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Looking at the Other/Seeing the Self: Embodied Performance and Encounter in Brett Bailey's Exhibit B and Nineteenth-Century Ethnographic Displays.

Lara Atkin

Representation, Race and Narrativizing Colonial History: The Exhibit B Controversy

On 23 September 2014 the South African director Brett Bailey found himself in the eye of a media storm over the cancellation of the planned performance of his work *Exhibit B* by The Barbican at The Vaults in London. The thirteen tableaux vivants of *Exhibit B* each represented a different moment in the history of European relations with Africans between the seventeenth century and the present. Media attention focused upon the aesthetics of the piece, criticizing Bailey's use of ethnographic display, a genre of nineteenth-century popular entertainment in which indigenous actors from throughout the colonies performed dances and rituals deemed representative of their cultures at various European metropolitan centers. These were carefully curated affairs in which the costumes and props the performers were surrounded by highly coded messages about the inferiority of non-Europeans to Europeans. Whether deliberately or as a result of the linguistic barriers separating audience from performer, the actors in these shows were necessarily silent—embodying the image of the primitive Other. It is Bailey's use of the ethnographic display to stage a history of the violent domination and subjugation of black Africans at the hands of white Europeans that proved so controversial.

Despite having been performed at eleven cities across the world before its London run, including Grahamstown, in its earlier incarnation as *Exhibit A*, Bailey admitted: "It [had] never

before been a lightning conductor for outrage as it [was] in London.”¹ Protesters gathered outside the venue on the show’s opening night in response to an online petition signed by over 25,000 people objecting to what they viewed as Bailey’s replication of racist representations of black Africans. An open letter published on the petition’s website summarized the key objections which coalesced into two arguments. Firstly, that the performance reinforced the objectification of the black body, which the protestors argued is a “standard trope of mainstream popular culture, demonstrating how it is the root of how White populations understand their relationship to Black people.” Secondly, that it “reproduces the idea that Black people are passive agents, who are used as conduits for White audiences to speak to each other.”² In this analysis, Exhibit B reinscribes the racism it aims to critique by objectifying the actors to enable the display and exorcism of the liberal guilt of an assumed white audience.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that one of the tableaux in Bailey’s piece that provoked the most negative commentary was a representation of a naked Saartjie Baartman—better known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’—rotating on a plinth and enclosed in a glass display cabinet. This tableau gestured towards an aspect of nineteenth-century ethnographic displays that has been the subject of much critical comment: the role they played in disseminating scientifically-inflected racialized thinking by producing an antithetical relationship between black performer and white audience through the meanings inscribed upon the black body. Much of this scholarship has focused on the life and afterlife Saartjie Baartman, who performed as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ between 1810 and 1815, becoming the first ethnographic performer to reach mass audiences.³ Sander L. Gilman’s influential consideration of the pathologization of black female sexuality in western culture locates

Correspondence to: Lara Atkin, School of English and Drama, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, United Kingdom. Email: l.e.atkin@qmul.ac.uk

¹ Brett Bailey, quoted in Staff Reporter, “Brett Bailey: The Intention of Exhibit B was never hatred,” *Mail & Guardian*, 27 September 2014, online.

² “Open letter to Nicholas Kenyon from Dr. Kehinde Andrews and Others,” online.

³ There is a substantial body of literature covering Baartman’s time in Europe as the ‘Hottentot Venus’. See, for example, Blanchard and Boëtsch, “The Hottentot Venus: Birth of a ‘Freak’ (1815)”; Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman, The ‘Hottentot Venus’”; Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter?”; and Strother “Display of the Body Hottentot.”

the origin of this representational mode in medical accounts of the genitalia of Saartjie Baartman, accounts which had their genesis in the autopsies performed by de Blainville following her death in Paris in 1815, and by Cuvier in 1817. Gilman writes that: “The nineteenth century perceived the black female as possessing not only a ‘primitive’ sexual appetite, but also the external signs of this temperament, ‘primitive’ genitalia.”⁴ Gilman links the interest in Baartman’s alleged anatomical abnormalities to socio-evolutionist discourses, arguing that the pathologization of Baartman’s extended labia and steatopygia served the psychological function of asserting the white man’s control through a mastery over black, female sexuality.⁵

The connection drawn by Gilman between the meanings encoded in Baartman’s performance as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ and textual representations of black African women in medical works indicates how, as Diana Taylor has argued, performance is a means of transfer. Taylor argues that from the first moment of colonial encounter “racialized identities sprang from discursive and performance systems of presentation and representation.”⁶ In other words, in the moment of intercultural encounter non-European bodies were interpreted by Europeans as the embodiment of a racial discourse already codified in both textual representations of non-Europeans and previous intercultural encounters. Taylor has argued that indigenous cultural practices were consequently dismissed by Europeans on two levels. Firstly, indigenous knowledge was denied the status as an episteme and as a result the “content” of indigenous cultural practices were frequently dismissed as “idolatrous or primitive.”⁷ In the case of ethnographic displays, textual representation in the form of lectures on the customs and manners of the peoples displayed combined with the performance by the actors of allegedly primitive customs and behaviors to reproduce a racial

⁴ Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

discourse that had already been widely disseminated through popular ethnological and anthropological texts, travel writing and colonial adventure fiction.

