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Six corporeal curiosities: re/presenting contemporary South African embodiment

Abstract:

After two colonial occupations, one systematically brutal racial segregation campaign and two decades of democracy, there is no wonder that contemporary South Africa is characterised by complex, hybrid identities. This paper connects this past and present though the lens of embodiment, taking six snapshots that tell significant stories of South African bodies that span time and place. Together, slowly, these bodies create a corporeal dialogue, a weaving in of various writing practices and around the issue of embodiment in space and time. In the interplay between their differing levels of contextual strangeness in these narratives, I hope to reflect a certain social estrangement that characterises something of a country in its third decade.

Biographical note:

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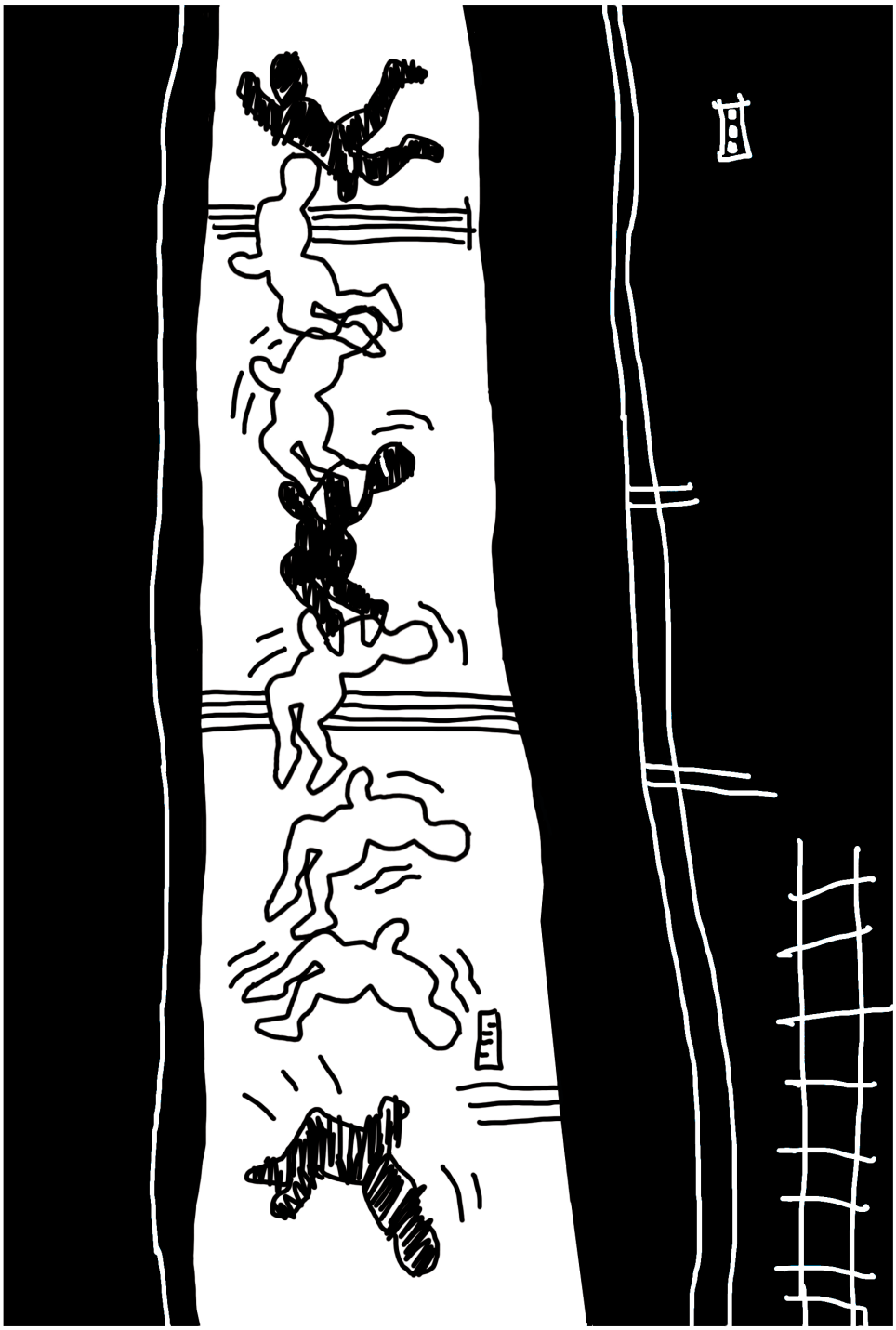

Fig. 1. Ulrike Sturm, *After Kentridge*, linocut, 2016

Introduction

Exhibit A *Johannesburg, 1995*

A man stands in the middle of a field, arms upraised, to deafening shouts. A black man. On a green field. In a green shirt. With a gold cup.

Exhibit B *Howick, today*

Fifty thin metal columns stand planted in a field, each one's outline spliced into a jagged irregularity. Between and behind black metal pieces, the empty KwaZulu-Natal midlands stretch away. In the interplay between land and line, a pattern of a face emerges.

