off-hand remarks, described by Abrams as “markedly lacking in both racial and gender sensitivity” (“Images,” 221), are reminiscent of a question posed by a member of the Royal Commission inquiry into Governor Edward Eyre's handling of the Morant Bay Rebellion. In my discussion of the transcript of that inquiry, I looked at the moment when a black baker, while recounting his experience of being flogged, was asked if he had received a baker’s dozen lashes. That question represented a crack in the formidable generic façade of empirical fact finding that obscures all but the most fleeting glimpses into the real motivations behind actions on all sides. In the transcript (1866) of the inquiry into the way Governor Eyre quelled the Morant Bay Rebellion, we find a vivid record of English imperial truth seeking, the same kind of positivist ideology that motivated the examination and anatomization of Bar(n)mann(n). At first glance, the documents would seem to provide a transparent window through which to view mid-Victorian exchanges between white Englishmen, West Indian planters, and members of both the black and “colored” communities in Jamaica. However, in the document’s record of the stark rationalism of administrative inquiry, we find a paradoxical blindness to the economic realities of this post-Emancipation sugar-growing community. That blindness in the face of monumental detail mirrors the ways in which the specifics revealed about Bar(n)mann(n)’s body get us farther away from her complexity as a woman. Details such as her motivations, likes and dislikes, and feelings of homesickness remain illusive, even as we stare into the renderings of her genitalia.

But noting the insensitivity of the remark to the Jamaican baker or the use of the brutal images of Bar(n)mann(n)’s genitalia does not necessarily
guarantee that we do not repeat the same dynamic of exploitation. In “Which Bodies Matter?: Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus,’” Zine Magubane argues that “although most studies that discuss Baartmann (or Gilman’s analysis of her) are scrupulous in their use of words like invented, constructed, and ideological, in their practice, they valorize the very ground of biological essentialism they purport to deconstruct” (Magubane, 817, original italics). However, Gould argues that a reading of Cuvier’s monograph of the Baartmann(n) dissection reveals a limited construction of the anatomist that says more about our reading of the text than about reality. Gould suggests that Cuvier had a more complex understanding of his subject than others have acknowledged: “Cuvier states again and again (although he explicitly draws neither moral nor message) that Saartjie was an intelligent woman with general proportions that would not lead connoisseurs to frown. He mentions, in an offhand sort of way, that Saartjie possessed an excellent memory, spoke Dutch rather well, had some command of English, and was learning a bit of French when she died. (Not bad for a caged brute; I only wish that more Americans could do one-third so well in their command of languages.)” (296). Interesting here is the attempt by Gould to redeem both Cuvier and Baartmann(n) simultaneously. Cuvier, he seems to suggest, saw more than we give him credit for. Baartmann(n), he argues, is more than simply a “caged brute”—after all, she could speak several languages and was aesthetically pleasing to the eye. The trappings and values of liberal bourgeois civilization are ushered out here to validate her humanity.

Yvette Abrams speaks to the problem of reproducing these images in her article on Baartmann(n), as she explains her decision to include one plate: “However, it is crucial to remember that the illustration reproduced in this essay does not bear any relation to Sara Bartman as she was in real life” (“Images,” 224). Even as she includes them in her study, she reads them as evidence of a twisted psychology that reveals more about those who originally rendered the figure than about Baartmann(n) herself: “The illustration of Sara Bartman in this chapter could best be characterized as a sketch from the nightmares of the melanin-deficient. As such it may be upsetting. But it should not be viewed as a picture of Black people” (“Images,” 224). These images support a particular construction of Baartmann(n) that I was not interested in perpetuating any further. I am concerned with beginning to examine in this conclusion the ways in which the space between the woman, Sara(h) Baartmann(n), and the images of her body shifts as a result of her remains leaving France and returning to
South Africa, and how that event brings into relief the scientific ideals of observation and anatomization that served literally and figuratively to disassemble this woman’s life.