In Exhibit B, Bailey explores the ways in which an understanding of black Africans as the embodiment of a colonial racial discourse which stresses the primitivism of both their bodies and culture has been used time and time again to justify colonial violence. As Bailey commented when describing the show's progenitor, Exhibit A, "what I'm looking at in this work is how Europeans have represented the African body and how these distortions have led to a particular sequence of actions and have legitimized some of these terrible actions."⁸ For example, two tableaux in the exhibit dealt with the response of the German colonial government to the Herero Rebellion of 1904. In one, entitled 'Civilizing the Natives', an Herero woman held in a concentration camp is forced to polish the skulls of murdered relatives to prepare them to be sent back to Germany for anthropological study. The tableau inverts the ideology of the 'civilizing mission' by stressing the interrelationship between the anthropological studies used to provide a supposedly empirical basis for the discursive construction of the African as biological inferior to the European, and the genocidal violence performed upon the Hereros and Namibs by the German colonial regime.

The historical narrative created by Bailey in Exhibit B constantly stresses the contrast between the treatment of Africans and the European cultures' self-representation. For example, a tableau representing a slave in an iron mask surrounded by a still life of fruit reminiscent of the paintings of the Dutch Masters immediately signifies the dissonance between the high culture of the 'Dutch Golden Age' and the brutality of the Atlantic Slave Trade, which enriched the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Another scene portrays a Congolese man holding a basket of latex fingers surrounded by an icon of Jesus and a prayer candle. At the program notes explain, this gestures towards the fact that in King Leopold's Belgium Congo "villagers were required to provide... set quotas of ivory and rubber, with a failure to do so resulting in 'murder, rape, mutilations... [and] the

⁸ Kruger, "Gazing at Exhibit A," online.

destruction of villages.”⁹ Through the ironic juxtaposition of the scenery and the actor, the ideology of the ‘civilizing mission’ of the nineteenth century is undercut by the foregrounding of the genocide practiced upon the central African communities. Crucially, the piece also includes a number of installations representing the plight of contemporary African migrants in Europe, including a tableau of a performer strapped to an airplane seat, bound and gagged. Accompanying this is a list of all the people who died on deportation flights in Europe in the past five years, creating an historical narrative that connects the state-sanctioned brutality of contemporary Europe’s asylum and immigration policies to the colonial violence of the past, confronting the audience with their possible complicity with the violence represented.

It is notable from both the reviews of both Exhibit B and my own experience of the show that the dominant emotional registers articulated by white audiences were shame and discomfort, feelings which result from Bailey’s use of one-to-one encounter, a frame-breaking device which dissolves the boundary between actor and audience, positioning the audience within the narrative presented in the exhibit.¹⁰ While this device forces a white viewer to confront his or her own complicity with both the colonial violence of the past and its afterlife in today’s asylum and immigration policies; the inevitable corollary to this is that it forces black spectators and performers to confront the history of their objectification, the systemic denial of their personhood. The accusation that such a confrontation ‘gives offense’ by replicating the dehumanizing representational strategies of colonial racial discourse lay at the heart of the arguments against the show put forward by the protestors involved in the #boycottthehumanzoo campaign.

Part of this accusation stemmed from Bailey’s position as a white South African director of European origin. As Yvette Greslé argued of Exhibit B: “Bailey appears unaware of one of the most critical questions of post-apartheid South Africa: Who speaks, for whom and how? His own

⁹ Bailey, *Third World Bunfight and Edinburgh International Festival*, 4.

¹⁰ Kruger, “Gazing at Exhibit A.”

complicity in this history is absent from his work.”¹¹ This criticism hinges on the premise that Bailey is utilizing the bodies of his performers merely as props in a theatrical project that tells a version of colonial history that is constructed by him, the white director. Because of this, even in a show that is designed to challenge the epistemological basis of colonial narratives, he is replicating the ontology of colonialism by speaking for his black performers, creating a series of characters for them to embody. Furthermore, Greslé highlights an ethical question that has long animated critical discussion of Bailey’s work: can a white South African director present black African culture and historical experience without laying himself open to accusations of voice appropriation? Bailey’s earliest productions, which utilized syncretic performance strategies to represent aspects of AmaXhosa spiritual practices and history, *Ipi Zombi?* (1998, first produced on the Fringe of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 1996 as *Zombie*), *iMumbo Jumbo* (1997), and *The Prophet* (1999) provoked hostile reactions from those, such as Duma Ka Ndlovu, who questioned Bailey’s right to “tell black stories.” This concern was bound up with theoretical discussions concerning the direction South African theater should take post-apartheid. Ndlovu argued that South African theater “must be Afro-centric, it must be first and foremost about black experience, and this experience must be relayed by blacks.”¹² In the case of Exhibit B, Bailey found himself in a double bind: not only was what Courttia Newland has termed the “absence of an African narrative” in the performance deemed to unvoice both the performers in the exhibit and those whose histories they were required to embody, but Bailey seemed to erase from the performance any recognition of the ways in which his position as a South African of European descent made him complicit in the events represented.¹³

In response to these criticisms, Brett Bailey posted on his Facebook wall a selection of the accounts made by the performers in the London run of Exhibit B of their reasons for participating in

¹¹ Yvette Greslé, ‘Twenty Pound Spectacle: Brett Bailey (Exhibit B),’ *3:AM Magazine*, 27 August 2014, online.

¹² Kruger, “Celebrating the Spirit of Tragedy,” 238.