Exhibit C *Cape Town, 1997*

A man is on the floor, straddling another whom he has restrained. He places a bag over his captive's head, pulls it tight around the neck. He looks up, towards a panel of observers, then right towards a waiting bank of journalists with cameras.

'Can you see, Mr Yengeni?', he asks a visibly distressed man in the audience.

Exhibit D *Barcelona, 1999*

A naked man contorts himself – leg raised, arm twisted behind his balding head – before a mirror. Around his creamy-grey flesh floats the outline of a grotesque chalk figure – a monstrously bloated being with puffy, grasping hands. With sunken eyes, the man confronts his image. The figure is not reflected.

Exhibit E *Cape Town, present day*

A woman stands in a library, naked apart from a small sheet metal loin cloth. Her exposed musculature is ironclad, her posture ramrod straight, her gaze steely. Her breasts protrude as unexploded grenades; her calves are compressed pistons.

Exhibit F *Bo-Kaap, any 2 January*

Men in suits dance in the streets. Silk suits, in harlequin colours. Their grins are grotesquely enhanced with smears of red paint. Colourful umbrellas held aloft, they sing a song celebrating the landing of a Confederate ship on the shores of the Cape to the beat of the *ghoema* drum.

The images conjured by these various bodies, cut off from all but the most basic of space/time contexts, may seem incongruous – may seem, so to speak, disjointed. Whilst many of the cultural references will be obtuse to most readers, what hopefully remains

is a sense of the macabre – snapshots of curiously disembodied embodiment. As 'exhibits', they invite closer scrutiny. Let us, then, examine them:

> Observation 1: It is difficult to tell whether these are images of celebration or of violence, reconciliation or division. Can they be of both?
>
> Observation 2: Are all of these bodies, in fact, real? What is a real body? Are physical bodies always the most real?
>
> Observation 3: In the absence of any distinguishing identification, time and location have been given. What is the relationship between body, place and time? How might examining embodiment help us to understand a place at a point in time?

Abstract examination can, of course, only take us so far. Over the course of this article, I will flesh out each of these individual narrative fragments. Together, slowly, these curious bodies will create a corporeal dialogue, a weaving in, and around, the issue of embodiment in space and time – specifically highlighting how contemporary South African identities cannot be understood simply in the present. In the interplay between these initial differing levels of embodied visual strangeness, then, I hope to reflect a certain social estrangement that characterises something of a country beginning its third decade. For now, though, let us narrow our focus.

The place? South Africa. The time? The present.

Identity in urban South African communities is unavoidably – often enthusiastically – hybrid. The radical upheavals brought about by two colonial powers, one systematically oppressive national government and the transition to majority rule have had extreme implications for the way people read, and represent, the body. I would suggest that the resulting tensions between recalibration and reception, possibility and practicality have resulted in some extremely complex, often curious, embodied positions.

As such, all of my 'exhibits' have been, at one time or another (or even at many times), accepted as completely natural, even appropriate, expressions of embodiment. In decontextualizing them as exhibits – in forcibly creating an estrangement – I make reference to the fact that contemporary South Africans live in a time when they have become inured to the visual strangeness of space/body mismatches, where they have, by necessity, learned to no longer read meaning solely from the visual. Whilst making meaning from contextual positioning is a feature of every society, it has particular relevance in South Africa for its recent upheaval. Whereas for many years, the racialised body was an absolute signifier of status – the only dominant status that counted – now, other forms of capital are more telling. Bodies are no longer reliable indicators of position: indeed, they can be deceptive. Instead, I argue, status has become acutely attuned to power – to how any given corporeality translates into capital. Can it be sold, marketed, leveraged? Who buys into its structures?

The structure of this article – entitled 'Six Corporeal Curiosities', offering up body 'exhibits' for scrutiny – comes both deliberately and perilously close to the Victorian carnivals of the grotesque where human difference was fetishized through enforced display. In making this choice, then, I am referencing an exploitative way of looking. I am asking the reader to briefly put their modern sensibilities on hold, to plainly gape at

the everyday in terms of otherness. I am, in short, asking for a consideration of objectification of the body. Does discussing figures such as Sara Baartman within this framework reduce them once again to objects of western scrutiny? Certainly. That is the point, but not the end purpose.

The celebrity body

A mix between celebrity and saviour, Nelson Mandela is the ultimate form of South African capital. His physical body lies buried – after bitter contestation – in his family plot in Qunu. His symbolic image, of course, lives on in everything from clock faces to kitchen aprons and has literally been capitalised upon in a new series of banknotes (in an affectionate gesture, the notes are referred to by the popular colloquial term of 'Randelas'). Indeed, in a country where so much is contested, his body is the one overwhelmingly unchallenged symbol of transcending the past and reconciling into the future. Can a country coming to terms with his physical passing sustain the transformative symbolism he embodied through – perhaps despite – the myriad of objects, applications, enterprises that bear his image?

It is to this iconic image, then, that my Exhibit A makes reference, specifically Mandela's congratulating of the white rugby captain François Pienaar for winning the 1995 Rugby World Cup. Tellingly for a country so obsessed with physicality, Mandela's most celebrated moment as a statesman came about on the sports field, in a moment of such glaringly symbolic unification that Hollywood was unable to resist making the move into that rarest of genres: a rugby movie (Clint Eastwood's 2009 film *Invictus*).

