The Icon of the Hottentot Female
And The Reclamation of Black Female Sexuality and Bodily Representation

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Abstract
This paper follows Sander Gilman in his examination of iconography and how icons have functioned in subsuming the identity of entire classes of people. In the late nineteenth century, the icon of the Hottentot female stood in to represent the identity of the black female. This paper examines the ideological forces that drive the representation of the black female, its relation to the slave trade, and the ways in which the icon can be deconstructed and dismantled to enact resistance and agency.

In “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” Sander Gilman illustrates the function iconography has in reflecting historically specific ideologies that work to construct notions of race, class and gender. Icons, Gilman contends, do not present the world but represent it. Therefore, when individuals are portrayed within art work or within medical discourse, “the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates.” However, the repercussion of this specific form of representation is that the individual is identified as belonging to a certain class or group. Through the function of iconography, what is dangerous about representing the individual is that the characteristics assigned to the individual can subsume the identity of an entire class of people. Therefore, this essay will examine how iconography functions in subsuming the identity of black women, specifically through the icon of the Hottentot female.

The Hottentot often stands in to represent the essence of the black female. This essay will observe the ideological forces that drive the representation of Hottentot as a justification of slavery and the abuse of black women within the slave economy. Furthermore, this essay will examine a counter-representation of the black female slave within Lorena Gale’s Angélique. I argue that though the icon of the Hottentot female functions as a repressive tool in justifying the appropriation and the enslavement black women’s bodies. By revealing the constructive nature of the icon,

2 Ibid, 204.
it becomes possible to reclaim and redefine icons in order to form resistance and alternative representations that run counter to the dominant narratives of the time.

Through his examination of European history, Gilman examined the racial typology that scientists used in categorizing black men and women. By the eighteenth century, Gilman claims that the sexuality of both black men and women became metonymic for deviant sexuality in general. The icon of the sexually deviant black man or woman provided a justification for the construction of black people as an inferior race. George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, a sixteenth century French naturalist, for example, found a way of taking early travel literature and placing it within a “scientific context.” Under the guise of scientific discourse, Buffon made observations on the “apelike sexual appetite of the black woman” and stated that their insatiable sexuality “went so far as to lead black women to copulate with apes.”

Buffon’s views reflected a westernized belief in the “Great Chain of Being,” — a medieval concept in which the universe was organized within a strict hierarchy of species. Observations on the “nature” of other than western races used the great chain of being as a scale to indicate what were seen as ‘innate’ differences between groups of people. As Gilman states, “in this view of mankind, the black occupied the antithetical position to the white on the scale of humanity.”

Comparisons between what was European and what was other than European were made to establish differences between all “human” characteristics. Sexuality and beauty, specifically for women, served as major indicators of class and racial superiority. In defining black sexuality and beauty, black characteristics such as genitalia embodied the antithesis of European sexual mores and European bodily aesthetic. The Hottentot, who was considered to be on the lowest rung of the “great chain of being,” often represented the ‘normal’ body and sexuality of black women at the time. With this in mind, Gilman argues that “the physical appearance of the Hottentot is indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon of sexual difference between the European and the black.”

As Gilman’s article demonstrates, the scientific discourse of early European scientists and doctors carried a culturally specific bias. However, that cultural bias demanded that the black body be constructed as inferior and “other” to that of the white body. The “biological differences” of black men and women were defined as inferior in their relation to the pathologization of the anatomical ‘anomalies’ of the Hottentot female. Specifically, scientists described that these anomalies were located in her “primitive genitalia” or her “Hottentot apron,” and a “remarkable development"
to her labia minora or nymphae." The image of the Hottentot genitalia carried a set of implications which served to define the anomalies of the genitalia as inherent, biological variations rather than environmental adaptations. As one gynaecologist described it, the "Hottentot apron" was an "error." Furthermore, the overdeveloped clitoris, he claimed, resulted from what was described as "excesses" and sexually deviant behaviour including the indulgences of "lesbian love". With this interpretation, the Hottentot, as the marker of black femininity, characterized black sexuality as being in "excess," justifying the treatment of black men and women as a biologically inferior class.