¹³ Courttia Newland, “A Hidden Code: The Subtle Language of Racism,” *Change.org*, 12 September 2014, online.

the performance. In an acknowledgment of the strength of feeling the show has provoked, he chose to withhold the names of the actors “for security reasons.” Many of the actors unequivocally supported Bailey’s project of historical recovery. This was particularly evident in the comments made by members of the Namibian choir who have performed in the show in all its twenty-two different locations. A singer identified only as ‘C’ stated: “Part of this exhibition concerns my country’s history. I am Namibian. The story about the heads that were cut off is about my ancestors. This project is very important to me, because not only have I learned about my own history, but I am able to share that information with others.”¹⁴ ‘C’ refers to a second tableau representing the genocide enacted upon the Herero and Namibs by the German colonial administration in the wake of the Herero Rebellion of 1904. The choir, whose heads alone are visible to the audience to recall the use of Namib skulls as anthropological specimens, provide the only voices in the performance, a selection of traditional songs of lamentation sung in Nama, Otjiherero, Oshiwambo, Tswana and isiXhosa in remembrance of the thousands murdered by German colonial officials during this period. ‘C’ argues that the show has enabled him to take ownership of the past by participating in a performance which represents historical events that are often unacknowledged in both Europe and Namibia.

Other performers strongly supported Bailey’s anti-racist sentiment, identifying the importance of the links the show makes between the past and present. A performer named as ‘S’ stated: “Until we have the courage to take shared ownership of the stories that tell us who we once were, we will remain in limbo; ignorant to how little around us had changed and too powerless to advance.” ‘S’’s vision of the show as empowering for the actors involved poses a challenge to those who saw the performance as either a suppression of black voices or a cynical mercenary gesture on the part of those involved. Perhaps the greatest irony of the protest and subsequent closure of the performance was that it denied the actors involved their right to artistic expression, effectively

¹⁴ Peter Boenisch, “From Brett Bailey,” online.

silencing their voices. Priscilla Adade-Helledy described her own response to the news of the performance's closure: "In all my experiences of racism I've never actually had someone say to me, 'You can't do your art.' We were totally unvoiced by the people who said they were anti-racists."¹⁵ According to Adade-Helledy, the protestors were replicating the suppression of black expression they accused Exhibit B of perpetrating by denying the black performers the right to present a piece that provided so many opportunities for black actors and artists, performers who are frequently underrepresented in the productions of high profile cultural institutions such as The Barbican.

Encountering the Other: Intimacy and Spectatorship

Yet many also registered a profound ambivalence about their involvement in the piece, alive to the contradictions that animated so much of the debate around the exhibit. The reflections of an actor named only as 'E' describe these conflicts.

Being involved in Exhibit B was an incredibly difficult choice for me. [...]I spent days researching, trying to be even-handed, trying to make sense of what Exhibit B means - what it means to the rest of the world: the people that say it's 'essential' and the people who feel it is 'an outrageous act of complicit racism'; what it says to the educated and the common man; what it says about race; what it says about class; what it says about the strength of the oppressed and who really has the power. Whether all these things can truly be represented by an art installation. And what it means for me. I thought I could find some answers by going to The Playfair Library [in Edinburgh] while the Exhibit was there, but outside the building I felt too ill-equipped, too scared to be confronted by Living Pictures where, unlike theatre, the protective layer of fiction distancing us from the horrors of history and the many and varied injustices of the present, has been stripped away. I went home.

¹⁵ J.S. Rafaeli, "Performers in London's 'Racist' Human Zoo Exhibit Are Angry It's Been Shut Down," *Vice*, 26 September 2014, online.

Being involved as a performer in London gives me a second opportunity to pick apart what Exhibit B means, for me and my world [...] I've no idea how I'll come out on the other side.

'E's response brings to the fore the contradictions at the heart of the performance: what meanings can the performance communicate when it seeks to represent horrors so traumatic that they seem to be beyond representation? What difference does who is watching the show make to the interpretations available? And how does the use of live performers affect the responses of both actors and audiences? One way into these questions is to consider the relationship between audiences and performers in ethnographic displays.

'E' registered a profound uneasiness with being 'confronted by Living Pictures' from which the 'protective layer of fiction' present in conventional theater removed. As I have argued, this frame-breaking is indicative of the way in which Exhibit B seeks to replicate the conditions of face-to-face encounter. The sociologist Erving Goffman highlights how the roles performed by each social actor in a face-to-face encounter are mutually constitutive — dependent upon agreed perimeters that are socially and culturally determined.¹⁶ In contrast to the one-way vision of the spectacle in which only the audience has the agency to interpret events, the face-to-face encounter necessarily involves the active engagement of both performer and audience in the making of meaning.

