



Article

The Dream Denied: Elizabeth Alexander's Poem "The Venus Hottentot" through A Philanthropic Framework

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to reveal discursive ways through which racial objectification, gendered exploitation, and institutional negotiation are intertextually woven in and through Elizabeth Alexander's (1990) seminal poem The Venus Hottentot via a Philanthropic Framework. In particular, the study examines how poetic strategies deployed by Alexander reappropriate the silenced voice of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman whose body was publicly exploited in 19th century Europe, and whether elite institutions influenced on the construction and dissemination of Afro-American cultural narratives. Building upon cultural capital (Bourdieu), cultural hegemony (Gramsci), and philanthropic pluralism (Roelofs), the paper contends that despite Alexander's poem's challenge to hegemonic narratives, its institutional endorsement paradoxically threatens to depoliticize its radical intervention. The poem helps redefine Afro-American agency, feminist poetics, and postcolonial memory all at once, while at the same time pointing out how contemporary philanthropy continues to function as a mediator between cultural production, and thus as a mediator of power. The analysis highlights the conflict between artistic opposition and elite patronage and thus encourages a more politicized attitude towards the politics of institutional distinction in the literary field.

Keywords: Afro-American Identity, Racial Objectification, Gendered Violence, Philanthropy, Cultural Hegemony.

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Introduction

Elizabeth Alexander is one of the most important contemporary African American poets. Her work represents a sustained engagement with the nuances of Black identity, memory, gender, and social justice, primarily through the resurrection of suppressed voices of history. Alexander's poetic contributions are inherited from a long tradition of Afro-American literary expression, the Harlem Renaissance and Black feminist poetics, that sees in literature a form of aesthetic production and resistance (Hughes & Drake Brown, p:20). Her poetry reckons with the enduring legacies of racism and colonialism presenting complex depictions of Black life and the dominant narratives about it. Alexander's (1990) poem *The Venus Hottentot* is especially significant as a poem that explores the historical and racial objectification of Black women through the narrative of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman displayed in 19th-century Europe under the insulting name "*Hottentot Venus*" (Alexander 19).

The poem dramatically demonstrates how racism and racial objectification work across time and around the globe. Giving Baartman a voice, Alexander challenges how Western scientific, cultural, and philanthropic institutions have long fetishized Black bodies, and Black women's bodies as objects of edification, charity, and scientific interest (Collins, 2000; Gilman, 1985). The poem compels readers to confront the rhetoric of progress, and charity frequently cloaks enduring structures of inequality. The work is not an ode to injustices of the past, but a critique rooted in the work that has been done and continues to be done to keep any racial hierarchy alive in cultural production.

In this article, the authors apply the Philanthropic Framework, as articulated by Roelofs (2003), Bourdieu (1996), and Gramsci (1971), to discuss how hegemonic systems of elite cultural power continue to police Black representation. The Framework of Philanthropy reveals that far from being ideologically neutral, philanthropy is a key site of reproducing hegemonic values (Roelofs, p 74)—and even under the banner of altruism. Organizations and cultural institutions financed by high-level donors have shaped what narratives about race and identity are visible and which ones are marginalized (Roelofs, 2003; Ebrahim, 2019). By situating Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* in this environment, the present paper probes how the representation of Black identity, even in progressivist, resistant art, is potentially susceptible to being commanded, co-opted, or depoliticized by philanthropy that defangs its political and social critique in favor of maintaining the status quo of social elites.

The study therefore posits that *The Venus Hottentot* is recuperative of a historically muted voice that is also complementary of a cultural environment

epistemically influenced by philanthropist mediation. The poem turns the site of that tension, between radical critique and the institutional forces carrying the critique out into circulation, into its own space. This dynamic is critical to understanding how systemic oppression still shapes the matter and reception of Afro-American literary output in the early 21st century.

The race for what some blacks have called the black ghetto lottery has led to the complicated intersection of philanthropy, power, and cultural production as a key site for how Afro-American identity has been depicted in literature and public life. Although philanthropy would like to imagine itself as ideologically neutral or merely well-meaning, it has, in fact, for centuries been a system of power through which elites, the wealthiest families and corporations, shape how we remember, understand culture and institutions, and view our social worlds. Using the Philanthropic Framework derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1996), Antonio Gramsci (1971), and Joan Roelofs (2003), the present paper seeks to reveal how philanthropic organizations both support and maintain structures of hegemony while seeming to support progressive cultural production.

