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South African Past Voices and Herstories: Performances as Counter-Texts*

Abstract I: Questo articolo esplora le intersezioni creative di etnia e genere negli spazi multimediali sudafricani che partecipano alla costruzione delle narrazioni storiche nazionali. A chi appartiene il passato registrato e come è conservato/rappresentato nell'archivio culturale del Paese? L'articolo si concentra sulle figure storiche femminili dimenticate, manipolate o marginalizzate nella storiografia ufficiale considerandole luoghi privilegiati della riscrittura storica femminile sudafricana. Questo approccio poggia sui recenti studi che invitano la ricerca ad adottare "alternative methodologies that take seriously the realm of the speculative and the imaginative" (Soudien 2023: 83).

Abstract II: This paper investigates creative intersections of race and gender in South African multimedia spaces in the construction of the country's historical narrative(s). Whose past is recorded and how is it preserved/represented in the national cultural archive? The article focuses on historical female figures forgotten, manipulated or marginalized in the official records, as a privileged site of South African female historical counter-narratives. This approach relies on recent studies that invite scholars to adopt "alternative methodologies that take seriously the realm of the speculative and the imaginative" (Soudien 2023: 83).

Keywords: Krotoa, Sarah Baartman, postcolonial archive, South African poetry, post-apartheid.

1. (De)constructing the Mother-of-the-Nation Myth: Krotoa and Sarah Baartman

After the end of apartheid, a number of cultural icons have emerged that identify the country with its colonial and more recent past history of sufferings and with its new multiculturalism. Nelson Mandela, the Springbok national rugby team, Table Mountain, Miriam Makeba, Ubuntu, Robben Island, Krotoa/Eva, and Sarah Baartman are among the symbols that come to mind when thinking of South Africa today. For most of them, post-apartheid implied

* This article is the result on an ongoing collaborative project by the two authors. Paragraphs 1 is jointly authored; paragraph 2 is authored by Terrenato and paragraph 3 by Guarducci; paragraph 4 was written by Guarducci with the exception of the section going from "In a compelling performance […]" to "(Phillips 2020: 21)" which was written by Terrenato.

a significant shift of meaning, sometimes expanding previous equivalences sometimes overturning them completely[1].

Whereas the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* pushed South Africa into a potentially never-ending process of historical rewritings and opened up the doors to individual truths, the (re)construction of the nation through memory after the end of apartheid, according to Meg Samuelson (2007), largely plays on the "dismembered" bodies of women. The best known and most significant example of this subjugation of a female body to national interests, in both a metaphorical and literal sense, is Sarah Baartman's dissected body. In the New South Africa's culture of 're-memorisation' of historical maternal figures of reference, Samuelson sees a continuation of the colonial abuse of women's bodies. In this process, she claims, the more irregular aspects of this female heritage are erased (Samuelson 2007: 2). These aspects resurface in how more or lesser-known female figures are imagined in the arts, thereby problematising the very relationship between South Africa, its history, its way of remembering and archiving.

Many are the questions to be asked, among which whose past is recorded and how is it preserved/represented in the national cultural archive? How do South African artists, often engaging with pre-colonial and colonial history, relate to the idea of a post-colonial archive? More specifically, how is this ideal archive embedded in the work of South African women poets? One of the strategies of 're-membering' is to give (lyrical) voice to historical female figures from a remote past: Krotoa/Eva and Sarah Baartman are but the most significant examples. In their cases information scattered in the official records is restored, amplified and positioned at the heart of the grand historical narrative of the New South Africa. Next to them, there is a number of unfathomed, anonymous female ancestors (native and/or enslaved) who ask for being included in an alternative archive by virtue of their presence/appearance in poetry[2].

If 'restorative' memory aims at filling the gaps of recorded and archived history, it must go beyond the boundaries of facts and venture into the sphere of fictions:

> For over a decade now, in the academy, in memory institutions, school classrooms, courtrooms, the media, people's living rooms, and, crucially, the TRC, South Africans have been searching for meanings in a myriad narratives of the past. For some, the meanings are borne by "facts;" the "truth" of what happened. For others "fact" and "fiction," "history" and "story," coalesce in imaginative space (Harris 2002: 82).