The intimacy between audience members and performers that face-to-face interactions create is an oft-neglected aspect of critical comment on ethnographic displays. In a different context, Gabeba Baderoon has described the intimacy of the encounter with an artwork when explaining her affective response to representations of black bodies in works on display in the South African National Gallery. "Intimacy," Baderoon remarks, draws us into thinking beyond what we know. It questions obvious differences, but has a clear-eyed skepticism for the seductions of easy affiliations. It proposes that identities emerge within history,

¹⁶ Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, 3.

but are also mobile, their signs manifest and physical, but also subtle and interior, and their possibilities radically open.¹⁷

Baderoon argues that the meanings that representations of black bodies can transmit to audiences are mobile, subject to change not just through the material conditions of collective historical experience but also through individual encounters. Furthermore her acknowledgement that the experience of looking at a representation of an individual involves an interpretive act that operates simultaneously on two planes: the ‘physical’, and the ‘interior’, indicates the importance of the subject position of the individual spectator in the making of meaning. Therefore, interpreting representations of the body does not end with the act of observation, but continues via a reflective process in which the individual situates their observations within a variety of interpretive frameworks that will differ depending upon who is doing the looking. Baderoon also alerts us to the heterogeneity of identifications made possible through this process, arguing against the idea that the meanings encoded in the black body are either historically predetermined or fixed. In the case of ethnographic displays, the interpretive possibilities are even more open as meaning is necessarily constituted through face-to-face interaction between audience and performer. In the first moment of encounter, the silent gaze exchanged between actor and audience facilitates the active model of viewing that Baderoon articulates. The moments in which performers return the gaze change the nature of the performance and in doing so affect the ways in which audiences interpret the performance. For the purposes of this piece I will therefore define the gaze as an interpretive process that both audience and performer enact when their eyes meet in a moment of ocular connection, a moment that forms the foundation of the intimate encounter that follows.

As I have argued, the intimacy engendered by Bailey’s use of face-to-face encounter is central to the success of Exhibit B. The audience is ushered in by a black ‘hostess’, allocated a number and forced to sit in silence. The ‘hostess’ controls who enters the performance by raising

¹⁷ Baderoon, “Intimacy and History,” 89.

numbers at random; this immediately places the black, female actor in a position of power, challenging any pre-determined notions of the black female as a symbol of either sexual excess or abject subjugation. The strategies of using guides, cards and the ‘exhibit’ format to break the frame of the performance were first used by Bailey in his exhibit exploring the structural inequalities underpinning race relations in contemporary Grahamstown, Terminal (National Arts Festival, 2009). As with Terminal, the audience participates in the performance, becoming as much depersonalized objects of curiosity as the actors, a point acknowledged by the fact that each installation has a sign explaining the components of the tableau, components which include both actor and spectator. This position is maintained throughout the performance as the audience experiences a series of face-to-face encounters with the actors in each tableau, which begin with the reciprocal action of the gaze. As Megan Lewis, who saw Exhibit A at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, noted: “The negotiation back and forth—what was most powerful was that they were set up as tableaux, as static images, and yet it’s a body with the eyes who are returning the gaze.”¹⁸ This silent negotiation between actor and audience member is central to the success of the performance as a critique rather than a reinscription of the colonial epistemology that has historically been transmitted through the objectification and exploitation of the African body.

Bailey has revealed how communicating to the actors about the empowerment possible through the gaze was essential to the success of the piece. “The performers are told, as they sit there, that the real performers of this piece are actually the audience moving through, and that they are the audience sitting and watching a lot of people walking through the space.”¹⁹ Thus the gaze becomes an act of resistance that challenges any model of spectatorship that allots the role of viewer, and by extension interpreter, to the audience alone. Stella Odunlami, one of the actors in the London show, spoke of the critical engagement demanded of both audience and actors: “It denies

¹⁸Kruger, “Gazing at Exhibit A.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

the spectator and performer the luxury of hiding. It forces us to examine the darkest corners of our mind.”²⁰ Odunlami’s description of the show as one which, through the reciprocal action of the gaze and the intimacy of face-to-face encounter, confronts both performer and audience member with the reality of the human suffering represented, counters accusations of objectification by describing the active engagement on the part of both parties required by this method of performance.

Looking at the Other/Seeing the Self: Historicizing Encounter in Ethnographic Displays

In Exhibit B, Bailey’s use of the ethnographic display is unsettling because it facilitates a self-reflexivity that requires actors and audience alike to consider where to position themselves in relation to the violent histories presented. As the controversy surrounding the London run has demonstrated, the discursive frameworks through which the exhibit was interpreted by actors and audiences alike varied greatly. In nineteenth-century reviews of ethnographic displays there is a clear acknowledgment of the importance of face-to-face encounter, particularly the self-reflexivity engendered by the act of looking. Through an analysis of contemporary accounts of interactions between Khoisan performers and audiences, we can see how this self-reflexivity enabled a number of different regimes of looking depending upon the perspective of the individual spectator. These evidence a matrix of different discourses at play, creating a complex range of audience responses. In some cases, looking upon the southern African performer enabled the spectator to reaffirm what was viewed as the innate superiority of the European to the African. These views were articulated in both socio-evolutionary discourses that dominated both ethnological studies of non-Europeans during the period and much of the travel writing written by both missionary and secular travelers to the Cape Colony and its environs. For example, upon witnessing an ethnographic display of six San

²⁰Stella Odunlami quoted in “Is Art Installation Exhibit B Racist?,” *The Observer*, September 27 2014, online.

people at London's Egyptian Hall in June 1847, a reviewer from the *Illustrated London News*, the most popular weekly magazine of the day, had this to say.