The treatment of Saartjie Bartman is probably the best example of how the Hottentot was demonized as an "other," by making a spectacle out of her physical "deviancy." Saartjie Bartman, who was also known as the "Hottentot Venus," had her body put on display for over five years across Europe. In this case, what became the site of fixation for the European spectators was her steatopygia, otherwise known as her "protruding buttocks." Along with her genitalia, her buttocks became another signifier of hyper-sexuality. However, the spectacle that the white colonialists made of her body did not cease upon her death. When she died, her body underwent various autopsies by white European men. For example, zoologist Georges Cuvier compared her body to the anatomical structure of an orang-utan.

As others followed in their representations of the Hottentot woman, the focus on her genitalia and her buttocks functioned as a way of distinguishing races, and therefore allowing scientists to describe race as polygenetic category. In other words, different racial categories of people were considered to have different origins of species. As Gilman argues, "if their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orang-utan." Within this context, the construction of black people as a separate and inferior species enabled the justification of Europeans to enslave black men and women despite the European indoctrination of the Enlightenment. Within this context, the ideals of equality and liberty for all were denied to black men and women, because within the discourse of scientific "reason", black people were seen as less than human.

During this period, the black female slave was specifically marked by her associations with an animal or the icon of the Hottentot female. The link between the body of the black female slave and the body of the Hottentot female materialized in terms of how black women were defined by their sexuality. Activist and scholar Angela Davis attempted to rewrite and revisit the representation of the black female

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7 Ibid, 218.
8 Ibid, 213.
9 Ibid. 216.
slave within North American history. In her book, *Women, Race, and Class*, she argues that "the ceaseless arguments about her [the black female slave's] 'sexual promiscuity'... obscured, much more than they illuminated, the condition of Black women during slavery." By labeling black women as sexually promiscuous, this allowed black female slaves to be dehumanized and treated like chattel by their white slave owners. The pathologization of female sexuality had specific ramifications on how the experiences of black female slaves were uniquely shaped in comparison to the experiences of black men. The body, and its relation to women's experience of reality, made certain conditions of slavery a gendered experience.

The experience of slavery was gendered because within the American plantation economy, "the slave system defined people as chattel" and "women no less than men were viewed as possible labor-units." As women were considered anomalies to the nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, black women were no longer seen as women, and were treated as genderless when it remained profitable to exploit them in the same manner as men. However, Davis notes that this changed because "when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female role." This specifically female role entailed isolation and exploitation of women's sexual parts. This particular form of exploitation especially occurred when the abolition of the international slave trade threatened the cotton picking industry in the United States. Plantation owners determined that the best way to replenish their labour force was to rely on natural reproduction, thus placing a premium on the slave women's reproductive capacity.

A specific requirement for the female slave was to ensure that her mind must become detached from her body. Again, her association with the Hottentot marked her body as animal-like, hypersexual, and therefore, it was believed that she no longer had intellectual claim over her bodily functions and her body parts. The separation of the black woman into body parts meant that, as an incomplete human being, it was okay to exploit and appropriate her specific body parts as they were needed. However, in this case, the fixation with black women’s genitalia, or as M. Nourbese Philip’s defines it, the space between the legs, was fetishized for its "baby-making potential" in contributing to what Nourbese calls the "plantation machine." Therefore, as Philips argues, "the Black woman comes to the New World with only the body. And the space between."

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 6.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
The consequence of this backward view of black women’s genitalia is that they were seen as “breeders”—animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers.\textsuperscript{18} Because black women were defined as chattel-producers who possessed an animal-like sexuality, sexual encounters between black men and women were seen as primitive and functioned well within the purposes of the slave economy to supply white masters with more free labour power. Furthermore, their bodies were not only used to produce labour power, but to “service the Black man sexually, to keep him calm.”\textsuperscript{19} Like the Hottentot, the black female slave was regarded as no better than a body whose purposes were limited to producing “chattel” and pacifying black men by satisfying them sexually. In sum, black women were reduced to an object of sexuality and capitalist exploitation.

