

Reclaiming the Body of the 'Hottentot'

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Netto, P. (2005). Reclaiming the Body of the 'Hottentot'. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(2), 149-163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805051235>

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Reclaiming the Body of the 'Hottentot'

The Vision and Visuality of the Body Speaking with Vengeance in *Venus Hottentot 2000*

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ABSTRACT The primary focus of this article is a reading of *Venus Hottentot 2000*, a performance-text that reperforms the hyperbolization of Black female sexuality. In using the corporeality of the Black body as a strategic site of postcolonial resignification, this performance is moreover an interrogation of the colonial gaze that has fetishized the Black body. In foregrounding *Venus Hottentot 2000* as a point of departure for exploration, the article proceeds by delving broadly into the representational history of the 'Hottentot' female. Furthermore, to facilitate an understanding of the constitutive power of the colonial gaze and the possibilities of subverting and displacing that gaze from that of a postcolonial diasporic aesthetic practice, the article frames the postcolonial feminist reading of *Venus Hottentot 2000* via an investigation of the processes by which the 'Hottentot' female has been fetishized and scopically objectified within colonial discourse – processes whereby the 'Hottentot' female became a signifier of Black female sexuality. The article concludes by reading this performance as an example of a postcolonial 'cultural war of positioning', which offers moreover a contemporary rescripting of Black subjectivity.

KEY WORDS Black female sexuality ♦ the gaze ♦ Hottentot ♦ Lacan ♦ performance ♦ postcolonialism ♦ subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Bartman, a Khoi Khoi woman, otherwise known as the 'Hottentot Venus', was an example of a colonized Black woman exposed to the European colonial scopic gaze in which the construction of a hyperbolic

sexuality was discursively produced within a visual framework. In 1810, this young Khoi Khoi woman from the Eastern Cape of South Africa was brought to Europe by Hendrik Cezar,¹ a White South African, and exhibited as a 'freak' and a 'savage monstrosity' around Europe due to the protuberant size of her buttocks (*steatopyga*) and her 'apron'² (Lindfors, 1989).

Her exhibition in Britain was a 'sensation' and she was 'displayed' until 1814. She was then taken by Cezar to Paris, where she aroused further medical and scientific interest. Shortly thereafter, she died a premature death in 1815 in Paris, at the approximate age of 28. She was then dissected by Baron Cuvier and Henri de Blainville in an attempt to prove her 'animal' origins (Abrahams, 1998). For both scientists and lay people of those days, Sarah Bartman became a stereotype of Black female primitivism. Cuvier, for example, dehumanized her further by comparing her to an orang-utan, thereby further contributing to the then European colonial belief that Africans were closer to the order of animals than to humankind.³ Plaster casts were made of her dissected remains and waxen moulds were made from her genitalia. Her remains including her death mask were preserved and placed on public display in Case 33 at the Musee de l'Homme in Paris until their final removal in 1982 after protests were made by people who found the exhibit demeaning and offensive (Kushner, 1999). Sarah Bartman's remains were finally returned to South Africa and she was laid to rest in August 2002 in the Eastern Cape as part of the country's Women's Day celebrations.

From the shameful colonial history and exploitation of Sarah Bartman and her reduction to both a sexual and medical object, let us 'fast-forward' to 1994 and look at a contemporary rescripting of the Hottentot Venus. The performance *Venus Hottentot 2000* (1994), emerged from a collaboration between Lyle Ashton Harris and Renee Valerie Cox, both of whom are Black visual artists. In this performance, Harris and Cox revisit the particularity of the Hottentot Venus. Cox stands, her hair in shoulder length dreadlocks, with her hands on her hips against a largely empty backdrop. Her body is partly turned away from us to the right. She has an ambiguous smile playing on her face and except for two or three bracelets on her left hand, she is partially clad. Apart from having what seems like metallic looking breasts tied by a ribbon around her chest, she also has metallic looking exaggerated buttocks, which mime those of the Hottentot Venus in the 19th century, attached to her buttocks. However, unlike Sarah Bartman, who was the passive object of the gaze, she, Renee Valerie Cox, is the author of this representation and she regards us, the viewers, with a direct, unflinching and confrontational gaze as she is photographed by Harris.