The first effect on entering the room may be repulsive; but the attentive visitor soon overcomes this feeling and sees in the benighted beings before him a fine subject for scientific investigation as well as a scene for popular gratification, and rational curiosity. It was strange, too, in looking through one of the windows of the room into the busy street; to reflect that by a single turn of the head might be witnessed the two extremes of humanity – the lowest and the highest of the races – the wandering savage, and the silken baron of civilization.²¹

The initial repulsion registered at viewing the supposedly primitive body is overcome when the reviewer is able to view the performers as subjects for “scientific investigation”, “popular gratification”, and “rational curiosity.” This indicates the three main functions of ethnographic displays in shaping popular perceptions of non-Western peoples during the nineteenth century. As has been noted elsewhere, ethnographic performances were often spaces in which British people encountered people from a diverse range of non-European nations for the first time.²² The fusion of entertainment, ‘scientific’ education and novelty audiences derived from these shows was predicated upon the assumptions that they would learn something of the ‘manners and customs’ of the performers in addition to encountering people of different races.

The reviewer's use of ‘highest’ and ‘lowest’ as categories for distinguishing between the San and the British indicates the extent to which ethnological classification had been assimilated into popular racial discourse by the mid-nineteenth century as a means of articulating racial difference. What is even more interesting is that these categories were transmitted through the gaze. It was not just by ‘seeing’ the performer before him that difference is established, but by the self-reflexive gesture of assessing the San performers against the European subject's own measures of

²¹ Anonymous, “Bosjesmans,” *Illustrated London News*, June 12 1847.

²² Qureshi, “Meeting the Zulus.”

‘civilization’. This begins with the intimacy of the individual encounter but is extended, through the presence of the window, to a more typological, ethnographic gaze that sets the ‘wandering savage’ and the ‘silken baron of civilization’ seen on the street at opposite ends of a racial hierarchy. This gaze begins with the personal and then moves to the global, linking the face-to-face encounter between the reviewer and the San performers with global considerations of what is signified by the categories of ‘British’ and ‘San’, and by extension the ways in which British subject should position his or her self in relation to the San performer.

This self-reflexivity enabled ethnographic displays to become important sites for the consideration of the treatment of indigenous peoples in Britain’s expanding colonies.²³ From the late eighteenth century until the emancipation of slaves in British colonies in 1834, this was a key concern of the evangelical, anti-slavery activists. It is within this broader political context that Saartjie Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’, was appropriated by the anti-slavery movement as symbol of the oppressed and subjugated indigene. Within weeks of Baartman’s arrival in Britain in 1810, a court case was brought against her manager, Heinrich Caesars, by Zachary Macaulay and the African Institution. Throughout October and November 1810, Macaulay and his associates published a series of letters in the press suggesting that Baartman was being kept in a state of slavery.²⁴ Extracts from Macaulay’s affidavit claimed that Baartman “gave evident signs of mortification and misery at her degraded situation in being made a spectacle for the derision of bystanders.”²⁵ The case was eventually found in Caesars’ favor when Baartman was interviewed through the medium of a Dutch translator, maintaining that she was being paid to perform; that she loved her master and that she had no wish to return to Cape Town.²⁶ Macaulay’s reading of

²³ Qureshi, “Meeting the Zulus,” 184.

²⁴ Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 91; Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman,” 238-9.

²⁵ Bhana Young, “‘Rude’ Performances: Theorizing Agency,” 55.

²⁶ Although Crais and Scully read this as evidence of a limited control Baartman was able to exercise over her performance, questions have been raised about how far Baartman was able to express her own preferences, and how far Caesars and his partner Alexander Dunlop were coercing her. See, for example, Abrahams, “Disempowered to Consent: Sara Bartman and Khoisan Slavery in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony and Britain.”

Baartman's performance as 'spectacle' erases any sense of her responses to her audience, reducing her to an object of pity that served the rhetorical purposes of the anti-slavery activists, for whom the disempowered African was the 'object' towards which their assiduous campaigning was directed. In this instance, Baartman was objectified to enable her appropriation in the service of abolitionist concerns over the mistreatment of indigenous peoples in the colonies, evidencing the interrelationship between ethnographic displays, the trope of the abject, objectified African and political debates over British colonial policy.

While the Macaulay case demonstrates how Baartman's performance was appropriated by abolitionists in order to further their own political agenda, recent attempts to recover more information about her life have led scholars to return to contemporary accounts of her performances as the 'Hottentot Venus' which evidence a broader and more complex array of responses from audiences.²⁷ It is clear both that Baartman's performance was open to a range of different interpretations and that this interpretive process depended to a large degree upon the extent to which audience members were able to engage sympathetically with her rather than viewing her either as an ethnographic curiosity, which reinscribed an increasingly fixed racial hierarchy, or a object of pity symbolizing of the abject condition of Africans in general.

The most full account of audience responses to Baartman is provided by Anne Jackson, wife of the comic actor Charles Matthews, describing Matthews' visit to the 'Hottentot Venus' show in London with fellow actor John Kemble. This short account demonstrates both the range of audience reactions and Baartman's responses to them.