Historically painted variously as a militant terrorist, an intellectual, a freedom fighter and a reconciler, Mandela's body – highly masculinised, often explicitly aligned with the athletic figure of the fighter or, more specifically, boxer – has always been a site of contested political currency. Despite his Apartheid-era reputation for physical disguise, his own choices of embodiment in his latter years – the rejection of the power suit in favour of colourful, patterned cotton shirts; his characteristically stiff-limbed, shuffling dance; his slow, deliberate phrasing – have themselves become iconic.

Recognising the power of representation, the Apartheid Government (1948-1994) actively sought to expunge the public record of Mandela's image, and his words, even while imprisoning his body. Ironically, however, it was this very absence of mundane representations of his prison routine that further fuelled the creation of the man's mythic status. Mandela's own attempts to control the narrative around his embodied history – the establishment of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the publication of his autobiography, the copyright on his image – have been important measures in the mediation of his otherwise unmitigated public consumption.

Despite these necessary restrictions on the Mandela image, many artists are working in an engaged and thoughtful way with the concept of national bodies – articulating something of the indeterminacy, the construction, the contestation through which they are mediated and with which they are made. My Exhibit B references one such artwork.

The Howick sculpture by Marco Cianfanelli marks the so-called 'capture site' – the remote spot between Durban and Johannesburg where Nelson Mandela was arrested by security police in 1962 (The Capture Site 2015). Fifty irregularly-cut black steel columns, each ranging from 6.5 to 9.5 metres high, are planted in the ground, symbolising the fifty years that had passed since the arrest and the moment of the sculpture's 2012 creation. Their three dimensional arrangement allows for people to walk in between the maze of the bases, but the real secret is revealed only upon distance. Approach the site at the right angle and the profile of Mandela comes into focus, playing on the relief between black metal and distant landscape. From all other angles, the famous face eludes the would-be image-capturer who is instead confronted with the prison-like grid of metal bars.

Incorporated in Cianfanelli's choice of medium is the concept of the accrual of meaning over both time and through multiplicity, the dependence of meaning on both personal perspective (the iconic profile is only revealed from one vantage point) and critical distance (the closer you get, the less you can see). Since Mandela's face appears in the negative space between the poles, etched on the landscape, we are reminded of how elusive images are, how framed by context. By placing the viewer in the space of the capturer – often, literally, through tourists' photographic image capturing – Cianfanelli makes a subtle reference to the continual imprisonment of Mandela's image. A man whose body is always associated with heroic incarceration can, ironically, never be free.

The traumatised body

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) marked the most significant moment of conscious and committed dialogue around dealing with the complexity of embodied, emplaced national identity in the post-Apartheid period. Indeed, journalist Antjie Krog has described her experience of covering years of testimony in so many languages as one of being 'present at the birth of this country's language itself' (1999: 43).

Whilst by no means the first country to hold such an extraordinary performance of national ground-clearing, South Africa was the first to hold such hearings publically. The Commission became part elevated national epic, part macabre travelling road show, spanning both the country and the course of two years. Beginning in April 1996, just two years into democratic rule, the seventeen-person Commission heard twenty thousand statements from witnesses – two thousand of which were presented in the form of public testimony – as well as six thousand applications for amnesty (Krog 1998: ix). Recognising that such a fundamental and multi-faceted transition would necessarily carry with it a deeply problematic and divisive history, the TRC was envisaged as, above all else, experienced as an embodied history. Watching the physical act of remembrance, seeing the tension caused by conflicted allegiances performed an embodied sense of nation – perhaps one looked to the body to perform a sense of what the mind could not grasp.

Unsurprisingly, then, it was with questions of 'stage managing' embodiment that the Commission struggled with most. How to deal empathetically yet practically with the

spectators, the reporters, the victims, the perpetrators, the commissioners, the traumatised? Would it always be possible to make clear distinctions between these categories from embodied clues (Race? Age? Uniform? Scars?). Was it possible to distinguish between 'genuine' amnesia from trauma and performed convenient memory loss? Was it possible to quantify trauma? Was it ethical?

A range of solutions were offered for coping with, as well as representing, the Commission experience. The room was a bank of microphones, a panoptic eye of camera lenses. Every night for two years, reports on the Commission's findings were summarised on news networks, including edited packages of original testimony. For a time, in an extraordinary blurring of the bounds of representation and reality, the Commission asked translators of the country's eleven official languages to perform the emotions of the witness as they spoke their translation – a practice which was, predictably, disastrous and soon halted (Krog 1999: 137–39). The symbolic spaces each body was allowed in were very carefully managed: no height difference was permitted between the commissioners' table and the table of those testifying. Emotional space was also accounted for in the form of 'professional comforters' for witnesses – people whose job was to sit beside a witness and provide whatever support they were able, from the supply of tissues to the simple comfort of presence.