Archival sources do not offer much material about Krotoa and Sarah Baartman, who

[1] For example: Mandela as a terrorist vs Mandela as a hero; Table Mountain as a natural spot vs Table Mountain as a cultural site hosting the first autochthonous presences; Krotoa/Eva as an unfit mother vs Krotoa/Eva as the mother of the nation, Robben Island as a secluded prison vs Robben Island as a tourist attraction, the Springbok rugby team as an expression of white Afrikaners only vs the same team, now led by its first black captain, Siya Kolisi, as the recipient of national pride and collective reverence.

[2] What is activated in these poetic texts is what Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka in their *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* refer to as the "mode of actuality" of cultural memory, that is, the process through which the context of the present acts on the archive (Assmann & Czaplika 1995: 130).

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have, since the mid-Nineties, been adopted as 'mothers' of the Rainbow nation. In their role of natives who came in close contact with the colonisers and suffered injustice, their restitution to the national archive may appear as a well-intended – though highly speculative – operation. As we will see, the results are, to say the least, rather controversial.

As a starting point in our inquiry on cases in which female identities are performed in poetry and/or multimedia texts in order to construct or deconstruct South African narratives of the country's past, we turn to recent works that share the ambition of reforming Krotoa and Sarah Baartman's place in the archive. The 'performances' we take here into account are such at a literal and/or metaphorical level: we rely on filmic texts, visual arts and the written and performed works of women poets. We share here the broad understanding of 'performativity' as action in the cultural arena, especially with regard to gender issues, which characterizes some seminal theoretic works in the field (Samuelson 2007: 7). When dealing with South Africa and its politics of national belonging, as a matter of fact, ethnicity always plays a part. Some recent poems by women authors, striving to problematise the heritage of these 'mothers of the nation' in terms of belonging and non-belonging will then allow for a nuanced and positioned[3] reading of what we know and can infer about their lives.

2. Krotoa

In 1674, Krotoa (also known as Eva van Meerhoff)[4] died on Robben Island where she was imprisoned on orders by the Dutch governor of the Cape. She had been accused of shameful sexual conduct and alcoholism by the same colonizers who had depended on her for their survival during the first years of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) settlement at the foot of Table Mountain. She had acted as an interpreter and counsellor for the Dutch, allowing them to trade and close treaties with the inhabitants of the coast[5].

In post-apartheid South Africa she was seen as the ideal ancestral mother: a woman not only able to translate languages and cultures, but who also hosted in her womb the first ethnically mixed offspring. Samuelson described the ongoing process in which "Krotoa-Eva the translator is transformed in Krotoa-Eva the rainbow Mother, particularly by those white South Africans eager to claim belonging in the new nation" (Samuelson 2007: 4). This cultural appropriation trend, supported by speculative genetic inquiries (her offspring, according to DNA research, is also white), is still visible today. Among efforts by different communities to appropriate her exclusively, the nation has publicly acknowledged her symbolic meaning:

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[3] By "positioned" in this context we also mean the cultural and ethnical affiliation of the poets – black and coloured – *vis-à-vis* their subject matter.

[4] What her native name actually was is impossible to reconstruct. The Dutch possibly wrote as 'Krotoa' the word meaning "kid in custody" in the language used by her uncle's people she was living with, and who entrusted her to the Dutch governor Jan van Riebeeck and Maria de la Queillerie, his wife, when she was ten or eleven years old; it was her custodians' decision to rename her Eva. She took the family name Van Meerhoff from the Danish surgeon in service in the fort, whom she married in 1664, after having given birth to at least two babies in her teens. For references on Krotoa's life, see Landman (1996) and Wells (1998).

[5] Krotoa was reportedly a member of the native group of the Goringhaikonas, also known as 'beach-combers'. In the early 1700s the group was either extinct or assimilated under pressure of the VOC.

a monument in her honour accompanied the celebrations for the 350 years of existence of the Castle of Good Hope in 2016. On that occasion the 'Khoi leaders', the representatives of a movement trying to restore the cultural memory of the earliest inhabitants of the Cape region, sternly protested against the government's appropriation of her name and heritage[6].