He found her surrounded by many persons, some females! One pinched her, another walked round her; one gentleman poked her with his cane; and one lady employed her parasol to ascertain that all was, as she called it, "naltral." This inhuman baiting the poor creature bore with sullen indifference, except upon some great provocation, when she seemed inclined to

²⁷Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus*; Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*.

resent brutality, which even a Hottentot can understand. On these occasions it required all the authority of the keeper to subdue her resentment. At last her civilized visitors departed, and, to Mr. Mathews's great surprise and pleasure, John Kemble entered the room. As he did so, he paused at the door, with his eyes fixed upon the object of his visit, and advancing slowly to obtain a closer view, without speaking to my husband, he gazed at the woman, with his under-lip dropped for a minute. His beautiful countenance then underwent a sudden change, and at length softened almost into tears of compassion. "Poor, poor creature!" at length he uttered in his peculiar tone, — "very, very extraordinary, indeed!" He then shook hands silently with Mr. Mathews, keeping his eyes still upon the object before him. He minutely questioned the man about the state of mind, disposition, comfort, &c. of the Hottentot, and again exclaimed, with an expression of the deepest pity, "Poor creature!" I have observed that at the time Mr. Mathews entered and found her surrounded by some of our own barbarians, the countenance of the "Venus" exhibited the most sullen and occasionally ferocious expression; but the moment she looked in Mr. Kemble's face, her own became placid and mild, — nay, she was obviously pleased; and, patting her hands together, and holding them up in evident admiration, uttered the unintelligible words, "Oh, ma Babba! Oh, ma Babba!" gazing at the face of the tragedian with unequivocal delight. "What does she say, sir?" asked Mr. Kemble gravely of the keeper, as the woman reiterated these strange words: "does she call me her papa?" "No, sir," answered the man: "she says, you are a very fine man."²⁸

In the responses of the unnamed men and women at the start of this account we can see attempts to locate Baartman in the context of nineteenth-century 'ethnographic freak shows' that focused on the display of anatomical abnormalities, wondering if her extended labia and steatopygia were "natural." Such objectification was legitimized by comparative anatomical readings of

²⁸ Mrs Mathews, *Memoirs of Charles Matthews*, 137-9.

‘Hottentot’ bodies, which positioned them on the boundary between the most degraded of humans and the most evolved of primates.²⁹ Yet Baartman returns the invasive curiosity of her audience with gestures that resist the objectification of her body: her facial expressions register a “sullen indifference” which rises to a resentment of her brutal treatment at the hands of the crowd. Here we can trace a limited agency being practiced by Baartman.³⁰ Her wordless response to her loss of dignity in the hands of the crowd can be read as an act of resistance against audience interpretations that sought to construct her as a typological ‘specimen’ of Khoisan womanhood. Similar accounts of resistance to the ethnological gaze of spectators are found in press accounts of ethnographic performances by other Khoisan peoples. In May 1847, six San performers debuted in London’s Exeter Hall under the management of anatomist and ethnologist Robert Knox. After hearing Knox’s ethnographic lecture on the San a frustrated London journalist commented that “we are unable to give any sketch of the cerebral development, as they could not be induced to remove their caps.”³¹ The reviewer here refers to the most popular of nineteenth-century human sciences, phrenology, in which intellectual and moral development was quantified through the measurement of the skull. By refusing to submit themselves to cranial measurement, the San were perhaps asserting their objection to being treated as scientific specimens rather than human performers.

Jackson’s anecdote not only reveals Baartman’s response to regimes of looking that sought to distance her from her audience, but also the power that the wordless gaze and facial gestures could have in shaping the affective responses of both performer and audience member. What is striking is the account of Kemble’s sympathetic engagement with Baartman: a gesture that involves a process of identification. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries this imaginative process of placing oneself in the position of another was perhaps the fundamental signifier of

²⁹ In fact, the justification for Cuvier and de Blainville’s anatomical interest in Baartman’s body both before and after her death stemmed from an ongoing debate amongst ethnologists in the early nineteenth-century as to whether the ‘Hottentot’ constituted the most degraded form of humanity or the most evolved form of primate. See Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 76-108.

³⁰ See also Bhana Young, 58.

³¹ Anonymous, “The Bosjijemans at Exeter Hall,” *The Morning Chronicle*, 19 May, 1847.

refinement in post-Enlightenment Britain and was theorized by moral philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, as well as Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley.³²

Perhaps the most influential articulation of sympathetic identification is found in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith argues that:

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us in any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case.³³

In Smith's formulation, sympathetic engagement with another is an imaginative process that is self-reflexive: the subject can only imagine a fellow human's reactions by assuming that they will be the same as his own. Kemble's reaction to Baartman, although framed as a complete identification with her position, is limited to the emotional register of pity: we are told first that upon witnessing the treatment of Baartman: "His beautiful countenance [...] softened almost into tears of compassion," while later on he "exclaimed, with an expression of the deepest pity, 'Poor creature.'" In this pity for Baartman we sense not the engagement of equals but a gesture which valorizes Kemble. Baartman's returning of Kemble's gaze does not challenge this representation of Kemble as a compassionate and by extension refined being, her response is read only as "admiration" and "evident delight" at his attentions.

Thus, although the focus of the anecdote is Kemble's sympathy for Baartman, we find that Baartman is still represented as the object of pity rather than an independent subject in her own right. This is evident in the repeated figuration of her as the "object before him" and "the object of his visit" whose difference is further emphasized by the typologization of her as "the Hottentot."

³² For more on Romantic sympathy, particularly with regards to spectatorship, see Page, *Imperfect Sympathy*, 4; Chandler, "Moving Accidents: The Emergence of Sentimental Probability."; Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*.

³³ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 9.