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power provide a basis for understanding how elite power is articulated through financial capital and influences cultural institutions and practices (Bourdieu, p. 88). They include art, literature, and education as the principal fields in which dominant ideology is naturalized and perpetuated as "taste" or "excellence." This perspective is grounded in their broader critique of Bourdieu's "economic reductionism" (p.89). In this, philanthropic foundations often become gatekeepers who decide what kinds of culture are valued and desired to be uplifted and funded. In and through their investments, they produce what Bourdieu refers to as "legitimate culture" (Bourdieu, p.228).

Antonio Gramsci's model of cultural hegemony also adds insight into this process. For Gramsci, coercion is not the only means through which the ruling class sustains domination; it also achieves it through the acquisition of consent constructed in cultural institutions, producing a "common sense" favorable to its interests (Gramsci, p.123). Philanthropy is central in this, funding much of the production of the narratives that support the neoliberal, race-based, gender-based, and marginalized contributions, which can support a more radical attack. In such a context, the financing of Afro-American culture may paralyze it, no matter how "emancipated" those it seeks to finance may seem.

Extending the thoughts of Bourdieu and Gramsci, Joan Roelofs (2003) provides a blistering attack on contemporary philanthropy in her *Foundations and Public Policy*. Roelofs argues that because elite control of these foundations is equivalent to

state control and integration, these large-scale philanthropic foundations, despite being formally non-governmental, are ideological centers of power. They shape public education, cultural policy, and the arts, ultimately validating the existing order of power (Roelofs, p. 147). This shows that funders frequently encourage clean versions of justice in their investments in “pluralistic” or “post-racial” fictions, which avoid structural analyses of racism, capitalism, or imperialism. So, even literature and art that challenge oppression can be strategically disseminated in controlled contexts.

Philanthropy immensely impacts how a society remembers its history, whose traumas are recognized, and whose identities are celebrated (Giridharadas, p. 12). In Afro-American history, the history of the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and continuing systemic racism is re-visioned in culturally focused, philanthropically supported spaces to promote neoliberal “resilient” and harmonious individuals and hide any deep structural racial disparities (Hammack & Pilecki, p. 25).

Museums, literature programs, and public remembrances represent significant sources of investment by philanthropic actors in constructing memory. As Ebrahim (p.37) contends, “on one hand industry philanthropy acts as a selective ‘filter’” of the types of cultural expression encouraged to filter into public consciousness. In this way, black stories of resisting, struggling, and continuing to be opened to forced re-reads that emphasize reconciliation and cultural pluralism rather than structural change (Ebrahim, p.78).

This dynamic is particularly applicable in the case of Elizabeth Alexander’s *The Venus Hottentot*. The poem’s resuscitation of Saartjie Baartman’s voice, resistant at its core, is also rooted in a charitable cultural industry that reduces the suffering of Black people into a consumable liberal product (Ramey, p 201). In this light, the poem is a form not just of individual liberation, but a work against the grain of an infrastructural cultural regulation. Philanthropic mediation molds Black identity’s representation, interpretation, and reception in the literary sphere. Art that deals with racial trauma and oppression is typically recuperated within discourses of multicultural tolerance that defuse its political urgency (Ahmed, p.68). As such, depictions of Black identity are depoliticized: scooped up from the register of justice and served as benign cultural diversity.

This is particularly important for a piece such as Alexander’s *The Venus Hottentot* that addresses the historical objectification of Black women. As Ahmed (2012) observes, these discourses frequently work as a “non-performative”, a promissory rhetoric of inclusion that effectively becomes cosmetic, as if by invoking the term, social systems, and practices of racism and othering were immediately problematized and agitated. (p.50) Throughout many philanthropic cultural spaces,

Black art would be celebrated in ways that obscure the stubbornness of white supremacy.