In their highly charged articulation and dramatization of the historicity of the Hottentot Venus, Cox and Harris offer a contemporary exploration

and reclamation of Black identity. I also suggest that their contemporary rescripting of the Hottentot Venus offers a negotiation and representation of Black subjectivity. Cox and Harris have, for example, argued that in reperforming the hyperbolic sexualization of Black female sexuality, their aim was to enable the 'body to speak with vengeance' (ICA, 1995: 150). Further, in revisiting the colonial past, *Venus Hottentot 2000* explores and recalls how the Black body, by being constituted as a specular object for the gaze of the colonizer, was sexualized and fetishized, how it was opened up, through slavery and imperialism and 'ethnological show business',⁴ primarily through the gaze of the colonizer, who was in this instance also the master of 'the gaze'.

In the next section, to facilitate an understanding of the significance of *Venus Hottentot 2000*'s intertextual relationship with that of the colonial objectification of the 'Hottentot', I first broadly highlight the historical context of the 'Hottentot' female. I suggest that the intertextual significance of *Venus Hottentot 2000* lies in the way it seeks to rethink the image of the Black body by opening up a dialogue between the present and the colonial past where the Black female body became mired in colonial discourses about Black female sexuality.

Next, by situating *Venus Hottentot 2000* within the representational history of the Hottentot female, I also explore the theme of the gaze. While being the nexus of signification in colonial discourse, the Black female 'Hottentot' body, as *Venus Hottentot 2000* highlights, also becomes the site of postcolonial Black cultural intervention on the other.

THE FETISHIZING OF THE 'HOTTENTOT'

Sarah Bartman's predicament has been brought into the field of scholarship by Gilman (1985), who argues that the image of the prostitute and the Black female were linked and conflated through the stereotyped iconography of the 'Hottentot' female. Gilman also asserts that in the course of the 19th century, various discourses produced Bartman (along with other South African 'Hottentot' females who were brought to Europe) as a sign and metaphor that was indicative of a stereotypical Black female sexuality. As Bhabha (1994: 66) notes of the colonial stereotype:

... an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as a sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition.

In the colonial stereotype, as Bhabha signals, it is also through the articulation of the visual forms of corporeal racial/sexual difference that the

'otherness' of Black female identity was fetishized and constructed in colonial discourses.

Further, Bhabha (1994) argued that although the construction of the colonial stereotype in colonial discourse is 'an arrested form of representation' that denies 'the play of difference', it is also structurally and functionally analogous to the fetish and like the fetish, they are both defensive strategies of disavowal: the acknowledgement of both difference and otherness and its reduction to specific characteristics. Additionally, the certainty of the fetish and the stereotype is something to which the subject repeatedly returns when there is a threat of difference. Indeed, for Bhabha, the colonial stereotype and the fetish function as so-called 'informed statements', functioning to reassure the colonial subject when he confronts difference and who is consequently threatened with the possibility of a lack and the possibility of an instability of his own identity. Furthermore, the fetish involves a *displacement*. In Freudian terms, the phallus cannot be represented as it is considered taboo and forbidden and sexual desire and danger are therefore transferred to another part of the body or another object.