What becomes clear is that we are dealing with circulating representations rather than an understanding of a human person. We are engaging with the tropification, if you will, of this woman’s experience, both initially as a circus “freak” and now as a symbol of reconciliation and healing. Abrams goes so far as to suggest that both the representations and the original spectacle of Ba(a)rtman(n) were constructed events. In “Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth-Century Britain,” Abrams states, “My own research has shown that there was in fact a considerable degree of manipulation involved in creating both the physical exhibit and the discursive myth” (“Images,” 222). She goes on to explain: “What is important about the myths built around Sara Bartman is precisely how the myth building became an increasingly conscious, and public, process. Before the exhibition of Sara Bartman, sexual analyses of Black people may have been a minor theme in dominant discourses. Afterward, ideas about the essentially deviant sexual nature of the Khoisan spread to include all Africans” (“Images,” 224). In other words, the “evidence” so frequently circulated as explanation for why Ba(a)rtman(n) became a spectacle may not represent the characteristics of the actual woman at all. Thus, our ability to identify, understand, and analyze the psychosis surrounding Ba(a)rtman(n) as a spectacle becomes limited to a process of identifying the importance of the traits (color, primitivism, and genitalia) that were chosen for manipulation.

The separation that is so important here is between the physical body and the psychological spirit. Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body was appropriated, circulated, and denigrated in the service of a racial ideology that required the emptying out of her spirit to deploy the representation most effectively. Using feminist theory and disability studies, Janell Hobson, in “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” refers to the work of Rosemarie Garland Thomson when she argues that “as a ‘deviant’ body—by virtue of skin color, femaleness, and body shape—Baartman becomes a ‘freak’ in Europe precisely because she is a ‘type’ of Khoisan woman of South Africa. In this construction of her sexualized and ‘disabled’ body, Westerners can prescribe racial and cultural differences—and, hence, their ‘superiority’ as Europeans in comparison with African people and cultures” (Hobson, 91). Ba(a)rtman(n) became a spectacle, an aberration, and a commodity, while at the same time providing evidence for a scientifically rendered examination of global races. Discourses surround-
ing her body brought together the burgeoning market economy, jingoistic colonial policies, systems of gender stratification, and changing attitudes towards the aesthetics of color difference. Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body was central to this process.

Questions of property, commodification, and their relationship to race, then, become central to the critical history surrounding Ba(a)rtman(n). Magubane argues that in the representation of Ba(a)rtman(n), issues of property intersect with race, putting the discourse surrounding this woman in line with early-nineteenth century debates about slavery: “When many people looked at Baartmann, they saw not only racial and sexual alterity but also a personification of current debates about the right to liberty versus the right to property [...] The contemporary debates about slavery provided the context to the Baartmann controversy, and it is within their parameters that it must be understood. Many individuals who opposed slavery on humanitarian grounds, nevertheless, were reluctant to infringe on the property rights of slaveholders” (Magubane, 827–28). The intersection of aesthetics, the body, and property becomes important in understanding the circulation of Ba(a)rtman(n), the sign, in a climate debating the question of slavery.

Harriet Martineau understood this connection of bodies, property, and policy, and she tried to focus her anti-slavery writings on solving the problem of this confluence and its relationship to racial violence. This study has engaged closely with signs of impatience and ambivalence, as well as the Victorians’ growing desensitization to violence, in genres ranging from government discourse to a Christmas tale. The ambiguity evident within Victorian racial discourse was not limited to texts advocating a harsh, racist view of racial distinction. As we saw in Martineau’s historical romance, The Hour and the Man (1841), ambiguity can surface in texts that display a wide range of political and social viewpoints. The indeterminacy of Martineau’s interpretive dynamics suggests that there was an implicit irrationality or inexplicability at the heart of her and other Victorians’ attempts to understand and categorize people racially. Although Martineau certainly advocated a humanitarian view of African people, her text is laced with moments that suggest her immersion in a complex discourse of race beyond which she could not move. She was, however, able to work within many of the conventions of Victorian racial discourse to create a text celebrating both the slave victory in Haiti and the establishment of a new government based on the needs of that community.