Moreover, Alexander's poem is working in this double bind. The Venus Hottentot is critical about both the scientific racism and sexual exploitation of Baartman; however, its movement through an elite-funded literary terrain leads to questions about how radical Afro-American voices are incorporated into serving systems that feed cultural hegemony. The Philanthropic framework thus makes it possible for us to ask this question of these dynamics, clarifying how the politics of funding determine what sort of Black identity, and what sort of critique of oppression, is made visible or invisible in our cultural moment.

Discussion

Critical Interpretation and Contextual Analysis

Elizabeth Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* (1990) is an important intervention in the literary and cultural re-imagining of one of the most grotesquely exploited figures in colonialist history, Saartjie Baartman. Born in the late eighteenth century in what is today South Africa, Baartman, derogatorily dubbed the "*Hottentot Venus*," such was her objectification among European audiences, was exhibited in London and Paris in the early nineteenth century as a spectacle of racial and sexual "difference" (Holmes, p.36). In her poem, Alexander protests the colonial objectification of Black female bodies and reveals the systemic violence that objectified Baartman, transforming her into a symbol of slavery and silence.

In Baartman, we are offered a powerful symbol of colonial objecthood; a body that has been constructed, exhibited, and cut up by the force of white, patriarchal scientific racism. In Part I of the poem, narrated by Georges Cuvier, the anatomist who dissected Baartman after her death, we get the distant, professional eye of European "science":

*Her genitalia
will float inside a labeled
pickling jar in the Musée
de l'Homme on a shelf
above Broca's brain: (lines 23-28)*

Here, Baartman's humanity is erased: her body becomes an object of curiosity; her sexual organs are available for perusal. At this moment in Euro-American cultures, "*the medicalization of difference*" (Gilman, p.108) erodes Black women as a dehumanizing gaze fetishizes their bodies in scientific rhetoric. In preserving the grotesque, Cuvier and his colleagues sought to "demonstrate" the inferiority of

African women, correlating bodily formations to moral and intellectual defects (Qureshi, p 25).

Alexander's decision to let Baartman speak for herself in Part II of the poem constitutes a radical re-centering of the narrative. Baartman takes on the objectification of her body directly:

*I am a black cutout against
a captive blue sky, pivoting
nude, so the paying audience
can view my naked buttocks (lines 5-8)*

These lines emphasize the performative violence that is done to her. Depersonalized, Baartman's body is reduced to a place of public consumption, spectacle as molded by colonial voyeurism. They are also that West African bitches are "running rampant" (McClintock, p.74), which we understand as them being 'sexually available'; this sexual display of Black women was fundamental to the imperial enterprise's narrative that non-European women are 'exotic', 'hypersexual' and "available (p.42). Alexander's images are clear about the violence of this dance.

Importantly, Baartman's objectification is described in both racial and gendered terms. Whether or not her body is "muscle, bone, or fat?" (line 36), a monstrous retort to the colonialist, pseudo-scientific nurturing of "excess" female Blackness (Gilman, p 74). This reflects Spillers' account of the historical "ungendering" of Black women, not receiving the humanizing attention proper to the fair sex but apprehended as primitive and animalistic. (p.22) Baartman's nude display is the embodiment of this human degradation.

However, Alexander's Baartman is not a passive one. She fights against being treated as just a body. She asserts her intellect:

*I speak English. I speak Dutch. I speak
a little French as well, and
languages Monsieur Cuvier
will never know have names (lines 59-63)*

The language assumes its form of agency, a taking back of the identity denied her. Baartman's multilingual voice contests the European story of African weakness and exposes readers to the high cultural information colonialism attempted to destroy. This claim to expressiveness is in concert with bell hooks' call for Black women's

“talking back” as a form of both Black feminist resistance and the reclaiming of the silence forced upon Black women. (p.36)

Even dehumanized, Baartman has an intricate inner life. She dreams of her daughters “in banana skirts / and ostrich-feather fans” (lines 91-92) and re-enacts:

“Since my genitals are public/I have made other parts private.” (lines 95-96)

In this powerful passage, Alexander shows how Baartman dominates her mind and voice as her body is exploited. As elaborated by Hartman in her “Scenes of Subjection”, the interior self becomes a place of resistance when the body is publicly violated. This self-privatization is a mechanism for survival, an insistence on humanity in the face of objectification. (p.39)

Moreover, Baartman imagines flipping the power dynamic:

If he were to let me rise up

from this table, I would spirit

his knives and cut out his black heart,

seal it with science fluid inside

a bell jar, place it on a low

shelf in a white man’s museum (lines 112-117)

In this fantasy of revenge, Alexander finds the psychological violence of objectification and its lasting repercussions laid bare. Baartman imagines the white patriarchal heart preserved, both literally and metaphorically, as a relic of cruelty. This would represent the most radical reversal of colonial objectification: Not a specimen, but the curator, revealing the deformity of white supremacist “science.”

