

## **Dark Histories, Bright Revisions: Writing the Black Female Body.**

By Maria Cristina Nisco

Colonialism and the European thought have created a system of dualisms on the basis of which a positive and a negative connotation was assigned to any reality the West encountered. The history of the world has been written according to categories establishing the white European countries as the norm – in contrast with any other other reality representing the difference; the West was the light (of progress and civilization) – in contrast with the darkness (of primitivism and wilderness). The metaphor of the dark has been for a long time associated to a particular country, Africa, notoriously the “dark continent”, the “heart of darkness”.

In recent times, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories appropriated the dark continent definition to describe another mysterious, wild, and unknowable entity: the female body. Ann Mary Doane underlines that there is an “intricate historical articulation of the categories of racial difference and sexual difference”<sup>1</sup> implied in the dark continent trope. As a result, the black (and African) female body can be regarded as the symbol *par excellence* of darkness, with all the different layers of signification applied to it.

Saartjie Baartman, known to the Western audience as the Hottentot Venus, can be said to fully embody darkness for her being both African and a woman. Her black body was a mystery to the white European gaze, which consequently caged it and turned it into a mere object of curiosity and knowledge: the excessiveness of her genitalia and buttocks were shown as a proof of the wild sexuality characterizing black women. Parts of her body were exhibited during her life as well as her death (the Musée de l’Homme in Paris kept them until 1992).

In this condition of overexposure, a series of deep contradictions can be found: Baartman was physically present, she was the “spectacle”, but she was perceived almost as absent, as she was hardly accepted as a human being; she existed mostly as an image, an icon, something to be looked at, but at the same time, she represented a non-image, the negation of her image, as the only parts of her body that were regarded as worth of attention (genitalia and buttocks), were also the reason why she was not treated like a person. According to Mary Ann Doane: “In a patriarchal society, to desexualize the female body is ultimately to deny its very existence.”<sup>2</sup> Baartman found herself in a condition of both extreme visibility and invisibility. She was an absent presence in Western history.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, London, Macmillan Press, 1987, p.212.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

***Reconfiguring dark continents through poetry and images.***

It is exactly on history that, decades later, the Guyanese writer Grace Nichols draws for her poetry collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*.<sup>3</sup> Nichols's fat black woman resists and rejects the stereotypes linked to her image by appropriating the negative labels implied in them.

Steatopygous sky  
Steatopygous sea  
Steatopygous waves  
Steatopygous me

O how I long to place my foot  
on the head of anthropology

to swig my breasts  
in the face of history

to scrub my back  
with the dogma of theology

to put my soap  
in the slimming industry's  
profitsome spoke

Steatopygous sky  
Steatopygous sea  
Steatopygous waves  
Steatopygous me

Grace Nichols's fat black woman, a steatopygous woman (with reference to the protuberances of her body), equates herself with the sky, the sea, the waves, and in so doing, she confronts and opposes to anthropology, history, and theology, all definers of norms and discipline.

And it is through another contemporary voice that emerges Saartjie Baartman's need to hide from visibility. Her thought can speak in Elizabeth Alexander's poem "The Venus Hottentot", which also gives the name to her poetry collection.<sup>4</sup>

There is unexpected sun today  
in London, and the clouds that  
most days sift into this cage  
where I am working have dispersed.

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<sup>3</sup> Grace Nichols, "Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath" in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, London, Virago Press, 1984, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, *The Venus Hottentot*, Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 1990, p.3.

I am a black cutout against  
a captive blue sky, pivoting  
nude so the paying audience  
can view my naked buttocks.,

I am called “Venus Hottentot.”  
I left Capetown with a promise  
of revenue: half the profits  
and my passage home: A boon!  
Master’s brother proposed the trip;  
the magistrate granted me leave.

(...)

That was years ago. London’s  
circuses are florid and filthy,  
swarming with cabbage-smelling  
citizens who stare and query,  
Is it muscle? bone? or fat?”

(...)