Essentially, then, the Commission sought to negotiate the complexities of bodies in space. What emerged was a performance of contested power to define the past and shape the positions of the future. In recognition that I cannot do justice to the spirit of this process, I sketch here one scene from one piece of testimony. Exhibit C, then, refers to a moment during the amnesty application of Jeffery Benzien, a Captain in the Apartheid Anti-Terrorist Unit. Tony Yengeni, a former activist who had subsequently risen to the rank of Member of Parliament (MP) in the African National Congress (ANC) Government, accused Benzien of having used what became known as the 'wet bag' method of torture on him. At Yengeni's insistence, 'I want to see it with my own eyes', Benzien is called upon to demonstrate – an act he dutifully, almost casually, performs in what Antjie Krog recalls as being 'one of the most loaded and disturbing images of the Truth Commission' (1999: 110).

In viewing photographs of the moment, we may well be struck by the extraordinary performative leeway, the almost casual demonstration – the too-tight lounge suit, the volunteer victim's natty polka dotted shirt – and its chilling disjuncture with the historical physical reality, from which we are separated only by the changes of time and political power. In this transformative context the action is once again politically sanctioned, yet residual trauma bleeds out of Benzien's every deliberate move, every carefully-chosen word of testimony.

We may also be struck by the near-perfect reversal of power. Yengeni, once an enemy of the Apartheid State, was by then its representative – chief ANC whip and, later, an MP himself. Captain Jeffery Benzien was a senior member of the Apartheid Government's terrorism unit, now cutting an isolated figure to publically account for his actions. The interrogated was now the interrogator. However, as Krog warns us, things are never that easy. The contestation of power continues and, for requesting this humiliating enactment, Yengeni is made to pay:

> Benzien quietly turns on him and with one accurate blow shatters Yengeni's political profile right across the country.
>
> 'Do you remember, Mr Yengeni, that within thirty minutes you betrayed Jennifer Schreiner? Do you remember pointing out Bongani Jonas to us on the highway?'
>
> And Yengeni sits there – as if begging this man to say it all; as if betrayal or cowardice can only make sense to him in the presence of this man. […] Behind Benzien sit the victims of his torture – in a row chained by friendship and betrayal. Yengeni betrayed Jonas, Jonas pointed out people in albums, Peter Jacobs betrayed Forbes, Forbes pointed out caches, Yassir Henry betrayed Anton Fransch. During the tea break they stand together in the passages with their painful truths of triumph and shame (Krog 1998: 110, 113).

With these finest of lines between victim and perpetrator revealed, it is ultimately the complexity that reunifies each in their dual burdens of guilt and trauma.

This complexity was to return less than a decade later. In 2004, Yengeni was convicted of defrauding Parliament as part of the controversial Arms Deal case – one that has implicated many top level ANC politicians including current President Jacob Zuma. Krog herself later commented on the Yengeni scandal, saying, 'we think we know what is right and wrong' (Smook 2009). However, she suggests that the media outrage against corruption leaves the country with a lack of tolerance which may be counter-productive. 'I am not saying he should be regarded as not guilty. But shouldn't he be treated with an understanding of the complicated and complexness and fucked-upness of oneself inside? [sic]' (Smook 2009).

That South Africans can live with political leaders who at are once past struggle heroes and current corrupt racketeers – coming from a past where they lived with politicians who were past military heroes and current oppressors – speaks much for the national capacity for fractured narrative and the exhaustion of everyday expectation.

Krog has spoken about her need to continually retell her experience of the Commission in a variety of writing genres, remarking that 'we tell stories [so as] not to die of life' (1999: 72). This view of art as an allowing space – a space where one can move, process, sometimes simply exist – brings us to the following installation.

The mediated body

> [The TRC] is exemplary civic theatre, a public hearing of private griefs which are absorbed into the body politic … in the face of the strength of the theatre of the Commission, the question arises, how can any of us working in theatre compete with it? Of course we can't and don't try to. … our theatre is … trying to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory (Kentridge in Kentridge and Taylor 1998: ix).

William Kentridge is South Africa's pre-eminent contemporary artist. Exhibit D is drawn from his work, specifically an etching that was part of the short animated film *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1996–97).

Born in Johannesburg to anti-Apartheid activists in 1955, Kentridge is a world-renowned printmaker, filmmaker, dramatist, conceptual performance designer, animator, set designer, draftsman, sculptor and light projectionist. Although he has exhibited work across a startlingly broad range of media, it is perhaps for his short animations, made from charcoal drawings, that he is best known.

Kentridge's method in these works deviates from the traditional notions of animation as a smooth representation of movement rendered from individually distinct drawings. Rather, he works on one large sheet of paper, sketching scenes in charcoal and pastel that he periodically photographs before erasing the necessary lines to unfold the scene incrementally. He has described this palimpsest technique as, 'a testing of ideas; a slow-motion version of thought' where 'the uncertain and imprecise way of constructing […] is sometimes a model of how to construct meaning' (in Christov-Bakargiev et al. 1999: 8).