So, with *The Venus Hottentot*, Alexander turns Baartman into a metaphor for the colonial objectification of the other and, simultaneously, gives her back her voice and dignity. The poem dissects the systematized mechanisms with which Black women’s bodies were, and continue to be, fetishized under Western culture. As Willis & Williams suggest, the legacy of Baartman, in the media fetishization of Black women’s bodies, continues to this day. Alexander’s art, despite taking a page as it were, in poetic counter-narrative to this incessant exploitation, allows us to hear the voice of a resistance, deeply human beneath degradation (p.88)

The double tone is one of the most remarkable features of the poem. Georges Cuvier, the French anatomist who had dissected Baartman’s corpse, intones their first segment, which is cold and clinical: “*Science, science, science! / All is beautiful, blown up / under my glass*” (lines 1–3).

Here, Cuvier’s false objectivity renders Baartman a specimen, thinking of her as little more than “cranial measurements” and “genitalia,” which are to be sorted and shelved in the Musée de l’Homme (lines 21–27). This is the subjugation of the Black

female voice: Baartman silenced in death, her body dissected to reinforce European racial myths (Qureshi, p 88).

The second part introduces a jarring new perspective: It is Baartman herself speaking, in a performance of cosmic force from Vinson, who embodies a woman whose body was commodified, and others' desires defined the existence to an extent that animals were not. Moreover, she remembers the lies that took her to Europe: "I left Capetown with a promise / of profit: half the takings / and my fare home: A prize!" (lines 11.18–21). So, Alexander retrieves agency from Baartman; she argues that Baartman's consent was bought at the cost of colonized infrastructure (here in the same vein that McClintock and Hartman explore how colonial "contracts" fortified racialized, gendered exploitation). (p.102)

Baartman's voice is deeply ironic and intelligent. She censures her objectification: "*I am a black cutout against / a hostage sky, revolving / nude for the paying audience / to see my unattended ass*" (lines 5–8). This act of performance highlights Spillers' (1987) assertion that the Middle Passage and slavery effectively rendered Black women devoid of subjectivity, reducing their bodies to commodities. The pivoting body of someone nude and alive is a haunting image, of victimhood as much as agency. Baartman is alive yet caged in a spectacle meant to silence her inner life.

Alexander brilliantly reveals how colonial science and popular culture disguised the commodification of Black women's bodies through discourses of curiosity, "education," and scientific advancement. Cuvier has the smug mien of a paterfamilias: "*Delightful facts are ready for me. / Small things in this small world are my*" (Alexander, p 69). This is an example of what Roelofs (p.23) refers to as the ideological role of philanthropy and science: developing public rationales for systems of oppression (p.30) Though she was herself subjected to this cruelty, Baartman's commodification was dismissed as not cruelty but a product of "knowledge," as having a benevolent result following what Said refers to as the "civilizing mission" of European Imperialism (p.147)

Baartman's commodification is not limited to the laboratory. She is a public oddity in London's circuses: "*London's / circuses are showy and festering, / crawling with cabbage-scented / citizens who gawp and ask, / 'Is it muscle? Bone? or fat?'*" "*And Alexander wept to see the breadth of his domain.*" (lines 40–44) In Alexander's narration, it is the grotesque hunger of the white gaze, which to Yancy is a "racializing look" (p.87), which reduces the Black body to an object for white consumption. Baartman is exhibited next to "*The Sapient Pig and singing mice*" (lines 46–57), selling her even

further short; she is an exhibit in a freak show, a sideshow attraction, objectified for the entertainment of the masses.