Crucially, in terms of the 'Hottentot', Gilman (1985) also translates the theory of fetishism to describe the process of racial fetishism whereby the sexual nature of the colonial gaze was displaced from her genitalia, which was what had really obsessed them, the colonial spectators, to the buttocks. For example, the 'Hottentot apron' was classified in scientific discourse as a malformation supposedly caused by sexual 'excesses' such as lesbian love (Gilman, 1985). Gilman also asserts that the 'Hottentot' female became associated, in the discourse of physical anthropology, with 'deviant' and 'polluting' sexuality and most particularly with the supposed 'licentiousness' of the prostitute.⁵ By constructing a deviant sexuality, 19th-century medical and colonial discourses assigned a nature to the 'Hottentot' that was different to a point of abnormality. This was further enrolled in the service of a reductive theory in which the so-called 'primitive' African female genitalia were taken as the external sign of a primitive and excessive sexual appetite. By reducing and essentializing her to the sum of her sexual parts – a fetishizing move – she became 'known' as a 'freakish' sexual object and her sexual difference was 'naturalized' within colonial discourse. As mentioned, fetishism involves disavowal in which the desire to gaze is both indulged and denied.⁶ In the case of the 'Hottentot', not only is the gaze displaced from the genitalia to the buttocks but it also allows the colonial gaze to continue gazing and observing while disavowing the sexual nature of the gaze. Nineteenth-century scientific discourses played the role of this disavowal by constructing itself as a 'dispassionate' gaze. By *looking* and yet *not looking* – an ambivalent desire is allowed to operate. What is declared to be different and 'primitive' can be obsessively lingered over because it is

'different', 'scientifically anomalous' and 'exotic'. The fetishizing of the Hottentot Venus legitimates, in short, an unregulated voyeurism and the desire to continue looking.

Through the penetrative gaze of medical and ethnographic discourses, a regime of 'truth' was constructed about Black sexuality. The 'primitive' genitalia of the 'Hottentot' women were defined within European colonial discourses as a sign and signifier of their 'primitive' sexual appetites. Indeed, in terms of visibility, Doane suggests that the 'visibility of the dark continent dictated the incessant visualisation of native eroticism' and within colonial discourse, 'the exotic and the erotic were welded together, situating the African woman as the signifier of an excessive, incommensurable sexuality' (Doane, 1991: 213). And according to Doane, the female 'Hottentot' became associated within the colonial scopic regime with a hyperbolic, 'excessive' sexuality.

Thus, vision is neither disinterested nor dispassionate. Within the field of vision, the female body is transformed into an image and object. This privileging of vision and visibility has been linked in feminist critiques to sexual privilege. Gallop (1985) argues that it is through the exercise of sight that sexual identity is constructed. In the Freudian argument, it is by looking that the child discovers sexual difference and the discovery of visible difference hinges upon vision.⁷ In addition, it is not only the discovery of difference, but also its denial that is articulated through vision – women are judged according to the phallogocentric standard and are consequently found lacking.

The implications of placing the female body in relation to the scopic gaze have also been theorized by Mulvey (1975) and Metz (1975) as involving fetishism and voyeurism. Mulvey asserts a very specific account of spectatorship, arguing that the visual apparatus both privileges and is productive of a controlling masculine gaze, a scopophilia that simultaneously involves fetishism and voyeurism where the 'active' observing subject is male and the 'passive' object of the gaze is female (who is subsequently fetishized). In Mulvey's Freudian argument, the male gaze reduces woman to the category where she functions as a 'to-be-looked-at-ness', as the other that defines man as the origin of the gaze. Metz (1975) also argued that it is through the look that the observer is re-enacting the mirror stage and as the observer is identified with the gaze (and since, according to Metz, the gaze *cannot* be returned) the observer is thus voyeuristically positioned.

Thus, within the colonial visual apparatus, the otherness of Black female sexuality as embodied by the visible difference of the Hottentot Venus became the antithesis of European sexual and 'civilized' mores. And it was through the visual regimes of scientific and medical observation and ethnological show business that the colonial fetishizing of the 'Hottentot' body was constructed within the field of visibility. But it was

also within the field of vision that visible corporeal and racial differences were read as signs of 'excess' and pathology. Through the processes of racial stereotyping and fetishizing, the Khoisan female became linked in the colonial imagination to one of the central images of Black female sexuality: 'female sexuality is tied to the image of the buttocks and the quintessential buttocks are those of the Hottentot' (Gilman, 1985: 219). As a spectacle of visible difference, the otherness of the 'Hottentot' female was further appropriated and used in European caricatures,⁸ popular ballads,⁹ cartoons and melodramas.