Indeed, it is easy to see meaningful parallels between Kentridge's personal artistic method and his wider political context. For instance, since traces of his erasure marks leave ghostly tracks in both film and final portrait, it is patently apparent that, in Kentridge's South African landscapes, characters leave their mark – that 'to rub something out is not to make it disappear' (Seddon in Hickey 2007: 40). In this process, too, we see the deliberate referencing of both the slow unfolding of historical time outside the present experience – the sheer, painstaking effort of construction. Seddon speaks of the viewers' awareness of, and participation with, the idea of the 'unseen hand' (in Hickey 2007: 40). By equating this hand with that of the shaping white South African historical narrative that Kentridge is always investigating, Seddon points to the powerful message of the presence of the unsaid, the undone and the invisible, in the artist's work.

Despite their metamorphosis, Kentridge's charcoal drawings are often displayed alongside – sometimes in place of – the final film. In refusing to recognise a difference of status between the composite sketch drawings and the finished film, Kentridge subverts notions of a final product – a neat, finished 'answer' to the subject of exploration. Rather, in celebrating the roughness of draft and deliberately making visible the act of construction, his work privileges process. As he notes, this 'way of working in the world' is a 'polemic for a kind of uncertainty' and that 'one needs art, or politics, that incorporate ambiguity and contradiction' (in Cameron et al. 1999: 34).

Far from giving the viewer an easily-consumed rainbow nation image, Kentridge deliberately searches for the anti-aesthetic:

> I'm interested … in finding the most picturesque aspect of what one's looking at … and then seeing what's either say at 90 or 270 degrees from it … almost invariably it's more interesting and says more about the landscape than the classically conceived or composed place (in Gabassi 2000).

In literally stripping the rainbow palate to his monochromatic depictions, Kentridge's charcoal drawings embrace the chaos of the palimpsest and reveal the contradictions, the uncertainties and the anxieties of contemporary South Africanness.

Given these artistic and political philosophies, Kentridge's fascination with the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was easily understandable. He created a series of works that explored the Commission's impact – including an animated film, a theatrical production and a series of etchings, one of which we focus on here. All of these works focus on Ubu – a character from the 1896 satirical play *Ubu Roi* by French dramatist Alfred Jarry. The original story – of a mediocre official who becomes a despot after violently usurping power, leading a regime that is at once devastatingly violent and deeply ridiculous – becomes a perfect vehicle for examining identities under Apartheid South Africa.

The images themselves depict Ubu as a duality, two rotund and bloated figures overlayed across each other. Two metal plates were used: on the one, simple white, chalky outlines of Jarry's Ubu figure of Ubu are printed from an engraved plate; and on the other, a more fully rendered human figure is printed from an etching plate.

Kentridge applies the same fractured structure, ambivalent endings and visible construction as with his other works, but this time seeks to highlight the complexity of self-deception. The finely etched naked vulnerability of Ubu in Exhibit D, his twisted contortions and anxious self-examinations, is contrasted with the grotesque figure chalked around his body. This shadow self has subsumed the man who, in the case of Exhibit D, tries fruitlessly to catch a glimpse of what he feels must be there but cannot recognise. In some cases, as in the Barcelona etching displays, Kentridge extends the chalk figures directly onto the walls of the gallery space, bleeding the boundaries not only of Ubu's personal accountability, but of our own perceived safe removal as observer. The truth, he shows, may be denied but it cannot be wholly contained.

In interpreting the character of Ubu for his etchings, Kentridge used his own body as a model, posing naked for a series of photographs which served as a reference point for the etchings. Not only is the physical body mediated in various forms to arrive at a body of work, but Kentridge's recognisable selfhood remains etched in the body of the white oppressor – an embodied response to the commission's challenge for South Africans to identify with the humanity of both victim and perpetrator. Kentridge's mirroring suggests a collective complicity in oppression and, consequently, a responsibility in (re)construction. Through the extension of the chalk lines into the viewer's 'sacred space' of the white cube, we are reminded of the complicity between listener and narrator, witness and perpetrator. Kentridge demonstrates a fascination for construction. His bodies of/at work show how deeply the history of violent oppression is etched on the landscape, how crudely our strategic cultural amnesia blunts our actions, how painstakingly slow the process of rebuilding must, by necessity, be. In this way, Kentridge's entire body of work reads as an ode to the contemporary South African condition. Yet, more broadly, this embodied critique of process – whether that be of identification, of memory, of governance – may well resonate far beyond national borders.

The historical body

History cannot even agree on the woman portrayed in my penultimate exhibit's name.

Popularly known as Saartjie (or Saartje/Saartjee) Baartman (or Bartman/Bartmann/Baartmen), some insist on the more 'respectful' first name of Sara(h). (The *–tjie* ending in Afrikaans indicates the diminutive: in this case, 'little Sarah'). While we may never know what this woman called herself during the first twenty years of her life, for the last five she was famous across western Europe as 'the Hottentot Venus' (Holmes 2007: 3).

Little is known of Baartman's early years in the Eastern Cape, where she was living in her Khoisan community. After losing her husband and family in a raid, she was sold into slavery and transported to the Cape, where she was given the name Saartjie. Baartman's physicality – particularly her genetically characteristic large buttocks and culturally characteristic elongated labia (inner-labia stretching is sometimes practiced by women in Sub-Saharan Africa) – intrigued British merchants and, in 1810, a deal was struck whereby she would be taken to London and exhibited as a curiosity.