According to Trouille, even Cuvier's dissection is a performance: "*Monsieur Cuvier explores / between my legs poking / probing sure of his thesis*" (lines 74–76). Gilman and Schiebinger detail how this kind of anatomical "research" was mobilized to pathologize African women's bodies. This history lives on in the social imaginary through media stereotypes of Black female sexuality (p.147). Baartman wittily remarks that Cuvier "*complains / of my scent and does not believe / I understand*" (lines 80–82), a bitter revelation of the scientist's ignorance and objectification.

Alexander also provides Baartman with moments of resistance. She states that: "Because my private parts are public / I have made other parts private." (lines 95–98). In this claim, Alexander parallels Hartman's concept of the enslaved person's "inner life" as resistant (p.25). Baartman elaborates that through her inner voice, she creates a realm of agency; her body is still a commodity, but her mind is not.

In the end, Baartman fantasizes about revenge: "*if he let me rise / from the table, I would spirit / his knives and cut out his /black heart, seal it with science/fluid in a bell jar*" (lines 112–116). Reversing the logic of the science of Cuvier, Baartman imagines him as the object of inspection, his heart revealed as "geometric, deformed, unnatural" (line 118). This fantasy of revenge reads Western science's pseudo-benignity as a technology of dehumanization. Finally, Alexander's poem situates Baartman's repossessed voice against the silencing of colonial science and spectacle. It reveals a body's commodification of the black feminine form, everything right under the shield of curiosity, and even philanthropy, while reminding us that Baartman is, and remains, human. Contemporary criticisms of media and scientific racism, such as those by Willis, Williams, and Nelson, demonstrate that these dynamics are no less relevant today. Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* is an elegy and a manifesto; two forms that do not let the historical commodification of Black women's bodies pass unchallenged.

The investment of philanthropic and elite institutions in reimagining Afro-American cultural reproduction is a two-edged sword, providing visibility and containment. Although these institutions historically have served to present resources, space, and validation for Black artists, they have also moderated, rebranded, and even depoliticized militant Afro-American voices. However, while fiercely critical of colonial and racial violence, a book like Elizabeth Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* maneuvers within that tension: lionized in academic and literary communities, but vulnerable to institutional co-optation. The following section investigates how they

apply and function in Alexander's project using Bourdieu's cultural capital, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and Roelofs' philanthropic pluralism to elucidate these dynamics.

Theoretical Applications: Philanthropy, Hegemony, and Cultural Capital

Elizabeth Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* (1990) is an incendiary book of African American poetry, a halting and incantatory lamentation about race and sexual exploitation: Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman, is displayed as a "difference" by European men in 19th-century freak shows. However, as the poem recovers Baartman's voice and agency, it raises critical questions about how the elite and philanthropic entities mediate African American voices. Such mediation determines how these voices are heard, received, and disseminated. As Bourdieu (1996) demonstrates, cultural fields operate through power structures that legitimize voices as "legitimate culture" (p.74). Roelofs elaborates that, as ideological gatekeepers, philanthropic groups and foundations (through decisions about which proposals to fund and which institution to sponsor) do the work of amplifying or silencing/reframing certain narratives (p.93)

Today, Alexander's poems are primarily taught in major U.S. universities, printed in leading anthologies, and assisted by organizations frequently endowed by philanthropic foundations (Hughes, p 14). Although such support from the academy and influential presses has given the poem its 'place' and some of the dimensions of 'recognition', it also exemplifies how Afro-American literature is produced and received through the mediation of elite institutions. The danger is that mediation re-makes works of radical critique into something digestible that can be made to fit with institutional aspirations to multicultural and diverse spaces, while giving us systemic racism" (Ahmed, p. 102).

There is also a scathing take on the performative nature of such spectacles in public entertainment venues within the poem:

*London's
circuses are florid and filthy,
swarming with cabbage-smelling
citizens who stare and query,
'Is it muscle? Bone? or fat? (lines 40–44).*

Baartman's subjection is commoditized and consumed by the public, first through the circus, then by museums and academics. Likewise, by grounding *The Venus Hottentot* in the institution, the episode runs the risk of re-commodifying Baartman's narrative as something for academia (rather than the site of radical

critique) to consume, a multicultural object of desire rather than a weapon of critique (Said, 1978; Roelofs, 2003).