Monsieur Cuvier investigates  
between my legs, poking, prodding,  
sure of his hypothesis.  
I half expect him to pull silk  
scarves from inside me, paper poppies,  
then a rabbit! He complains  
at my scent and does not think  
I comprehend, but I speak  
English. I speak Dutch. I speak  
A little French as well, and  
languages Monsieur Cuvier  
will never know have names.  
(...).<sup>5</sup>

Baartman’s body becomes a bridge over a new subjectivity, implying a different way to approach the dark female body.

With reference to the complex and ambivalent representation of the black female body, Lyle Ashton Harris and Renée Valerie Cox realized the photograph “Venus Hottentot 2000” presented within the exhibition *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.3-6.

<sup>6</sup> London, May-July 1995, Institute of Contemporary Arts.



Renée Cox's body is inserted into metallic protuberances, hiding and revealing her profile at the same time, playing metaphorically with visibility and invisibility, visibility and invisibility, and drawing attention to the implicit meaning inscribed on images.

### ***Writing the body***

Focusing on the intertwining connections between body and writing is another female artist: Ingrid Mwangi. Born in 1975 in Nairobi, Kenya (of Kenyan father and German mother), Mwangi explores her being a black woman with African and European roots. Her body is the place where these worlds converge. She claims: "My body is the only thing that I actually own": she thus places her body or parts of it (hair, skin, voice) at the very core of her photographs, performances and video-installations. She alters her image to question the oversimplified and stereotyped way in which race, gender and sexuality are narrated.

In the photos *Static Drift*<sup>7</sup> she manipulates the color of her skin by applying different shades to her dark skin.



She traces on her stomach the borders of Africa adding the word “bright” to the traditional “dark continent” definition. Mwangi makes her body tell another story, a new story posing a distance from Freud’s authoritarian voice. She also traces the borders of a “burn-out” Germany, a European country now implying darkness. The two countries inscribed in her genetic inheritance are, thus, impressed on her skin, on a new territory, with new borders and characteristics. Photos become photo-graphies<sup>8</sup>, not simply the site where writing takes place, but the expression of what Jean-Luc

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<sup>7</sup> Two-piece digital photography, each 110 cm x 75 cm (2001).

<sup>8</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Paris, Editions Métailié, 1992.

Nancy calls “l’excription de notre corps”<sup>9</sup>, a writing exposing the body, inscribing it outside – in a sense, “outscribing” the body.

The photos *Shades of Skin*<sup>10</sup> constitute the installation *Coloured*<sup>11</sup>, where four monitors show the artist’s face, back, upper thighs, and feet (each part with a different shade of darkness).



The fragmentation of Mwangi’s body, not represented as a whole, recalls the absence and invisibility of Saartjie Baartman’s exhibition (even if no glimpse to the female genitalia is included in Mwangi’s installation).

In the video-installation *Neger don’t call me*<sup>12</sup> Mwangi projects on a large video images of her face covered by masks made of her own dread-locked hair.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Four-piece digital photography (2001).

<sup>11</sup> One video projection, four videos on monitors (2001).

<sup>12</sup> One video projection (2000).



Her experience with difference and prejudice (when she left Kenya for Germany as a teenager) is the basis of the installation. The artist's face gradually disappears, becoming unrecognizable, almost transformed into a beastly image, implicitly questioning Western discriminatory modes of representation. Linked to this critique towards the power images have in constructing identities, is also the video-installation *Cutting the Mask*<sup>13</sup>. Mwangi's image (from shoulders up) is displayed on two screens: in one of them she covers and masks her face with her dreadlocks, in the other she intensely stares at the camera while cutting away her dreadlocks.



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<sup>13</sup> Two videos on monitors, two bases (2003).



What appears clearer and clearer is that the body is the interface between the self and society. The image is no longer a consumer good, it is explicitly charged with a social responsibility, it becomes a sort of prism through which each person can see and read (just like a text or an image) him/herself and the rest of the world in many different ways. During the conference *Mirage*, Stuart Hall talked about a “practice of resignification” consisting in working on and with the black body, thus becoming a sort of “auto-graphy”.<sup>14</sup> Bodies are thus introduced into writing, their writing is uncovered and corpo-realized in a new dimension. New “lights” (coming out of darkness) join old ones.

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall in Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness. Frantz Fanon and the Visual Representation*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Seattle, Bay Press, 1996, p.20.