Finally, it should be noted that this obsessive scopophilia and fascination with gazing on the 'other' is still very much alive. In the South African Kagga Kamma Game Park, a group of approximately 40 'Bushmen', the Khoi Khoi, have become 'attractions', objects for the consumption of the tourist gaze. Visitors pay about US\$125 to stay the night and US\$7 to see the Khoi Khoi, who are only given a tiny portion of the profits (Daley, 1996). While contemporary South African artists and intellectuals have made the recovery of Sarah Bartman's remains a *cause célèbre*, others are still queuing to see her descendants 'perform the authentic native' for their touristic pleasure. Kushner (1999) also highlights the example of the continued popularity of prints of the Hottentot Venus at the Brighton Museum, asserting that this continued marketing of the image of Sarah Bartman as the Hottentot Venus constitutes an example of the persistence of cultural racism in Britain.

Before the next section's postcolonial reading of *Venus Hottentot 2000*, where I suggest that as a performance-as-critique *Venus Hottentot 2000* foregrounds the attempt to question and destabilize the colonizing and phallogocentric gaze that has contributed to a colonial inscription of Black sexuality, I want to briefly acknowledge in passing that any attempt to comprehend this particular performance also highlights the complexity of reading the image within normative theories of the gaze particularly if one were to use the critical orthodoxies as represented by both Mulvey and Metz. Theorizations about the practices of vision and the constitution of the positioning of the reader's gaze are political. Consequently, *Venus Hottentot 2000* resists an unproblematic reading particularly when any theorization of spectatorship has to take into account the issue of multiple spectatorial subject-positions, particularly, for example, the interrogation of the gender/race positioning of the reader/spectator. Indeed, whose vision is being privileged in *Venus Hottentot 2000*?

Because of the necessary constraints of space, suffice it to state briefly that dominant theories of spectatorship as represented by Mulvey and Metz have failed to produce a more nuanced theory of spectatorship. The normative male gaze as theorized by Freudian-Lacanian models has evicted both the female and the Black spectator. Moreover, in this theory of the masculine, voyeuristic gaze does not account or allow for the active

return gaze of the Black female artist, Renee Valerie Cox – a gaze that counters and, it could be argued, challenges and destabilizes the voyeuristic phallogocentric gaze. Diawara (1988: 66) has also highlighted the ethnocentrism of these theories, asserting that 'certain theories of spectatorship have not . . . accounted for the experiences of Black spectators'. Similarly, Jacqueline Bobo (1989) also argued that when the female spectator is spoken of and spoken for, the female in question is inevitably White and middle class, which in turn implies how dominant theories of visual technologies have continued to marginalize Black subjectivity. *Venus Hottentot 2000* usefully highlights this 'colour blindness' where the preferred reading of the photographic image would have to depart from traditional formulations of the gaze in relation to the woman in the photographic image.

READING *VENUS HOTTENTOT 2000*: THE COUNTER-GAZE AND THE REPOSITIONING OF THE BLACK FEMALE SUBJECT

The preceding section discussed how the body of the Hottentot Venus was sexualized and fetishized, opened up and reduced to the status of an object of the colonial gaze. Significantly, *Venus Hottentot 2000*, in revisiting the site of that original trauma, rethinks the ways in which the Black body could be visualized and rescripted – the site also for a critical displacement of negative stereotypes and essentialist notions of Black female sexuality.