Also the South African film industry took an interest in her and in 2016 the release of the film *Krotoa* caused a similar stir[7]. Starting from the closing titles, a usually neutral aspect in a movie, an evident ideological stance is conveyed in this biopic. The last caption reads: "Krotoa has White, Black and Mixed Race descendants including many famous South Africans such as iconic political leaders Paul Kruger, Jan Smuts and F. W. De Klerk". The identification of this white nationalist triumvirate[8] as Krotoa's descendants elicits quite a few questions, as do the film and its script. The focus lies here on how Krotoa, the native, first a girl then a woman, interacted with white men, and in particular with Jan van Riebeeck, the commander of the Dutch VOC settlement on the Cape from its inception to 1662. The movie creates a flattering depiction of Jan van Riebeeck: a young, handsome man trapped in his institutional role and in an unhappy marriage, on whom the clever and sensual Krotoa exerts a fatal attraction, to the point that he 'cannot help but' rape her one night, to be then devastated by his sense of guilt. Needless to say, the official records of the VOC bear no indication that Van Riebeeck was sentimentally or sexually involved with Krotoa[9], although, from what is known at large about colonial contexts, it seems likely that he might have exerted his right as a master in requiring sexual services on her part.

The topic of language in the script also deserves some notice. Krotoa's proficiency as an interpreter, and as an early speaker of Dutch as a second language, is fully recorded in Van Riebeeck's journal[10]. However, most dialogues are in Afrikaans, a language that did not exist at that time. Khoekhoegowab (also known as Khoekhoe or Nama), a non-Bantu language supposedly close to the one spoken by native tribes in the Cape coastal region, is used in the dialogues between native characters such as Krotoa herself, her uncle Authsumato, and her native boyfriend Doman[11]. Without diving deeper into the history and development of Afrikaans, in which the Dutch substratum underwent a gradual process of creolization

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[6] See the reportage at https://www.news24.com/life/new-krotoa-film-reveals-life-of-that-khoi-woman20170806 (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[7] A Penguin Films production, directed by Roberta Durrant, starring Crystal Donna Roberts as Krotoa and Armand Aucamp as Van Riebeeck. The script also sees the collaboration of Kaye Ann Williams who directed the documentary on Krotoa for the *Hidden Histories* series (2013).

[8] Paul Kruger (1825-1904), a hero of the Boer resistance against the Brits and President of the Transvaal Republic; Jan Smuts (1870-1950) President of the South African Union and revered member of the United Nations; President De Klerk, the pragmatic politician who envisioned and made possible the democratic transition of the country (Mlambo & Parsons 2018: 75, 127 and ff, 228 and ff).

[9] By official records of the VOC we refer here to Van Riebeeck's diary (1952-1957).

[10] Van Riebeeck's diary has been consulted in the original language (Dutch) in a standard modern edition. The places in which Eva (Krotoa) is mentioned are too many to be listed in this article (Van Riebeeck 1952-1957).

[11] The relationship among these characters in the film, and especially the Krotoa/Doman subplot, is unaccounted for in the extant historical sources, and has to be considered almost totally fictitious.

with local and other European languages[12], the film promotes the idea that Krotoa is also the mother of Afrikaans, that is to say, of its white, historically dominant, variety. In the polarised terms that are always at play in South African debates on belonging and identity, the film might be accused of some kind of 'blackwashing' as well as of a 'whitewashing' of South African history. The pivot in this double process is Krotoa, whose fictionalised historical role grants more credibility to the white establishment and culture by giving it a 'native' hue, while at the same time toning down the clash between the white colonisers and the native peoples. Krotoa and Van Riebeeck stand together, in the filmic text, as a monument to goodwill and cooperation between ethnic groups.

Appreciative critics underline the emancipatory message conveyed by a movie that "explores the life of the only recorded female interpreter of her time; which is not only depicted by a female lead, but was also written, directed, produced and edited by women"[13]. At the other end of the spectrum, the film is accused of chauvinism for glorifying Van Riebeeck and declassifying his sexual assault by showing an almost consensual Krotoa (Van Niekerk 2017). A more balanced view is put forward by Barnabas and Jansen van Vuuren: the film itself "vacillates between myth and (fractured) memory" but its viewers "are left with a hope trope, offering a neat ending to a messy tale". Their conclusion is that the "promulgation of womb over words is symbolic of the inequality evident in the representation of women's participation in history, thus turning a poignant film into a weak nation-building exercise" (Barnabas & Jansen van Vuuren 2020: 41). They convincingly put forward a connection with how mainstream culture, and once again cinema, fictionalises Sarah Baartman, contended between dominant narratives and positioned re-appropriations (Barnabas & Jansen van Vuuren 2020: 41).