Bourdieu's symbolic power can help to make sense of this: cultural capital is not neutral but is inflected by the forces of institutional power. These forces often decide which Black voices are heard, and which are left out of the conversation or marginalized (Bourdieu, p 69). The institutions that now honor Alexander's poem are implicated in a long history of elite control of the representation of Black suffering, offering the contrast as a treatment for White guilt. As Roelofs believes, major foundations in the U.S. have long endorsed politically neutered approaches to social justice, those that valorize personal strength and cultural pluralism at the expense of wider sorties into systemic critique of capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy (p.89)

Even as Alexander gives Baartman a sense of agency, the poem does not elide the challenges of breaking free from controlling institutional forces:

*In my silence, I possess
mouth, larynx, and brain, in a single
gesture (lines 95–99).*

This act of interior resistance parallels the problem that faces the Afro-American writer today: of asserting intellectual and political agency inside a system that is always trying to situate, interpret, and finally co-exist with their voices (Hartman, p.55).

The final vision of Baartman's spirit-sent revenge on Cuvier is a damning indictment not only of one man, but of the entire institutional machinery that made a trade out of the black, female form:

*If he were to let me rise up
from this table, I would spirit
his knives and cut out his black heart,
seal it with science fluid inside
a bell jar (lines 112–116).*

This fantasy unearths the extreme violence that institutional power visits, and the rage that its violence inspires. However, this anger is precisely the one that the literary establishment tends to work to neutralize in Afro-American literature, making radical protest into manageable art (Giridharadas, p 19).

Although philanthropic and elite institutions have helped drive The Venus Hottentot to its current prominence, they also mediate its reception, notably deciding how Afro-American voices will be heard. The poem is an incisive critique of this

process, an important reminder that institutional celebration of Black art is not always synonymous with liberation.

Among the many paradoxes of the reception of *The Venus Hottentot* by Elizabeth Alexander are the conflicting tendencies of its institutional success. A poem that aimed blisteringly to critique contemporary colonial scientific racism and to call out the grotesque objectification of the Black female body is now canonized by the very institutions responsible for the distribution of the kinds of power it condemns (Hughes, p. 78). Such a paradox is key to understanding how philanthropic and academic patronage functions in culture.

As Bourdieu suggests, the cultural field is based on accumulating “symbolic capital” (p.147), where institutions legitimize certain types of cultural production and marginalize others. In this respect, the fact that *The Venus Hottentot* enjoys extensive circulation in universities, museums, and philanthropic literary programs is, arguably, a testament to the fact that the work has been firmly placed as “acceptable” dissent, a challenging but not threatening work that can serve as “an apparatus” that in point of fact “enhance[s]” our image of cultural progressiveness without “fundamentally attacking” institutional formations (Ahmed, p. 19).

Moreover, its historical subject matter, the 19th-century exploitation of Saartjie Baartman, could potentially be positioned as a distant history rather than an indictment of present systems of racial and gendered violence. This framing enables institutions to use the poem to signal that they are not prejudiced and have the right attitudes, even if they choose not to think about the deeper and current forms of structural inequality (Giridharadas, p. 201).

The strength of Alexander’s poem rests on its multi-pronged critique of individual and institutional violence. The speaker’s detailed account of her performances in London circuses, with animals and other “curiosities,” foregrounds the intersection of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. As the poem gets absorbed into elite anthologies and syllabi, frequently without enough robust contextualization of continuing institutional complicity, its radical edge might grow blunted. This demonstrates how power works, in the Gramscian sense of passive revolution, absorbing and neutralizing the other.

Related closely to this paradox is the larger risk of depoliticizing radical Black voices through elite sponsorship. As Roelofs and Ahmed have shown, philanthropies may fund cultural production that reflects or reinforces institutional interests that parade as nebulous cultural expression and celebration of “diversity” but do not require systemic critique. Any Afro-American literature that is too direct in confronting capitalism, colonialism, or white supremacy is likely to have difficulty

obtaining institutional support unless the message is heteroglossic in a manner that makes it accessible to mainstream readers.