Such descriptions emphasize the Otherness of Baartman, her essential unknowability. If identification between the subject and the object of sympathy is not full, sympathy is necessarily imperfect. Amit Rai has suggested that this use of sympathy as a reinscription of racial and social difference characterized the descriptions of encounters with racial Others in abolitionist and missionary discourse during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, creating a paradox: on the one hand the performance of sympathetic identification was necessary for the construction of the self as a moral being; while on the other the failure of full sympathetic identification was necessary to assert the boundaries between the white, male self and the racial Other.³⁴

Yet Jackson's account of Baartman's reaction to Kemble evidences one of the few moments of dialogue between Baartman and her audiences that we find in the archive. As has been noted, sympathetic engagement with another becomes integral to Kemble's self-representation insofar as it affirms his position as a refined, moral being. In Baartman's reaction, Jackson registers her delight and gratitude—a response that confirms the construction of Kemble as “a fine man”, in contrast to the brutality of the anonymous audience members earlier in the passage. However, there is also another interpretation open, one that hinges upon the question of how far Baartman was conscious of her own position as a performer. If face-to-face interaction, as Goffman suggests, necessarily involves the performance of an identity that has to be mutually agreed between each party, could it be that Baartman is performing the role of the grateful native in response to the gestures and facial expressions of Kemble, consciously registering that this was the role he expected her to perform?³⁵ In the Colonial Exhibitions and World's Fairs that appeared after The Great Exhibition in 1851, ethnographic displays became mass spectacles with performers sometimes spending their whole lives as professional showmen and women.³⁶ If the evidence from the Macaulay court case is to be

³⁴ Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*, 164.

³⁵ Erving Goffman suggests that, in the case of African-Americans, they may feel obliged to affect a manner that affirms white ideas about their inferiority, illustrating how race is often a determining factor when a person chooses which role to adopt in a face-to-face interaction. See *Presentation of Self*, 25.

³⁶ For more on this, including the contractual and management arrangements, see Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 101-125.

trusted, Baartman was also conscious of both her role as a performer and the economic benefits that could be gained from it.³⁷ In order to successfully engage audiences who witnessed her at close quarters without speaking their language, responding to the looks and gestures given in a manner calculated to satisfy the expectations of the particular audience member she encountered would surely have been necessary.

There is certainly evidence from newspaper reports that other Khoisan performers adapted their performances to respond to the attentions of different audiences. On May 2 1850, *The Bath Chronicle* reviewed a show of San performers, stating that in addition to demonstrating the way in which the San hunt and kill animals, the elder man “engages in various comical waggeries, pretending, among other things, to make love to sundry ladies present, for which his tawny spouse professes to be very angry with him; while she, on her part, indulges in various philandering with gay bachelors, who were honored by the African beauty with several hearty salutes.”³⁸ While these reports could be read as an internalization, particularly on the part of the San women, of the role of the African female as a hyper-sexual object, they seem to suggest that the San consciously adapted a show in which intended by their manager as a display of their ‘primitive’ lifestyle to incorporate actions they thought would best entertain and amuse their audiences in response to the gestures of the audience.

There can be little doubt that in the case of both Baartman and the San performers mentioned above, a consciousness of the meanings transmitted to their European audiences by both their race and gender were important factors in determining their self-representation; yet of equal importance was audience response. Through an examination of nineteenth-century reviews of ethnographic displays, I have suggested that audiences were responding to these performances in a number of different ways. The tensions at play in these accounts demonstrate the power of the

³⁷ Although, despite the drawing up of a contract stipulating the length of her ‘service’ and also her payment in the wake of the Macaulay court case, we cannot read Baartman’s consent as a transparent expression of her agency. See Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, 83-101.

³⁸ Anonymous, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 2 May, 1850.

intimacy of encounter to radically open up the interpretive possibilities that the embodied performance by the South Africans could transmit. While they were structured by certain predetermined regimes of looking—whether ethnological or sympathetic—that simultaneously distanced performers from audiences even as they brought them into close encounter with one another, performers’ responses register both a resistance to this distancing and also a degree of self-consciousness of their role as actors who were constantly interpreting and responding to the different reactions of their various spectators.

Yet these encounters were not limited to the exhibition space. There is evidence to suggest that disruptions to the carefully curated shows sometimes led to encounters that spilled out beyond the exhibition space, facilitating an even broader range of interactions that ruptured the carefully constructed regimes of looking that defined the southern African against the British subject’s self-conscious measurements of ‘civilization’ and ‘refinement’. For example, an anecdote published alongside an ethnographic lecture on the San in 1847 recounts a performance at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly during which an audience member threw a piece of fruit at one of the performers in order to create a distraction that enabled him to pick the pockets of the gentlemen and ladies present. The performers began to throw objects from the stage at their assailant, causing the performance to be cancelled and the evacuation of the venue.³⁹ J. S. Tyler, the group’s manager at the time, recounted the events that followed.

Mr. Clark, the keeper of the rooms, supplying the fainted and fainting ladies with water—carriages called before their time and not found — ladies, with their children, seeking shops in Piccadilly to appease their own children’s frights — a mob had followed —the police, who sometime before had entered the hall, stood appalled. Our rapid driving from the hall was the signal for one of the most discordant yells from civilized Londoners that perhaps

³⁹ Tyler, *Mental and Moral Attributes of the Bush Men*, 7.

have ever greeted human ears. It followed us and every minute the savages seemed to get more excited.⁴⁰

The italicization of “civilized Londoners” suggests that the reaction of the crowd was anything but. Furthermore, Tyler’s fractured prose leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the “appalled” reaction of the police is purely to the actions of the “savages,” or whether it is the chaotic actions of the increasingly unpredictable crowd that has become the most shocking aspect of the scene. In the final sentence, the refined ladies and children vanish and are replaced by an amorphous “mob,” signifying the collapse of social order as the boundary between savage and civilized is dissolved in this moment of confusion.