A different operation is at work in poems, videopoems, etc. which try to restore the complexity of Krotoa's role. Her story becomes then emblematic of abuse, resistance, inequality, gender oppression but also of resilience, inventiveness and female agency. In both Karen Press's *Krotoa's Story* (1990) and in Toni Stuart's performed recreation of this character titled *Krotoa/Eva's Suite: a cape jazz poem in three movements* (2018) Krotoa embraces and plays with her ambiguity as a creature forced by circumstances to juggle on a border between two opposing worlds[14].

On another public occasion in 2021, Stellenbosch University officially announced the renaming of a building in its premises after Krotoa. This time, the Khoi leaders were invited and took part in the ceremony by performing a ritual, among scholars, academics and students. On the occasion, poet and activist Khadija (Tracey) Heeger performed her poem *Krotoa or the child of the mother (for Krotoa Eva)*[15]. No video or audio recording is preserved, but the poem was published in her Afrikaans/English collection *Thicker Than*

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12 See, among others, the writings of Hans den Besten, (Den Besten & Van der Wouden 2012).

13 See the anonymous review at http://www.waafrikaonline.com/2017/08/krotoa-fictional-story-inspired-by-real.html (consulted on 10/07/2024).

14 For a discussion on these two works see Guarducci & Terrenato (2022: 29-42).

15 *The Krotoa Building*, https://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/visual-redress/initiatives/krotoa (consulted on 10/07/2024).

Sorrow (Heeger 2022: 20-22)[16]. The repeated invocation of Krotoa's name seems to take us into the realm of the revival process leading to the construction of a symbolic mother for all South Africans, but the second line of the following quote, as the poem in general, casts a shadow upon the possibility to connect present identities to buried memories impossible to revive: "O vertel die storie Groot Moeder / van die memories waar o's nooit wassie" [*"Oh tell the story, Big Mother / of those memories in which we never were"*] (Heeger 2022: 21). By playing with words denoting the acts of telling, speaking foreign languages, and adapting to the environment, Heeger's poem transfers elements from the dominant narrative about Krotoa, or rather of 'Eva the tolk', who was able to function both in the Dutch fort and in a Khoi village, into the present-day revival. This revival is marked by disguisement and feelings of exclusiveness: "Ons rolspeel hier in tale wat leuens vertel oor ons komvandaan saad" [*"We play roles here in languages that lie about the seed of our origin"*], is said in a verse (Heeger 2022: 20).

In this shared and contested Krotoa narrative, the poem argues, today's generally twisted relationship to history is manifest. This becomes evident as the poem introduces the issue of the Battle of Blood River, one of the tenets of Afrikaner pride (a few hundred Boers defeated a large Zulu army there in 1838), remembered during apartheid with a monument in honour of the Boer fighters. The government has now added another monument, right in front of the first one, glorifying Zulu warriors' heroism[17]. The poem bitterly ironises the concept of ethnic loyalties thereby connecting the Krotoa debate to the trend by which competing groups strive for a native ancestry:

> [...]
> nou hakel ons in bloed die rym van vals identiteit in popular geskiedenis
> skielik staan ons almal hier by die bloed rivier
> eis ons die bloedband met beduiwelde tonge
> aasvoël se belange oppie hart
> "Wie is meer Khoi as wie!" [...]
>
> *[...]*
> *now we comb in blood the rhyme of a false identity in popular history*
> *suddenly we all stand there at the blood river*
> *we reclaim that blood tie with a ruined tongue*
> *the interest of vultures in our hearts*
> *"Who is more Khoi than the other?" [...]*
> (Heeger 2022: 21).

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[16] The poetic production of this author reaches the public mainly through live performance; the only other published collection, *Beyond the Delivery Room*, dates from 2013. *Krotoa* is an Afrikaans poem, with a strong Afrikaaps influence, and a four-line section in English. All translations from Afrikaans in this article are made for the occasion by Francesca Terrenato. The English versions are in italics.

[17] See *Blood River Monuments in South Africa* at https://contestedhistories.org/resources/case-studies/ncome-and-blood-river-monuments-on-ncombe-river-in-nquthu-dundee/ (consulted on 10/07/2024).