Even for the time, the conditions Baartman found herself in raised alarm amongst many who saw her. Kept in a small cage and made to wear a tight-fitting, skin-coloured loin cloth, Baartman was displayed as a sexualised savage with onlookers often urged to 'feel her posterior parts' (2009: 80). A lawsuit was brought against the man who displayed her and Baartman was asked to give testimony without him present and with full assurances of her security. Her response has dismayed historians ever since. Baartman stated she had 'everything she wants; has no complaints to make against her master or those who exhibit her; is perfectly happy in her present situation; has no desire whatsoever of returning to her own country', indeed, her only complaint was that she often felt cold (Crais and Scully 2009: 100). Whilst her decision may have been the result of many different pressures and complex allegiances, the fact remains that Baartman was offered a free return passage to South Africa, but chose instead to remain, earning money from displaying her difference under conditions everyone, but her, spoke out against as exploitative.

Upon Baartman's death – the cause of which is, once again, disputed – one of Europe's most prominent anatomists Georges Cuvier dissected her body. He preserved her brain and genitals and made a full-body plaster cast which remained for the next two centuries in Paris (Crais and Scully 2009: 2). Artists painted the cast and added details like hair and – ironically – a small loincloth for modesty (2009: 139). From a body that was read at various points as a provider of free labour, a dispenser of available sexuality, an abnormal curiosity, an object of science, an artistic muse, a legacy of colonial atrocity and a battleground of postcolonial politics, very little remains in Baartman's own voice. Her body is everywhere available to us, but nowhere able to be clearly read. Indeed, as Crais and Scully have commented, 'Europeans created the Hottentot Venus. Sara entered Europe's psyche, modernity's psyche, not as a woman, but as a metaphor' (2009: 6).

South African artist Willie Bester's metal sculpture of Baartman is displayed in the University of Cape Town's main library, significantly in the section reserved for Science and Technology. In several ways, it resonates eerily with Cuvier's full body cast: in both cases, a man is re-making Baartman's body for display in contexts of science and learning. However, Bester has deliberately denied a realist narrative,

fashioning Baartman's body out of hundreds of cast-off pieces of iron, recycled from the scrap heap to form a skeleton and musculature which is at once disturbing in its metallic manufacture and paradoxically suggestive of surprisingly soft and giving flesh. Baartman's infamous curves are cold, her face turns away and refuses to meet our gaze, the springs, pistons and pipes all flex, as if poised with some inner kinesis, some mechanised locomotion that has yet to be activated.

There is an obvious resonance with the concept of disposability – of discarded, (dis)functional parts – but also, significantly, of anachronism. After all, these mechanical parts are from our own era, reminding us of the impossibility of historical authenticity, of how our view can only be made through the means at our disposal in our present, of how there never was anything 'natural' about Baartman's body. We have, Bester may well say, all created Baartman.

Bester contrasts the illusion of composite fleshiness in the sculpture's torso with a lean line of limb. Indeed, the streamlined functionality of the lower half of her limbs remind one of nothing so much as amputee prosthetics. Furthering this association, what Bester gives in dignity (a steel loin cloth, a coin-spangled headdress), he denies in normalcy as his creative bio-mechanics refuses her a complete frame, one foot crudely rendered as a simple pulley with no attempt to cast it with more anatomical accuracy. Forever 'unfinished', a loin-clothed Baartman stands backed against a pillar, artist and curator working together to constantly deny the observer a view of those parts for which she is most famous.

Ironically, Bester's sculpture was also originally much disliked by members of the University of Cape Town's student body who considered it 'disrespectful' of Baartman's African femininity (Buikema 2007: 72, 79). Ironically, the very same sculpture was rejected for display at a private function by MP Tony Yengeni – with whom we have already been acquainted in this article – as being 'not African enough' (Loots 2001).

Clearly, Baartman, a nineteenth-century woman simultaneously over-exposed and under-known, still brings to light the ambivalence of position-taking around the social manufacturing of bodies and the individual terms of their presentation. Is Bester once again exploiting Baartman by exposing her body to public scrutiny? Are we continuing her fetishisation or challenging it? I would suggest that we are led to thinking in broader terms about how embodiments are enhanced, constructed and known today. Bester's sculpture draws the viewer into both an awareness of active construction, and a request for self-aware consumption, of embodiments.

The carnival body

On the slopes of Signal Hill – a lookout point with sweeping views across Table Bay – is a district called Bo-Kaap. Literally translated as Above the Cape, it was originally a community for freed Indonesian and Malay slaves, sent to the hill beyond the bounds of the then-contained Cape Colony. Despite the ensuing passage of time – including the violent reshaping of the cityscape that forced removals enacted – Bo-Kaap retains a

palpable sense of its heritage. Many of the streets are still cobbled, houses are typically square, simple semi-detached slave cottages in the Cape Dutch style, the drone of morning and evening prayer is broadcast through suspended Mosque speakers. And yet, encroaching modernity is everywhere apparent.

In the most obvious trend towards modernity, many Bo-Kaap houses are painted bright shades of pink, yellow, green – their flat, unfussy exteriors transformed in an explosive riot of colour that ensures photographic snapshots of this increasingly gentrified community now wing their way around the world by postcard. Originally this painting practice was borne of the joyful celebration at the end of Ramadan where, as with the new set of colourful clothing that would dress the body, a fresh coat of colourful paint would be applied to the home. Now, with occupant diversity, it is tied less to a sense of religious and more to a sense of residential community.