As the story unfolds, this “mob” pursues the group as they are carried away by Tyler in a carriage until they finally reach the safety of the station house. Tyler describes the conclusion of events as follows:

without any serious consequences we at length found ourselves in Tower-street station-house— my clothes literally torn from my back, a bruised head, minus a tooth, and a rhinoceros coat of impenetrable mud. But all I had suffered was comparatively nothing to the mental agony of the Bosjesmen, who [were] wrought to the highest pitch of madness by the rabble.⁴¹

In this anecdote it is clear that it is not just the emancipation of the audience from pre-determined regimes of looking that is important, but the ability of the performances themselves to disrupt the careful curatorial decisions of their managers. When the performance space turns into a crime scene and the drama shifts from the circumscribed space of the exhibition hall into the street beyond, the separation between performer and spectator is dissolved. With the distance between performer and spectator no longer maintained, new interpretive possibilities are opened up. Tyler’s empathetic

⁴⁰ Tyler, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid.

description of the “mental agony” of the San at the hands of the depersonalized “rabble” inverts the regime of looking that constructs the European as subject and the San as object, opening up the possibility of greater empathy on the part of the showman with the Africans than with his own race.

Newspaper accounts of performances by other southern African groups in the late nineteenth century also indicate a rupturing of the boundary between audience and performer as the celebrity status of the stars of some of the larger ethnographic spectacles engendered increasingly intimate encounters with audience members. In some cases, such intimacy led to romantic liaisons between performers and visitors which were widely reported in the press, feeding contemporary fears about the threat that miscegenation posed to the social order. Sadiah Qureshi has noted how, as news of the South African War in 1899 dominated the nation’s foreign news reports, Earl’s Court hosted the Savage South Africa exhibition which featured a range of performers of Khoisan, amaXhosa, amaZulu and Ndebele origin. During the staging of this show, concerns were raised about potentially disreputable encounters between performers and upper-class female audiences after it was reported that women were taking the performers for rides in Hyde Park, prompting the *Daily Mail* to suggest the kraal should be closed.⁴² Further controversy was raised when Prince Peter Kushana Lobengula, a star performer who was purportedly the son of Ndebele king Lobengula Kumalo, attempted to marry Kate Jewell, daughter of a Jewish mining agent from Cornwall.⁴³ Although the marriage was eventually annulled, we can see evidence of the role that the mass media played in the dissemination of such romantic encounters, playing upon popular fears about the threatening nature of African masculinity as well as feeding the voracious public appetite for gossip. In the role that popular newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* played in stoking the flames of the Savage South Africa controversy, we can see both the level of public interest the shows

⁴² Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, 163.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 144.

inspired and also how they became a focal point for contemporary anxieties about the effects that interracial encounter was having upon the social world beyond the exhibition hall.

Ethnographic Displays and the Intimacy of Encounter

The ability of ethnographic displays to intervene and shape wider debates about the social impact of racial diversity in the late nineteenth century indicates how widely reviews and reports of these shows were disseminated, shaping popular perceptions of southern African peoples. Although in examining nineteenth-century sources it is important to acknowledge that the absence of the voices of the performers from the archive makes it impossible to recover their stories, that what Spivak terms the “epistemic violence” of colonial knowledge formation means that modes of representation aimed at typologizing and objectifying them necessarily dominate the source material available for analysis.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it could be argued that by consciously adopting the roles of performers, the South Africans referred to in these anecdotes examined are demonstrating complicity in their own objectification, that having internalized the role of the primitive African allotted to them by their manager and audiences alike, the only subject position available to them was the performance of the role of the ‘savage’. However, the diversity of encounters recorded in the nineteenth-century press destabilizes this notion by indicating the heterogeneous ways in which ethnographic displays were being interpreted by audiences, and the ways in which even a silent gaze or a facial gesture can indicate moments of resistance on the part of performers which momentarily reconfigure the relationship between them and their audiences. Although these moments cannot be read as expressions of complete agency, they indicate that to read these events purely as spectacles of objectification would make the critic complicit in propagating the essentializing practices of colonial knowledge formation that are under scrutiny here. It would also be a failure to consider the critical practices of both performers and visitors, who used the intimacy of encounter available both

⁴⁴ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 82.

inside and outside the exhibition space to actively construct a range of identities in negotiation with one another.

As I have argued, Exhibit B attempts to recreate these negotiations through the use of the gaze. The gaze is both internal and external, it engenders both intimate encounters between individuals and a self-reflexivity that facilitates a range of responses. The very silence that critics of Exhibit B interpreted as a suppression of expression I experienced as an emancipation from language that created a space for quiet contemplation of not only the performance, but the historical events that were represented. It also created a means by which the performers were able to channel their own experiences of racism and their own responses to the histories of the characters they played into a gaze which accuses but also engages the audience, without the didacticism that usually accompanies such gestures. The Namibian choir meanwhile created a strain of lamentation that directed the audience towards an emotional engagement with the tragedies represented. Although this focus on the abject was central to the piece's power, the absence of a counter-narrative of African resistance and response does still lay Bailey open to the accusation that he is providing a narrative of white postcolonial guilt rather than a revisionist interpretation of colonial history. Perhaps then, it was not the performers or the protestors who were left unvoiced in the performance, but those who still live with the legacies of the events represented.

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