3. Sarah Baartman

Sarah Baartman's story travelled around the world inspiring works of art and provoking debates everywhere. The idea that a young woman who already suffered the loss of her family was forced to move from her natal Eastern Cape to Cape Town as a servant and, possibly, a prostitute; the idea that such a woman could end up performing as "The Hottentot Venus" in 1810s freak shows in London and later in Parisian libertine salons; the thought that, on top of everything, once dead in 1816 of some obscure disease for which she received no treatment, Sarah had been dissected by the scientist George Cuvier and her genitalia and brain exposed in glass jars at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, together with her wax body cast, until 1974 have all come to shock past and contemporary sensibilities[18].

In the mid-Nineties, Baartman became both a new 'mother' of the nation and a figure whose story elicited a reflection upon the perception of Black women's bodies worldwide[19]. The procedure for returning her mortal remains from France started in 1994 at the initiative of the Griquas National Council[20], which petitioned President Nelson Mandela for their 'ancestor' to be brought home. Mandela became the principal sponsor of the operation: the living Rainbow icon working to shape a new Rainbow icon. It was only in 2002 that the French parliament authorised the expatriation of Sarah's remains and her body cast. She was then buried in her supposed birthplace, the Gamtoos River Valley, in a broadcasted traditional Khoi ceremony attended by President Thabo Mbeki. The grave was declared a national heritage site in 2007 and, after a series of arguments connected to Sarah's history of exploitation during her lifetime and the consequent inappropriateness of charging a fee to visit the site, was granted free access[21].

The ways in which Baartman was and is celebrated/recreated, that is, 'performed' are never, and to a certain extent, could never be, neutral. In 2000, for example, the University of Cape Town acquired and exposed a sculpture of her made by Willie Bester by assembling scrap metal material. In 2016, in the context of the *#RhodesMustFall* university protests, a group of black students, mainly women, dressed the sculpture with pieces of cloth to express their intolerance in the face of yet another display of Sarah's naked body, albeit in this 'translated' form. The remonstration resulted in a more structured exhibition held in 2018 in another venue of the same university, where the sculpture was given a context.

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[18] Among the many references on Sarah Baartman's life, for the purpose of this article we refer to Holmes (2007).

[19] The photography and art exhibition *Black Venus: Reclaiming Black Women in Visual Culture* (New York 2022 and London 2023), curated by Nigerian-British Aindrea Emelife, is but the most recent example of a never-ending process of dissemination. Among popular international appropriations of Baartman, we can also include Suzan-Lori Parks's production of 1996, *Venus*, where the woman is given full agency over her choices. Parks's goal of removing black women from the stereotype of eternal victims is understandable but historically untenable, as Jean Young has proved discussing the play and the different reactions it produced in the US (Young 1997).

[20] The Griqua claim their descent from the now extinct aboriginal Khoi and San. Sarah belonged to a small Eastern Cape ethnically mixed Khoisan-Xhosa clan which, it seems, did not make it into the Twentieth century (Holmes 2007: 9-20).

[21] See: https://www.sawarmemorials.ed.ac.uk/sarah-baartman-memorial-hankey-eastern-cape/ (consulted on 10/07/2024).

Other works of art, including life-size photographs of the 'clad' statue, surrounded it; all the supporting, emotional, apologetic paper cards placed on it during the protest were also on display. The staging was accompanied by the looping soundtrack of the famous poem *I've Come to Take You Home* (2011)[22], read by its author Diana Ferrus, and by the opening live performance of *resurrection* (2017)[23] by Koleka Putuma. The combination transformed the event into an interactive, multimedia happening open to dialogue, which created both empathy and constructive debates from the complexity of its topic[24].

In this regard, for example, one regrets to note that the widely acclaimed movie, *Vénus noire* (2010), by Tunisian-French director Adbellatif Kechiche, while trying to objectively expose the wrongs suffered by Sarah in London and Paris, actually replicates the morbid gaze of racist nineteenth-century Europe and deletes any subjectivity and agency that Sarah, albeit in appalling circumstances, must have had. The movie reiterates obsessively and in an almost pornographic fashion Sarah as an object of racist and gender-based violence, to which she reacts either by visibly suffering or with resigned indifference. In a possible act of respect, Kechiche chooses not to venture inside the main character's individuality, but the movie duplicates the perversity of the narration we inherited, by insisting with the camera on Sarah's supposedly 'abnormal' body[25]. Rather than correcting the many stereotypes affecting Sarah's story, the film simplifies it along the Manichean binarisms of colonisers/colonised, white/black, men/women, culture/nature, master/slave, rich/poor, etc. *Vénus noire* toured in international festivals and was predictably awarded the Equal Opportunity Award at the 67th Venice International Film Festival. In spite of its success, though, a significant part of its audience and reviewers did not welcome the way Kechiche indulges on Sarah's physical and psychological subjugation. Sarah is almost always shot silent and although different sources report she was multilingual, the few times she speaks she stammers or does not expand any further than "yes" or "no". Also, the character of her first 'master', Hendrick Cesars, whom we know was a free black, is portrayed unproblematically as a 'Boer'. The film thus erases the complexities of different forms of discrimination faced by Baartman and Cesars in England, a country that had just abolished slavery and opened a crusade against the Boers[26].