By returning to the site of that traumatic history, *Venus Hottentot 2000*'s performance-as-critique enables the postcolonial cultural resistance to the fixity of the colonial stereotype of Black female sexuality. As Harris indicates,

I am interested in returning to the idea of the body, and asking the body to speak with vengeance. . . . This reclaiming of the image of the Hottentot Venus is a way of exploring my psychic identification with the image at the level of spectacle. . . . And yet, I see my work as less a didactic critique and more an interrogation of the ambivalence around the body. Engaging the image of the Hottentot Venus has deepened my understanding of the body as a sight of trauma and excess. (ICA, 1995: 150)

By returning to the presence of the body, perhaps what is also sought in *Venus Hottentot 2000* is a decolonization of interior spaces particularly the ways in which this image raises and pursues questions about the constitutive role of visual representations in understandings of Black subjectivity.

But, first, let us turn to Cox's performance-as-critique of the 'Hottentot',

which is enabled by the way in which this performance orchestrates the reader's gaze. While the object is in the scopic field, Cox's direct counter-gaze beckons the observer, in a moment of identification, to be sutured into the image. The viewer and the viewed become entangled in contact, complicit in the scene and made simultaneously aware of the ironic fetishizing of the Black female body. Through an authored self-performance, her counter-gaze engages ours. The gaze of the discriminated is turned back on the eye of power.

Significantly, this performance-as-critical-displacement is also enabled by Cox and Harris's active appropriation of the technological gaze of the camera, representing a postcolonial authorial assertion to reposition the Black female subject. By using the high modernist style of photography, Cox and Harris reclaim, in their reperformance of the 'Hottentot', and explore the image of the Hottentot's body, particularly the ways in which the Black female body became an object of White colonial (male) desire, curiosity and disgust. Cox's deliberate performance of the historicity of the 'Hottentot' challenges the fetishistic and scopophilic (and normative) male gaze – the eye of power. This is enabled by Cox's self-performance of herself in a sexually charged narrativization of the 'Hottentot' and extends her dis-identification with the normative White (masculine) discourses that have sought to authorize the 'primitivity' of Black female sexuality.

By deliberately donning the paraphernalia of the fetishized body-parts of the 'Hottentot' that have become signs of the 'excessiveness' of Black sexuality, the female body is deliberately authored by Cox as hyperbolized and sexualized. But, by also deliberately including herself as the object of the look, Cox's postcolonial masquerade of the 'Hottentot' 'doubles representation'. Consequently, through repetition and mimicry, Cox and Harris attempt to destabilize the racist stereotype of the 'Hottentot' by allowing the body to become 'almost the same but not quite'. Indeed, 'the masquerade confounds this masculine structure of the gaze. It effects a defamiliarisation of female iconography' (Doane, 1982: 82). But mimicry also has a 'comic turn' in that the self-proclaimed noble intentions of the colonizer's construction of the colonial subject ironically hinge on the ignoble effects of repetition, mimicry and farce.

Indeed, mimicry has an edge and Bhabha theorizes mimicry as a complex form of representation that involves repeating or doubling the image of the other. If mimicry can be articulated as the disciplining gaze which doubles its subjects, then the menace of mimicry is the potential return or ricochet of that gaze: 'The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.' Thus, 'the reforming, civilising mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double' (Bhabha, 1984: 128).

In attempting to expel a pathologized identity through this somatic

mimicry, *Venus Hottentot 2000*'s performance-as-critique of the colonial discursive production of the 'Hottentot' is aimed at detaching the Black woman's perception of herself from White (and male) colonial inscriptions of Black women's sexuality. Consequently, Harris and Cox's somatic mimicry turn on a representational history that has attempted to colonize, fix and naturalize a specific Black female sexuality. What is witnessed in Cox's performance is her simultaneous identification and dis-identification with a body that has become a space and a territory in which battles have been waged.