This danger is evident in how Alexander's poem is packaged. The poet is not simply redreaming a tragic historical figure's voice; she is building the inner life of Baartman in blazing irony and simmering anger. The narrator's musings on her diminishing body and sardonic observations of European spectators and scientists resonate as her resistance to passive victimization. The expression "*I get enough to have a coffee at last*". (Alexander, p 58) This is a critique of colonial promises of economic empowerment, while it exposes the extraction-based nature of racial capitalism.

In academic or literature festivals or spaces that philanthropic interlocutors fund, this kind of work of criticism can be nudged to the side in favor of something that positions itself as resilient or multicultural or what have you (Hooks, p 73). With sponsorship comes a peculiar move to foreground the victory of the Black voice instead of the systemic critique in which that voice is built. According to Giridharadas, elite institutions prefer narratives that support their hollow brand of corporatized progressivism, and therefore dismiss structural injustice (p.46)

Furthermore, the endorsement of Afro-American voices is frequently conditional. According to Ahmed, voices that condemn racism in acceptable terms, that do not threaten dominant liberal norms, may be elevated. In contrast, those that denounce capitalism, empire, or philanthropy may be silenced (p.89). There is a richness to Alexander's poem, in that it subtly criticizes the intersecting violences of race, gender, and class, that in philanthropic contexts, there is a risk its most radical elements will be flattened down.

One of the most remarkable accomplishments of Elizabeth Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* (1990) is its ability to challenge and thwart hegemonic colonial narratives on the level of poetic structure, voice, and intertextual counter-history. The poem enacts a different memorialization of Saartjie Baartman, reclaiming her and her natural agency from the European discourse. Through the deployment of layered poetic strategies, Alexander criticizes this intersectional collusion of race, gender, and colonial violence, also providing a personal history that unsettles normalized historiography. Alexander's principal form of resistance is her voice. In a work of radical historical revisionism, Baartman is a silent figure for the most part, seen but not heard. Alexander writes in a first-person persona, allowing Baartman to speak in her voice. In so doing, the novel destabilizes colonial and scientific discourse by returning to the subject's experience. As Hughes notes, the adoption of such an

approach is consistent with a Black feminist poetics which opposes the quieting of voices through bodies to assert language (p.34)

Alexander also employs ironic cross-cutting to reveal colonial hypocrisies. For example, when Baartman observes:

"The Ball of Duchess DuBarry":

In the engraving, I lurch

toward the belles' dames, mad-eyed, and

they swoon. Men in capes and pince-nez

shield them. Tassels dance at my hips (lines 87–91).

Here, Alexander juxtaposes Baartman's hyper-visibility with her concomitant objectification: the object of both desire and fear, she is marginalized all the same. The coquettish allusion to "belles dames" and "duchess balls" mocks the high society set that got rich off her exploitation while putting on airs of aristocratic propriety. As hooks contends, this literary irony refutes the essentialist dichotomies commonly rooted in portrayals of Black women (p.109). In addition to changing attitudes, Alexander disrupts the story's linearity, shifting between public display, inner reflection, fantasy, revenge, and passive resistance. This fragmentary shape also disrupts historiography proper, corresponding to what Hartman calls "critical fabulation", a way of writing which resists colonial archives' erasures. (p.30)

Alexander's poem is a stark instance of intersectional critique, underlining how the intersection of race, gender and imperial violence produced Baartman's exploitation. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) groundbreaking work on intersectionality provides the theoretical underpinning for understanding how multiple systems affect and interact, resulting in unique oppression for women of color.

In *The Venus Hottentot*, Baartman is objectified not just for being a woman or for being black, but for being both, at the intersection of an ideology with deep colonial roots. Her racialized body is hypersexualized, medicalized, and commodified. This is the multitier violence of which she is speaking when she says:

Monsieur Cuvier investigates

between my legs, poking, prodding,

Sure, of his hypothesis (lines 74–76).

This is not a neutral scientific act but a violation of white patriarchal power over the black female body, transforming her into an object of European desires and control (Gilman, p 19). Baartman, we are led to believe, finds herself isolated within the circus

sideshow, among animals and freaks, and, as an object of the imperial hierarchies of race and gender, is dehumanized. (Spillers, p. 208),

Alexander's refusal to represent Baartman's trauma within a single frame speaks to the complexity of intersectional lived experience. The speaker's tone varies from ironic to bitter, to nostalgic, to defiant, an emotional breadth that undermines simplistic depictions of victimhood. This layered subjectivity asks the reader to look towards the fullness of Baartman's humanness, a life hidden in colonial taxonomies.