Martineau’s novel gives voice and agency to all of those participating in an unresolved debate regarding issues of slavery, nationhood, and color.
That narrative decision separated her from the bulk of abolitionist writers who dramatized the saving of African slaves by benevolent white figures. In studies of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s life, questions of agency often stall as descriptions of this woman’s victimization suggest a figure at the mercy of unscrupulous and cruel English and French people. In particular, narratives flinch when addressing the court case brought by abolitionists, after seeing her initial display in London, to “free” her from the clutches of her oppressors. Complicating easy understandings of choice and agency, Ba(a)rtman(n) refused to be “rescued” from her arrangement. Rosemary Wiss speaks to the confluence of issues of agency, the Enlightenment construction of the rational self, and the court case over Ba(a)rtman(n)’s treatment as suggesting concepts at the heart of racist thinking:

In the court case which questioned Saartjie Baartman’s ‘owner’s’ sexual access to her, and later attempts by racial scientists to discover the ‘secret truths’ of Hottentot female sexuality, Saartjie Baartman was effectively silenced. These were not discourses within which she had the right to represent herself. It is not a process of constructing subjectivity through confession, which therefore applies to Saartjie Baartman, but of extraction. Her body was a text which was read by her colonial viewers; it was not the site of her own discourse. Her lips could not tell/speak. (Wiss, 37)

The court case, according to Wiss, illustrates the ways in which the courtroom situation became yet another environment in which Ba(a)rtman(n)’s aestheticized and silenced body was read by those participating in a positivist rational system of regulation and evaluation. Within that site, Ba(a)rtman(n) was silenced. The truth of her situation could not be rendered—the complexity of her feelings, situation, positionality, and spirit would not fit into the prefigured paradigms and tropes offered for her expression.

We have, then, several related paradigms, all working within the same array of representative tropes and positivist, commercialized, and jingoistic discourses. Science, law, and marketplace all converge on the silent body of Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) as we continue to examine her life, her pictures, her decisions, and her anatomy for evidence of colonial exploitation or cloaked agency. In T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French, the author defines “the concept of the (white) male gaze as a desire to unveil, ‘to dissect,’ ‘to lay bare’ the unknown, in this case the black female. The gaze ‘fixes’ the black female in her place, steadies her, in order to decode and comfortably recode
her into its own system of representation” (6). In her discussion of Cuvier’s examination of Ba(a)rtman(n), Sharpley-Whiting argues that “[e]ven in Bartmann’s nakedness, Cuvier had yet to decipher her body, to undress the body. In the nineteenth century it is only through dissection that the hidden secrets of the body are fully revealed to the medical gaze, and Bartmann still wore the veil of her skin” (27). To decipher, in this case, is to search for origins, explanations, and answers in an almost frenzied scientific endeavor to get to the smallest and most bare unit of observation. What becomes interesting is the paradoxical movement away from any kind of true, complex understanding of subjectivity in the results of this impulse to taxonomy.

But am I simply carrying on a tradition of searching for truth in the dismembered minutiae of discourses, bodies, and ideas? As I suggested in chapter two, taxonomic impulses reach extreme levels of both racism and ambivalence in anatomist Robert Knox’s *The Races of Men* (1850). On the one hand, Knox’s notorious text makes race the central influencing factor in history thus far, moving away from ideas of nation and civilization. Biology, this anatomist argued, determines the course of events within any human community. He went on to examine in detail all the races of the planet, as he understood them, creating a physical and psychological profile of each group, which concluded in a clear racial hierarchy. On the other hand, however, this overtly racist agenda, saturated as it was with brutally derogatory digressions on the limitations of some races, predicated on material gained from individual dissections of individuals from a variety of cultures, resulted in an inadvertent critique of imperialism. For, as Knox argues, each race is predisposed to embrace a particular governmental structure, and so the process of imposing English social structures on other races is doomed to fail. Imperialism is therefore flawed, because it does not take into account the more important factor: human biological variations.