The clear-cut dichotomy on which Kechiche's movie is built is not historically accurate

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[22] Composed in 1998, the poem had a role in the process that led to Sarah's return to her home country (see Guarducci & Terrenato 2022: 106-108).

[23] *Resurrection* features in "Postmemory", the third and last section of Putuma's bestselling collection *Collective Amnesia* (2020; I ed. 2017). *resurrection* is not about Sarah Baartman; it is a poem on remembering/forgetting trauma, on the presence of blood in South African history and, in particular, on the living memory represented by graves.

[24] See: https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2018-09-21-dignifying-sarah-baartman (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[25] Advertised in London and Paris as 'typical' African female features, Sarah's sexual organs, that is the enlargement of her *labia minora* and the accumulation of fat in her posterior (*steatopygia*) attracted European curiosity.

[26] In her biography of Sarah Baartman, Rachel Holmes details the troubles Cesars had, as a non-white, in getting a pass from the governor to leave the Cape (Holmes 2007: 48). Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais, on the other hand, explain that free blacks were not necessarily black, the definition itself meaning in that context "with slave ancestors". Cesars was probably of ethnic mixed origin. In London he was identified as a Boer, which anyway meant as an enemy for the Brits (Scully & Crais 2008: 313).

and does not help our understanding. Furthermore, Sarah Baartman was discriminated against, and her body may have been sold – whether by her choice or not – years before she ventured to Europe. Coming from a (Khoikhoi) Gonaqua clan from the rural Eastern Cape and arriving in an ethnically and socially mixed, chaotic, relatively open to self-initiative city such as the bustling Cape Town of the times, Sarah must have experienced first-hand the prejudices reserved for Khoikhoi people, who could not be formally kept as slaves but who were nonetheless servants and, if they were women, also often prostitutes (Scully & Crais 2008: 311). On this part of Sarah's life, which is very interesting because it opens up a complex web of social discrimination dating before the black and white racialisation of the country, the biopic glosses over.

Vénus noire's rendering of Sarah's life does not seem to get to the heart of the matter. Different is the case with the musical *Venus vs Modernity*, written by Lebogang Mashile and launched at the Johannesburg Market Theatre in 2019 under the direction of Pamela Nomvete and Koleka Putuma. There are no full-length videos of the production to our knowledge, but from some brief clips available on the web and interviews to Mashile herself (who plays Saartjie) and to opera-singer Ann Masina (who plays Venus)[27], we can get the idea of a performance eschewing historical verisimilitude with a view to conveying, instead, Sarah's emotions in the dual guise of what she felt and what she experienced. According to Mashile, two bodies/actresses were needed to stage the 'enormity' of Sarah's story, the schizophrenia she experienced, the difficult relationship between her inner and outer worlds, the trauma of her hypervisibility continually juxtaposed with her invisibility, a trait she shares with so many black women. Most of all, the play stems from the idea of Sarah's being both a freak and the most famous performer of her times (Mashile 2019). In order to allow the woman Saartjie and the icon Venus to interact and come to the fore, Mashile uses poetry, spoken words, dance, music, thus actually 'performing' the female identity in its full complexity, tensions and even contradictions.

That Sarah Baartman's *quid* does not lie in what we know about her from partial historical sources is what emerges from the opening of Makosazana Xaba's *Tongues of Their Mothers* (2008), a poem that lines up six 'historical' South African women, equally overshadowed by the men they stood beside. This is the 'liberating' stanza devoted to Sarah Baartman and outlining a different, new idea of history altogether:

> I wish to write an epic poem about Sarah Baartman,
> one that will be silent on her capturers, torturers and demolishers.
> It will say nothing of the experiments, the laboratories and the displays
> or even the diplomatic dabbles that brought her remains home,
> eventually.
> The poem will sing of the Gamtoos Valley holding imprints of her
> baby steps.