Scenes such as those described in my Exhibit E can be found on the second day of every January, extending the violent bursts of colour from the walls of the Bo-Kaap community in a winding rainbow of harlequin silk suits through the streets of greater Cape Town. *Tweede Nuwe Jaar* (Second New Year) is an historic holiday celebrated by many in the Cape Coloured community, marking the annual concession day slaves were given in the Colony. In a tradition that dates back to the 1800s, the day is routinely marked with a street parade, drawing curious spectators and concerned speculation in equal parts. Despite this ambivalence, its overwhelming local popularity and feature as a tourist drawcard has led to it occupying an uneasy centrality in the Cape cultural landscape.

The unease stems neither from the celebration of slavery roots, nor from the inconvenient road closures, but rather from the specific form the procession takes as it winds through central town, culminating in dramatic fashion in Bo-Kaap itself. Over seventy organised minstrel clubs practice a repertoire of traditional songs and dances throughout the year and decide upon the colour and design of their distinctive silk suits. One of the most famous songs celebrates the moment when, in 1863, a Confederate ship called 'The Alabama' docked in Table Bay. Despite the political allegiance, the crew made a great impression on the local Coloured slave population and, since then, the resounding chorus '*Daar kom die Alibama / die Alibama dit kom oor die see*' [There comes the Alabama / the Alabama it comes over the sea] accompanies the procession across town. That local slave descendants would sing a song celebrating a Confederate ship is certainly incongruous. However, the scene rapidly becomes infinitely more perplexing.

Participants parade in their suits, often clutching silken umbrellas and painting their faces either in the chosen colours of the troupe or in traditional American blackface. There is often one man per troupe who dresses up in women's clothes, or otherwise engages in highly effeminate gesturing, popularly called the *moffie* (a homophobic slur, analogous to 'faggot'). Adding to the cultural discomfort is the *atjas* – a figure dressed as a stereotypical American Indian who chases onlookers with a faux tomahawk, often accompanied by children dressed as devils. In one event, then, a performative celebration of centuries of racial and gendered oppression takes to the streets of a racially-loaded area of town to celebrate their emancipation from slavery.

The anxiety over cultural ownership can be seen in the choice of name itself – the government recently stepping in to insist on a name change from the widely-accepted 'Cape Coon Carnival' to the more sanitised 'Cape Minstrel Carnival', allegedly after complaints by tourists. Participants still regularly refer to themselves as Coons or the *Kaapse Klopse.* As a troupe coach explains:

> The Americans come and they don't want us to use the word Coon because it's derogatory for the people. Here Coon is not derogatory in our sense. For us the minute you talk Coon … he sees satin and the eye and mouth with circles in white, the rest of the face in black, like the American minstrels (in Martin 2000: 4).

Surely, though, that is exactly what there is to see? How can a non-ironic African performance of a racially denigrating American tradition, coupled with complex parodies of gendered difference be claimed as an empowering cultural practice? Hardy Dollie, the head of the V&A Minstrel Troupe positions minstrelling as not only culturally central to the Coloured community, but as a fundamentally embodied cultural experience: 'For some people it is rugby, for others cricket. For others, this – singing – is their sport (Kendal 2011).

Indeed, the connection between minstrelling and the national sports culture is reinforced by many. Community organiser Faidal Gasant speaks of the importance of the carnival for the upliftment of at-risk communities, saying: 'The minstrels and the football together, we have to do this. If we don't, we're going to get more kids doing bad things' (in Kardas-Nelson 2013). Seventeen-year-old Leanne Warth, from Manenberg (a gang-riddled community on the Cape Flats) backs this up, saying, 'I sing in the choir and it gives me something to do. I'm proud to be a minstrel because it's a sport (in Kardas-Nelson 2013).

Nadia Davids suggests that to see the carnival merely about articulating a hybrid group's disease with their racial marginality and history, or as an indictment against mainstream cultures, is to fundamentally miss the nuanced underlying tensions in the performance (2013). For a group that has been rendered conveniently invisible, what more visible way to protest than through a colourful, culturally confounding reminder of the legacy of oppression? The ostensibly light-hearted, celebratory tone of the event also functions to render it socially safe, allowing for a space of more freedom. How better to disempower more socially powerful bodies than to render one's own culturally unintelligible, to defy the sensibilities of 'good' taste and the 'suitable' narratives of empowerment others ascribe?

Davids' reading of the carnival as part social challenge, part reclaiming of a city space that functions practically, if no longer officially, to hide working class and black people, allows for a nuanced reading of spatial embodiment. For many Capetonians, *Tweede Nuwe Jaar* is the only time they are visible, let alone celebrated, in a city that is increasingly unwelcoming towards those of lower socio-economic backgrounds. It is no coincidence that the majority of those who participate in the celebrations are not residents of Bo-Kaap but, instead, of working-class communities in the Cape Flats (Kendal 2011), a geographically undesirable area of distant suburbs where mixed race communities were historically relocated under Apartheid and which are now plagued

with gang violence and poverty. Naturally, this geographical and ideological claiming of prized space steps on many toes, with Central Business District residents complaining at the high rate of crime the carnival brings in its wake and many urban-based Muslim community members arguing the festivities do not represent their experiences and disturb their own prayer ceremonies (Oktober 2014).