The power of Diana Ferrus’s poem derives from its movement away from this paradigm of positivist scientific “rationality” to harness a protective, maternal voice as a way to usher in the rage at the way Ba(a)rtman(n) was treated. The voice becomes one that wrenches Ba(a)rtman(n) away from those who dissected her and respects the integrity of her body, creating a sense that the spirit is still alive and the oppression continues. There is a way, suggested here, that we can all still participate in bringing her out of that world in which her remains still live and her spirit is still trapped:
I have come to wretch you away—
away from the poking eyes
of the man-made monster
who lives in the dark
with his clutches of imperialism
who dissects your body bit by bit
who likens your soul to that of Satan
and declares himself the ultimate god!
(Ferrus, 10–17)

Here we see a way out of the dead-end of positivist analysis in the simple
expression of anger and the determination to care. Rather than using
Ba(a)rtman(n), Ferrus positions the speaker as offering herself for succor
and return. The relationship to the body becomes one of care and protection,
rather than one of a frantic search for individualized agency or bio-
logically rooted explanations for cultural differences.

This switch of perspective is dramatized in Barbara Chase-Riboud’s
novel, *Hottentot Venus*, by having anger expressed by Ba(a)rtman(n) her-
sel. Chase-Riboud narrates a large part of the story, including the dissec-
tion, from Ba(a)rtman(n)’s point of view. At the point when she is brought
to the Jardin des Plantes to be put on display and “explained” by Cuvier to
scientists and artists, Chase-Riboud powerfully collapses the museum, the
circus, the laboratory, and the freak tent into one spectacle of degradation
and death. The observers become oblivious to the trauma they inflict as
they simultaneously examine, aestheticize, narrativize, and anatomize this
woman. As Ba(a)rtman(n) surveys the main gallery of the museum where
she will be the subject of a lecture and examination, she is astounded by
the variety of objects, figures, and animals that surround her. The men
believe she thinks the figures are alive, and they laugh. All the while
Ba(a)rtman(n) thinks of the pain surrounding her: “The white men stood
in a circle like hyenas, laughing at me. I tried desperately to control myself,
repeating to myself that these exhibits were only skinned and stuffed ani-
mal s, not real souls . . . but what of the human severed heads?” (225–26).
As the process of scientific study that will end in the rending of her body
literally into parts begins, we see the relationship between narrative, aesthet-
ic, and literal dismemberment depicted in Ba(a)rtman(n)’s dissection
as told from Ba(a)rtman(n)’s own perspective.

Ba(a)rtman(n) indicts Western philosophy and science from the site of
her display in the Musée de l’Homme: “Oh, shame, shame, shame on you,
masters of the universe. Shame on Dapper and Barrow, Levaillant and Diderot, Voltaire, Jefferson, Kolbe, Rousseau, Buffon, and fuck you, sirs! You are no gentlemen. This is no freak show. I am on display without compensation or compassion, in the name of all mankind and the great Chain of Being. The Hottentot Venus, archetype of inferior humanity. This very last layer of the human pie. Undo all this, sirs. Undo all this. Undo me” (285). Throughout this novel, the “freak” speaks back to the observers, the anatomists, and the artists, turning the tools of decipherment back on those who value its ideals. In one moment, a rationalist tradition of scientific endeavor is accused of atrocities, made the object of great shame, and exposed as the site of an ethic of dismemberment antithetical to the ethic of care embodied in Ferrus’s poem.

Trinh T. Minh-ha argues much the same point in her critique of Western science and positivist rationality. Reflecting on the methodological requirements of Western academic work, she asserts directly her intention of working within an alternative paradigm:

Thus, I see no interest in adopting a progression that systematically proceeds from generalities to specificities, from outlines to fillings, from diachronic to synchronic, or vice versa. And I am profoundly indifferent to his old way of theorizing—of piercing, as he often claims, through the sediments of psychological and epistemological “depths.” I may stubbornly turn around a foreign thing or turn it around to play with it, but I respect its realms of opaqueness. Seeking to perforate meaning by forcing my entry or breaking it open to dissipate what is thought to be its secrets seems to me as crippled an act as verifying the sex of an unborn child by ripping open the mother’s womb. It is typical of a mentality that proves incapable of touching the living thing without crushing its delicateness. (48–49)

Here, Trinh T. Minh-ha unmasks a destructive vision of theorizing as a process of searching, within a model of depth, for the central, originary, and clear explanations for ideas and issues. As an alternative, she suggests that “opaqueness” sometimes should elicit respect, and that within the unknowable may exist knowledge that requires the need to respect its boundaries. To charge at it, rip it open, explore its elements is the intellectual equivalent to searching within the body of Ba(a)rtman(n) for answers to racial difference that do not exist there. In fact, it is the search within individual bodies for this understanding that perpetuates the system. Only in respecting the boundaries of the body and dealing with it by respecting
its integrity and understanding its “opaqueness” can we begin to see that the source of the knowledge we seek is in the culture and the ethics of exploitation developed by a system of positivist racial exploration.