Significantly, rather than repudiating the sexuality of the Black body, Harris and Cox revel in the authored and affirmative display of the Black body in all its sexual, racial and gender particularities. The performance excavates and explores those moments of colonial objectification in relation to Black subjectivity. In this contemporary rescripting of the 'Hottentot', Cox projects herself as a fully embodied authorial subject in a performance where she is also (but not only) an object in relation to her viewers (her others). She, Cox, is an embodied woman who is not only the object of the camera's gaze but also the author-subject of the image. As a performance-as-critique of the objectification of the 'Hottentot', Cox is not only the object of the White (male) gaze but also a subject and author of her own image. She is not simply an 'object' that exists 'to-be-looked-at-ness' but a Black female subject who is actively articulating an intersubjective relationship between herself and the viewers in a constant and continual negotiation of desires and identifications. The strategy used by Cox is that she deliberately poses as an object in order to be a subject.

While the Hottentot Venus was inscribed as a passive object within the colonial gaze, Cox's counter-gaze speaks of the literal manifestation of authorial power. She is most definitely not the passive object of the gaze. And her overt solicitation of the spectator's gaze challenges the masculinism embedded in the assumption of disinterestedness behind conventional notions of the gaze. As noted, for Mulvey, the female body in western culture connotes a 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Thus, the female must grapple with her assignment, within the logic of White, heterosexist patriarchy to passivity. Simply, men are active agents of the gaze and women are passive objects of the gaze. But the directness of Cox's counter-gaze both solicits and confronts the White heterosexist 'male gaze'. She, Cox, is not 'cornered' by the gaze. Instead, by recognizing that the Black body is the locus of desire, disgust and curiosity, Cox's counter-gaze solicits the very gaze that hopes to stage it as an object. By presenting herself in an exaggerated self-performance of the 'Hottentot' and by confronting us through her 'counter-gaze', Cox complicates the simplistic logic of those scenarios in which women are consigned to a passivity – the locus of the White male gaze. Rather, through the assertion of her authorial-body in performance, she takes away, via her authorial assertion of her

counter-gaze, from the White heterosexist 'male gaze' its strategic function of reducing women to the passive function of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Cox's performance-as-critique, in short, makes use of the conventional codes of feminine display to disturb the conventional dialectics of the gaze inherent in the relationship between supposed male activity and female passivity. The observer thus becomes the observed.

Clearly, Cox is refusing the fetishizing process. While Sarah Bartman was fixed within the penetrative colonial scopic gaze, the directness of Cox's counter-gaze displaces that normative phallogocentric gaze while simultaneously highlighting the ambivalence of the colonial stereotype. Cox gives her body back to herself.

In short, Cox's direct counter-gaze solicits her viewers' gaze and makes them self-conscious of their processes of looking. But, more importantly, this direct solicitation of our gaze makes us aware of our responsibility in terms of the effects of our own perceptions and interpretive judgements. By operating in, and against the forms of knowledge production about Black female sexuality, Harris and Cox's reperformance of the 'Hottentot' also radicalizes and questions the whole notion of the 'essential, Black subject' and encourages us to question instead the entire premise of normative, essentialized conceptions of femininity, blackness, sexuality and identity.

Venus Hottentot 2000 thus offers a contemporary rescripting of the body as well as an interrogation of the gaze in relation to Black subjectivity. From its practice of resignification via mimicry, the interrogation of the constitutive role of the voyeuristic and fetishizing nature of the gaze as a site of power/knowledge is effected through the disarming nature of the counter-gaze. Through the parodic and critical literalization of the 'Hottentot' female's body, Harris and Cox simultaneously stage a version of a Black female stereotype while displacing the figment of an essentialized and fetishized Black female sexuality from within and offer an example of a contemporary strategy of postcolonial representation, bringing into the field of vision concepts of memory, fantasy and desire. Black identity, as demonstrated by *Venus Hottentot 2000*, is a process of negotiation and translation, exemplifying what Kobena Mercer and Stuart Hall have referred to as a postcolonial cultural war of repositioning.