[27] See: https://www.facebook.com/VenusVsModernity/videos/363563051251574/?_rdr; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3SRH34cEZw; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enc595NoCaE (consulted on 10/07/2024).

It will contain rhymes about the games she played as a child,
stanzas will have names of her friends, her family, her community.
It will borrow from every single poem ever written about her,
conjuring up her wholeness: her voice, dreams, emotions and thoughts [...]
(Xaba 2008: 25).

4. Rescuing a Drowned Archive in Verse

Sarah Baartman's and Krotoa's overexposure, which includes the current use of their names for monuments and centres of cultural and/or social activities around South Africa[28], has generated, as sketched so far, appropriations of all kinds but has also revealed the need for a historical rewriting that can only be achieved through opening and extending the country's archives. The work of a new generation of women poets features the need to redress the same idea of archival evidence, locating in the water the memory site of both enslaved and native women.

Koleka Putuma's final lines of *you / who are monumented* remark:

[...]
in the twisting and turning and taming and titillating and tallying
all black history is established on a plantation
or slave ship
that conveniently drowns some biographies
and saves others
where men were slaves
who fought and made art
a history that made it into textbooks
and women were slaves
who fought and made art
a history
drowned in glass jars and museums
now we rotate libraries upside down
retrieving from the margins
lives connected to other lives
spilling the ones
they say
do not exist
(Putuma 2021: 39-40).

Slave women did not make it into textbooks and the passing reference to Baartman, "drowned in glass jars and museums", provides the concrete image of the fragmentation and isolation of women and of their history; even when they "fought and made art" as men did. In the face of their umpteenth erasure from an "established" historiography legitimately

[28] Such is the case of the *Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children* founded in Cape Town in 1999, where they take care of women and children who survived abuse within or outside their homes, https://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/ (consulted on 10/07/2024).

made of plantations and slave ships but featuring mostly men, women authors reclaim the right to overturn the cataloguing system of libraries, whose monotonous methods and results are signalled by the strong alliteration in the first line. The 'liquid' metaphor connecting drowned biographies to Baartman's drowned genitalia (and history) brings out unrecorded lives from the margins via an act of "spilling".

In a compelling performance at the 2023 *Bua! Poetry Slam*[29], singer/poet Jolyn Phillips impersonates Bientang, a native woman from the nineteenth century, whose memory is only preserved in the name of a marine cave[30] and a bunch of legendary details. Phillips, who is a skilled singer and musician, turned for the occasion *die walvis droom/the whale's dream*, a poem from her 2020 collection *bientang.'n !naugedig* (bientang. a poem of passage[31]), into a song combining spoken word and evocative chant[32]. The rich sea imagery (whales, waves, seaweed, ships) supports the identification of the woman with the coastal environment, thereby attesting to the pre-colonial history of the native 'beachcombers' by focusing on the banished woman who was, according to oral traditions, the 'last' of the tribe. Besides the specific artistic choice made in this collection, one should remark the historically strong connection, both cultural and material, between the Khoi (or KhoiSan people) of the Eastern Cape coast and the ocean as a dwelling environment and food source, as well as a spiritual site[33]. By concentrating along the whole collection on Bientang, Phillips provides us with a quite detailed 'herstory' and tackles the problem of heritage in sociocultural terms by addressing the issue of slavery as well.

Avowedly finding inspiration in a fish restaurant's name, the poet or scribe – the collection also features a poetic I who is the poet/witness/archivist – (re)creates Bientang's voice, providing some evidence that is lacking in the official records. Before telling her own name in her last lines, the woman's voice builds all she is and stands for through aquatic metaphors: "ek is 'n slaweskip wat deur die sand trek ek droom my vel word 'n net" ["*I am a slave ship that sails through the sand I dream my skin becomes a net*"] (Phillips 2020: 21).

The process of identity shaping of the I (both body and mind) then takes a turn towards the water. As opposed to the ship, the woman who is one with the sea, cannot disappear in the abyss:

> […]
> in my is ook water ja in my is ook donderstorms
> in my is ook die harsings so groen soos seegras

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[29] This poetry slam was organised for the first time at the North-West University (NWU), South Africa, by the Creative Writing subject group in the School of Languages.