A Legacy of Violence

What then becomes the proper ethical scholarly relationship with a subject such as Ba(a)rtman(n), a woman who stands as such a clear symbol, victim, and embodiment of Western colonial violence? How do we recognize the woman at the source of the destructive discursive explosion that arose in her wake and, at the same time, analyze the constructed nature of those representations? How do we honor the fractured subjectivity suggested in the visual partitions I use in the spelling of her name, while at the same time help participate in the beginnings of a cultural and intellectual healing process? How do we intervene in the aestheticizing of individuals in order to bring the representations out from the dynamic that desensitizes and dehumanizes the representative signifiers? As a beginning, Ferrus offers a model of a way of appreciating human beauty in a spirit of care and love:

I have come to soothe your heavy heart
I offer my bosom to your weary soul
I will cover your face with the palms of my hands
I will run my lips over lines in your neck
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you
and I will sing for you
for I have come to bring you peace.
(Ferrus, 18–24)

The main ethical impulse of this poem is caring for the other. Moving into the historical situation of Ba(a)rtman’s exploitation, the speaker intervenes by participating in a wholly different kind of physical relationship. The poem sets up a comparison between the scientific, anatomizing, and conventionally aestheticizing relationship to the body and a loving and appreciative relationship to form. The body is the center of both, but in Ferrus’s poem the nurturing movement is from the speaker to Ba(a)rtman(n).

My analyses have addressed instances of violence in each of the texts in this study, as well as the ways those moments suggest wider implications for mid-Victorian racial representation. Violent acts are intrinsic to
fictional and nonfictional racial narratives of the period. Although Martineau shied away from direct reference to violent actions, the narrative gaps in which violence occurs, such as in the disappearance and presumed death of Thérèse’s child, convey the material reality that violence permeated every facet of the colonial system. Colonialism and imperialism were violent activities that resulted in the suppression of the colonized, and the eventual eruption of that group against their oppressors. Dickens and Collins’s tale conveys the public’s growing post-Emancipation frustration with repeated rebellions by former slaves. Both the transcript of the Governor Eyre controversy and the irrational rantings of Robert Knox represent, in vivid detail, the violence felt and experienced in relations among different races. Finally, Grant’s novel develops the theme of vengeance evident in Dickens and Collins’s tale written a decade earlier. The prevalence of violence suggests the reality of colonial relations and the frustration felt by English citizens who struggled with and debated issues of race and colonialism.

Ba(a)rtman(n)’s return to South Africa represents one small and powerful instance of cultures beginning to move beyond this violence to create moments of healing from its legacy of destruction. As Abrams and others encourage us to use the spelling on the baptismal certificate, Sarah Bartmann, so lifts the divisions in her name as the divisions and pain begin to heal with her return to South Africa, for those who live in South Africa, and those of us across the racial, national, and political spectrum who participate unknowingly and unacceptably in a system of taxonomic oppression. This successful negotiation, coupled with Ferrus’s powerful ethic of care, provides a compelling model for a way to move beyond and begin to heal the legacy of destruction created by colonial and imperial structures and to engage in a model of intellectual exploration that takes into consideration the ethical imperative to be part of this process. Rather than employ a logic that suggests that truth lies in the details, a belief so vividly deconstructed in the Royal Commission transcript, we need to embrace a respect for the integrity of wholeness, for the need to change perspective on the totality rather than rend it into smaller and smaller bits. For, as the final lines of Ferrus’s poem point out, we all need to participate in the dismantling of the legacy of racial violence.

I have come to take you home
where the ancient mountains shout your name.
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,
the proteas stand in yellow and white—
I have come to take you home
where I will sing for you
for you have brought me peace.
(Ferrus, 25–32)