During Apartheid, the carnival was severely restricted, with the parade route initially being banished out of the city centre, resulting in a scattering of local support and centralised organisation. It was none other than Nelson Mandela who revived the legitimacy of this form of expression and access to space when, in 1996, he opened festivities in centralized Green Point Stadium in his own silken suit made up of the ANC colours of green and yellow. Despite Mandela's reinstatement of the parade's cultural capital and its continuation amid funding challenges, the minstrels were, however, only allowed access to their preferred historic route from District Six (in central town, site of famous forced removals) to the Bo-Kaap from 2012. 'For people who were kicked out of town, to follow that route […] which traces the history of the community and connects working class Cape Town [is] very emotional. It's bittersweet', explains social historian Lalou Meltzer (in Kardas-Nelson 2013).

In painting the town red, green, blue, pink and yellow, the carnival can be read as a rainbow challenge – an amalgamation of multiple cultural oppressions and a gamut of emotions through a cityscape that would shamefully relegate these embodied experiences to the past. That it discomforts the upper classes, the fact that it offends the sensibilities of the 'haves' is no doubt well and good – why should the 'have nots', after all, be ashamed of their own (past or present) subjugation? What appears as a clownish celebration is a path of confrontation and contestation, where January second becomes once again the sole day of the year when the marginalised, mixed-race, working-class body can occupy the city on its own terms.

Davids references Melvin Matthews, Chief Executive Officer of the Carnival, who explains that he sees no elements of blackface in the performance, as, '[y]ou can paint it green or blue or red or white or whatever […]. It's not about the race' (2013: 89). Perhaps, then, the face paint should be read only partially in terms of a blackface narrative that is not subverted, but rather celebrated for subversive ends. Perhaps any reading should also include elements of the mask – a means of complex cultural allegiance and identification which enables the wearer to transcend social and political barriers that would, ordinarily, render them trapped.

Conclusion

Here, I would like to pause for a moment and take you out of the noisy, colourful streets of Bo-Kaap up country, to the lush grounds of William Kentridge's Johannesburg house, where – alongside several friends, his golden Labrador and a film crew – he is having a garden party. 'São Paolo is so much like Johannesburg', he says to the camera, 'it's not the Amazon, which is like the Kruger Park. And it's not like Rio which is like Cape Town, the beautiful part with the sea. It's the tough money business part' (in Gabassi 2000). A woman next to him nods. 'The comparative model is always being

made between South African and Brazil', she says. 'the sort of under-development and over-development within one economic system'. 'It's skyscrapers and shacks!' a man interjects. People laugh; someone repeats the phrase in satisfaction. 'It's the celebration of the carnival', the woman continues. 'Particularly that in South Africa the carnival has failed. With the state repression of the so-called Coon Carnival and the shutting down of coloured street culture in Cape Town. Brazil has always been the story of ourselves that we didn't allow ourselves to follow. That kind of celebration of diversity'. 'It's only jealousy', says Kentridge, a beatific smile on his face. 'We would love to have something like that here every day' (in Gabassi 2000).

At the risk of disturbing Mr Kentridge's lunch, perhaps we can suggest that this is, indeed, what South Africans have – the carnival, every day. In these embodied positions, in the many millions of others stemming from sudden social inversions, incongruous space occupation, body-centric celebration of inclusivity and joyful deposing of old power structures, it is certainly easy to read something of Bakhtin's carnival in the everyday. Perhaps, though, ours is the carnival without end – a darker place of overwrought revelry without focussed political rebellion.

Before we entirely sour the Pinot at the lunch, however, perhaps we should return once again to Antjie Krog's belief that telling stories enables one not to die of life (Krog 1999: 72). In witnessing the confusion around empowered performance, we may think of Baartman's choice, of the *Kaapse Klopse's*, and realise the limits of reading cultures. We cast our minds back to Mandela stepping into costume, no longer to avoid embodied repercussions as The Black Pimpernel, but to create them as a leader who lends his capital bodily to uplift maginalised positions. We hear Yengeni deny Bester's sculpture's 'Africanness' because of its portrayal of complex oppression, see Kentridge's ghostly traces of past process in present product. We may think of the connections between victim and perpetrator and reflect that, if there is ever a truth to be found in rainbow rhetoric it is that there are a hundred different shades on the spectrum between black and white. Again, we come back to the Cape colour, on the faces, the bodies, the walls.

And so the Carnival performance continues, year after year. Sweating in January heat, revellers and spectators alike climb up Signal Hill's slopes, where Bo-Kaap looks inwards, over Table Bay where the Dutch first landed, over exclusive city bowl penthouse apartments and further out, towards the dusty, flood-prone Cape Flats. Just on the other side of the hill, in the intermingled currents of Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the silently symbolic Robben Island sits, low-slung in the water and entirely hidden from view.

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