CONCLUSION: READING *VENUS HOTTENTOT 2000* AS A POSTCOLONIAL WAR OF POSITIONING

With Harris and Cox's *Venus Hottentot 2000*, we cannot ignore the fact that both their individual works as well as their collaboration represent a response to the discursive colonial production of Black sexuality.¹⁰ Indeed, *Venus Hottentot 2000*'s performance-as-critical-displacement of

the colonial stereotype is enabled by a form of *quotation* and *reconfiguration* that aims to make possible a historically informed politicized aesthetic practice that seeks to displace the colonial myth-generation of Africa that had contributed to an erasure of a Black creative subjectivity.

Consequently, *Venus Hottentot 2000* highlights the matrix of concerns arising out of a politicized postcolonial aesthetics that is characterized by the practitioners' refusal of the dichotomy between theory and practice, actively foregrounding a dialogic relationship with a colonial discursive production and scripting of Black sexuality. Postcolonial aesthetics could be characterized as praxis via a performance-as-critique and is activated by the authorial insertion of Black experience into the dominant visual technologies that have traditionally positioned them as objects of the colonial gaze. As Kobena Mercer (1996: 117) observed, issues such as paranoia, ambivalence and fetishism are critically explored by the practitioners 'as a point of departure for interventions into a cultural war of position'. Postcolonial aesthetic practice can therefore be said to intervene in colonial representational practices that cohere around the power/knowledge nexus. Power, in this sense, is power to mark, assign and classify. Power is exercised not only in terms of economic exploitation and territorial appropriation. It is also exercised in the sphere of visual technologies that produce in turn regimes of representational practices. These regimes of representational practices function within the apparatus of power where 'discourses of sexuality and race relate in a process of *functional overdetermination*' (Bhabha, 1994: 74). As Kobena Mercer (1996: 19) describes it:

The principal counter-strategy here has been to bring to the surface – into representation – that which has sustained the regimes of representation unacknowledged: to subvert the structures of 'othering' in language and representation, image, sound and discourse, and thus to turn the mechanism of fixed racial signification against themselves, in order to begin to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification.

By intervening in the colonial visual production of a fetishized and spectacularized Black sexuality and by offering a contemporary rescripting of the Black body, *Venus Hottentot 2000* thus belongs to a postcolonial *hybrid polyvocal space* which calls for 'contextual appreciation of the multiple conduits and rhizomorphic connectivity that makes postcolonial aesthetics a strategic site of "the dialogic imagination"' (Mercer, 1995: 16).

By returning to the historical Hottentot Venus, in an attempt to loosen these past codifications of differences in colonial discourse, that attempt to construct identities within the optic of visible and embodied 'racial' differences, Harris and Cox raise questions about the discriminatory nature of the 19th century's (and perhaps even contemporary White society's) constructions of the so-called natural and unchangeable biological

'essence' and 'truth' of Black female sexuality. In other words, racist stereotypical discourses reinforce the power relations that were based on the attempt to fix the binary oppositions between self and other, White and Black. In the case of the Hottentot Venus, this was worked through the denigration of Black female sexuality as monstrously other. However, Cox and Harris's reperformance of the 'Hottentot' enabled an interrogation of the representational practices of the White heterosexist gaze. By grafting the 'Hottentot' onto Cox's body-self, taking hold of it and reflecting it back, Cox and Harris expose the ways in which the Black female body has been the site of multiple inscriptions and overdeterminations.

By using the 'Hottentot' body to 'speak with vengeance', Harris and Cox foreground the possibility of transgressing seemingly fixed positionalities. It is this transgression in which variable positions of identification and places of enunciation are overlaid by the interwoven and potentially internally antagonistic nature of gender, 'race' and sexuality. In short, by reperforming and mimicking the 'Hottentot', *Venus Hottentot 2000* challenges the constructions of 'racial' and sexual difference – a tactic that highlights the performative nature of sexuality that is not fixed but is extremely mobile at the level of fantasy. Such a strategy highlights the fact that Black subjectivity is far from fixed. Rather, it is subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.