What may be most subversive about Alexander's poem is its role as counter-history. Through giving Baartman her voice, her dreams, memories, disappointments, the poem rewrites the history that tells her story for her, making her an independent, speaking subject. This is an instance of what Trouillot refers to as "silencing the past", which Alexander resists by filling in the interior life of Baartman. (p.41)

As Baartman contemplates her initial aspirations:

I left Cape Town with a promise

of revenue: half the profits

and my passage home: A boon! (lines 18–21).

She uncovers trumped-up contracts and breached promises behind colonial exploitation, a motif accompanied by Hartman in her discussion of the legacy of slavery. (p.72). This personal narrative disrupts the myth of voluntary participation and suggests instead a vision of coercion couched in "opportunity."

In Alexander's counter-history, Baartman's cultural memory is even more deeply restored:

I have not forgotten my Xhosa

clicks. My flexible tongue

and a healthy mouth bewilder

this man with his rotting teeth (lines 106–109).

In this cultural act of remembrance, Alexander refuses the totalizing erasure of Baartman's identity. Baartman maintains knowledge and linguistic richness that are beyond the understanding of her captors, a narrow but powerful act of survival and resistance. In deploying these personal narrative techniques, Alexander also provides a practical critical analysis of the colonial historiography. Instead of depicting Baartman as a faceless cause or curiosity, the poem redeploys her agency and desiring, her very voice, which confronts historical documents as well as the historical moment in which we sit, the fallout of imperial trauma, by demanding that that voice be heard.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* is an indispensable space for investigating the entanglements of race, gender, and power in cultural production, especially from the Philanthropic Framework of Bourdieu, Gramsci, and Roelofs (2003). The poem is not only a reclamation of Saartjie Baartman's legacy, but also a scathingly critical site for examination of the way institutional forces, scientific, academic, and philanthropic, shape, contain, and commodify Afro-American voices.

The Philanthropic Framework helps to highlight some of the more central dynamics. First, it shows how institutions mediate stories of culture, whose works are elevated, and how they are framed for public consumption. If Alexander's poem criticizes the racist and patriarchal work of European science and spectacle, its institutional success, academically, literarily, and philanthropically, confirms Bourdieu's insistence that even radical art can be reintegrated into dominant culture, typically in ways that weaken its transformative capacity. Additionally, Roelofs invites us to consider how the philanthropic valorization of diversity can reproduce elite articulations of pluralism without challenging deeper orderings of race and class.

Second, Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* is paramount for the continual reconstruction of Afro-American identity in today's literature. By granting Baartman a voice and interiority, the poem contributes to a lengthy tradition of Black feminist and Afro-diasporic poetics that refuses erasure and objectification (Hughes, p 55). Alexander builds on this tradition of writing, but by center-staging race, gender, and colonial trauma, gives us a narration that rejects the binary of victim and presents a layered, resistant subjectivity. In the process, the poem destabilizes prevailing histories and insists on the humanity of Black women whose voices were deemed unspeakable.

Finally, the present study has broader implications for how we think about the contemporary role of philanthropy in cultural production. Although institutional support brings necessary visibility and resources to marginalized voices, it subtly shapes which stories are appropriate, marketable, and fundable (Giridharadas, p 28). Alexander's poem both exemplifies and provides a set of limitations for such institutional contexts: while its reach may be broad, and its entry into public discourse historically significant, its radical critique of institutionalized racism can be dulled or defanged within philanthropic contexts that prioritize "diversity" over systemic transformation.

In the long run, *The Venus Hottentot* enhances Afro-American literary traditions and works as a case study in which philanthropy has mediated what one calls culture. For academics, activists, and even artists, this twined reality demands an ongoing critical reflection on how cultural political institutions structure black voices' visibility and political efficacy. In the future, it is crucial that voices like this remain,

in another sense, “radical” and that they do not become just symbols of Establishment liberal advance.

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