[30] Bientang's Cave, in Hermanus Bay, Western Cape.

[31] *nau* is a Khoi term indicating the age or period in which a young person undergoes an initiation rite. The use of lower case is an intentional choice in Phillips' work. This collection has already been discussed in a different context in Guarducci & Terrenato (2022: 78-81, 121-123).

[32] The performance can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hch3G1lE3is (consulted on 10/07/2024).

[33] See Minguzzi (2021: 22). The issue is also artistically explored by prominent writer Zakes Mda in his 2005 novel *The Whale Caller*.

in my is klippe en daar is 'n grot aan elke
swelselhoek van
my
lyf

en hier kan ek nie sink nie
[…]

[…]
in me there is water too in me there are thunderstorms too […]
in me the brain is as green as seaweed
in me there are rocks and a cave
at every curve of
my
body

and here I cannot sink […]
(Phillips 2020: 21).

Bientang's name and story will be preserved in the water and the rocks, whales will bear witness to her deeds, and her lasting presence is to be retrieved in forms – a ghost, a fossil – that eschew the common textual / visual manmade items in the archive. The archivist / poet is enquiring into a heritage that does not share the dominant white male preoccupation with the accuracy and tangibility of 'grounded' sources and opens up the chance of naming and 're-membering' through oral lore, ancient beliefs, and the 'memory of nature':

[…]
in die baai sal ek spook tot ek
fossiel in die baai
sal die noorkappers kom
herinner ek is bientang
[…]

[…]
I will haunt the bay until I
fossilize in the bay
shall the whales come
and remind that I am bientang
[…]
(Phillips 2020: 21).

Also Yvette Christiansë insists on the connection between the ocean and women's history. In her collection *Imprendehora* (2009)[34], she expands on the relationship between (the

[34] Imprendehora was a Portuguese slaver seised by the British in the crusade they opened after having approved the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

memory of) slavery and water. In the final section of the poem, titled *Ship's Register*, we are overwhelmed by the list of 29 persons (mainly children), supposedly "liberated Africans": 18 males, 9 females, 2 undefined. The section pretends to record the otherwise forgotten vessel's human cargo providing "the demographic details of trafficked bodies found and 'liberated' from a slave ship in the Indian Ocean" (Boswell 2016: 14). Among the details, the poem registers the name of the person's mother and alternates the inventory with the flow of thoughts of these 'disremembered' ancestors, often involving their maternal figures, in a fictional though plausible mosaic accounting for something that, in fact, actually happened to actual people. Liberation for them did not mean freedom, as they were relocated as "indentured labourers" (a more politically acceptable term for 'slaves') in other European possessions in the Southern world (Samuelson 2013: 9-11 and 2014: 36-37; Hofmeyr 2007). The maternal lineage reported in the register evokes images of possible historical roots, of home and protection, of community, of oral cultural heritage. In short, these lines (re)create what was once a system, a network of relations, an articulated world – disrupted by the dominant historical narrative – stemming from the specificity of each individual:

> 346 Salome. Age 4. Stature 3-4
> Mother's name Touamouyoo
> My mother's name
> grows like the roots
> of a black tree
>
> My mother's name
> is a house whose roof
> reaches over me
>
> I open my mouth and she is a village
> of words that buzz.
> [...]
>
> 353 Female Tomasine. Age 5. Stature 3-4
> Mother's name Lorratia
> Several scars on left side of chest
> This tooth is loose.
> My mother says,
> late tooth, long life.
> Mistah Gebat says
> eat, get big.
> [...]
>
> 363 Male Onesiphon. Age 24. Stature 5-4½
> Mother's name Yawah Teka
> Open wide, my mother's name
> hides in my throat. Push your tongue

back, my mother's name is wide [...]
(Christiansë 2009: 83, 85, 87).

Poetry picks the tales dismissed by historians, who colluded in the general amnesia affecting those exiled from the records, the many native and enslaved women and their children. For these poets the sea stands for a complex and open archive. Besides its materiality and its role in the slave routes, it evokes the obscurity in which unrecorded narrations drowned and the fluctuating movement with which mainstream culture shapes women's identities and assigns them meanings according to its current needs. Among other art forms, poetry seeks to restore their complexity in order to shield them from manipulations and biased readings.

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