According to Lacanian thinking, our identities can never be finally fixed. Meaning and signification only exist through differentiation and for Lacanians, the attempt to construct a closed and self-contained identity is ultimately impossible (Rose, 1986). Identity then is read as proceeding from a *production* that is always in process and always incomplete. So, while *Venus Hottentot 2000* engages in a dialogue with the colonial past, at the same time, it is also an authorial assertion on the part of the Black female subject in the present. As such, it represents a restoration of 'an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past' (Hall, 1990: 212).

This displacement and critique of the gaze and reproduction of identity in the visual apparatus highlights that it is not the visual apparatus that is the problem, but the fact that it has been produced, used and defined within dominant ideological and social formations. Dominant codes do not own narrative and visual pleasure. Understanding how to rewrite the monolithic accumulations of conventional understandings of the visual apparatus requires a more complex understanding of visual practices than Freud's story of scopophilia.

In sum, this article sought to highlight that the Black body, as exemplified by *Venus Hottentot 2000*, be recognized as a battleground of Black cultural intervention, interrogation and a postcolonial war of repositioning, where a radical authorial assertion of Black subjectivity could be seen and not overseen.

NOTES

1. Abrahams (1998) also argues that there is considerable evidence that Bartman was a slave and that the 'pornotroping' of Sarah Bartman along with other Khoisan women should be understood as occurring within a period of Khoisan slavery.
2. The so-called 'Hottentot apron' refers to an enlarged clitoris, while *steatopyga* is the Latin name given to large, protuberant buttocks. Sarah Bartman's elongated labia and nymphae, obtained through the manipulation of the genitalia, were a sign of beauty among the Khoisan peoples. However, to the 19th-century European medical gaze, it was a sign of 'hypertrophy' – an 'anomaly' and a sign of 'primitivity' (Lindfors, 1985).
3. Cited in Kirby (1949: 60).
4. The phrase 'ethnological show business' is used by Bernth Lindfors to describe the colonial exhibition of 'foreign peoples for commercial and/or educational purposes' (Lindfors, 2003: 29).
5. The 19th-century medical gaze scrutinized the prostitute's body for external signs of her 'deviancy'. 'Signs' of her 'immorality' and 'degeneracy' were 'deduced' from the configuration of the bumps on her head, the asymmetry and masculinity of her facial features and the unusual size of her genitals. After analysing the external form of approximately 800 prostitutes, Adrien Charpy, in 1870, comments that the 'characteristic' elongation of the prostitute's labia majora is similar to that of the 'disgusting' 'Hottentot apron' (Gilman, 1985: 229). Within 19th-century evolutionist ideology, the 'grotesque' body of the prostitute and the 'Hottentot' were conflated, becoming signs of their being supposed 'atavistic throwbacks'.
6. Bhabha (1994: 80) observes, 'It is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division.'
7. According to Gallop (1985), Freud articulated the discovery of castration around a sight – the sight of phallic presence in the male and the sight of phallic absence in the female.
8. Kushner (1999) cites the example of a George Cruikshank print *The Court at Brighton a la Chinese*, published in 1816, in which a 'Hottentot' female stands on a plinth labelled 'Regency Taste'. Kushner asserts that by using the figure of the 'Hottentot', Cruikshank links the decay of the Regency period to the presence of the 'Hottentot'. Kushner also highlights another example of the usage of the 'Hottentot' image to lampoon the Prince Regent's coalitional government, who were known as the 'Broad Bottoms'.
9. Lindfors (1985: 145) cites an example of a popular ballad of the day but space prevents me from citing it in full. However, here is an example of one of the verses:

... But you may ask, and well, I ween,
 For why she tarries there;
 And what, in her is to be seen,
 Than other folks more rare.
 A rump she has, (though strange it be,)
 Large as a cauldron pot,
 And this is why men go to see
 This lovely Hottentot. . . .

10. See, for example, Lyle Ashton Harris's *Construct no. 10* (1989) and *Sisterhood* (1994), reprinted in Read (1996).

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