As Gilman underlined in his article, the representation of individuals is important in shaping our understanding of entire classes of individuals. As previously discussed, the icon of the Hottentot stood in to represent the black woman as animal-like and “other” than human. This provided a justification for the use of women’s bodies as “baby machines.” Lorena Gale’s \textit{Angélique} is a Canadian play that remembers the life of a historical figure whose black body became sexualized and forced into becoming a “baby machine” by a Montreal businessman and his wife. Given the name, Marie-Joseph Angelique by her owners, she was later convicted for burning down her master’s home, leading to the destruction of a large portion of Old Montreal. Though she was silenced and marked as guilty by many historians, Gale’s play is an attempt to give Angelique a voice. Unlike the aesthetic icons of the black females discussed in Gilman’s piece i.e. the figure of the black female servant in paintings such as “A Rake’s progress” and “A Harlot’s progress,” \textit{Angélique} is an icon that is re-inserted into the aesthetic realm as a figure of black female resistance.

In the Gale’s play, \textit{Angélique}’s body is presented as an object to her white slave owner, an object to be commandeered under his control. As the narrative follows her owner’s struggle to do what is financially beneficial for his business, he thus introduces her to the slave of his business partner so that he can begin to exploit her reproductive capacity. In their encounter, César, the black male slave, tells \textit{Angélique} that “my master says that you are to be with me now... you have been chosen for me.”\textsuperscript{20} In this transaction, her body is reduced to a sexualized object, or something that can be transferred from one man to another. Furthermore, this handling of her body indicates the slave owner’s belief that she has no choice, that she is sexually promiscuous, and that she would take anyone who is given to her. While Angelique and Cesar are interacting, the two slave owners observe their encounter. “Perhaps they are like dogs,” one comments, “a bitch in heat struts past

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\item \textsuperscript{18} Davis, \textit{Women, Race and Class}, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Philips, \textit{AGenealogy of Resistance}, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Lorena Gale, \textit{Angélique} (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1999), 16.
\end{itemize}
and the first thing that happens is they sniff each other out... Most animals do that.”

This treatment of black sexuality as primitive and animal-like is reminiscent to the conclusions drawn by Buffon or Cuvier in the Sander Gilman piece. The two men also revel in the idea that “those two will turn a profit for us in no time” showing that they see the sexual interaction between black men and women as just a mere process in facilitating their business interests.

However, whereas the space between the legs or the fixation of the black female’s sexuality may be used as a site of oppression, Gale presents the possibility of reclaiming sexuality and using sexuality as a site of resistance. Contrary to the Hottentot, who was seen as an animal who was alienated from her body, Angélique demonstrates that a black woman can have intellectual control over her body.

The first example of this in the novel is her refusal to allow her body to be treated like a cow’s body, a body that produces labour power to be bought and sold to the “plantation machine.” In the instance in which Angélique does bear a child, she claims her right over her child and her reproductive body by smothering her child. This act occurs as a means of preventing the appropriation of her child, and having her child be raised to be treated like an animal much like herself. It is also a statement about having control over her reproductive capacities by refusing to give her owner: the chattel that he demands. Yet, in no way is this meant to be an act of cruelty but instead, serves as an act of release. Singing to her child, she sings “fly home and greet the darkness. There are others waiting there, Mama loves you and will join you soon.” In contrast, this act is meant to liberate her child from the chains of slavery, implying that there will be a better life after death than being born into slavery.

A second example of Angélique reclaiming her body and sexuality is when she rejects César and chooses a new lover, a white man named Claude. Though the Hottentot was seen as possessing an “excess,” or a deviant and indiscriminate sexual appetite, in contrast, Angélique makes it clear that she possesses choice and control over her own body. Her ability to reject César demonstrates sexual agency by asserting that no one but herself can actively allow another person to trespass her bodily boundaries. As Angélique tells César, “the only reason we’re together is because our masters say so... I don’t choose you at all. Claude has a choice. He chooses me.” The idea of choice actively displaces the notion that she is just an animal because as a human being, her mind informs her body’s movement, allowing her body to be sexual but only through choice. Furthermore, her ability to choose a lover demonstrates a rejection of enslavement, allowing her to reclaim the human emotions that had been denied to her when she was treated as an animal-slap.

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21 Gale, Angélique, 17.
22 Ibid.
23 Gale, Angélique, 23.
24 Ibid, 46.
Angélique demonstrates that she can be loved and that someone can choose her, she again exerts her human consciousness. The representation of female struggle and resistance, and the representation of a woman who reclains her sexuality and her ability to love presents a counter-representation to the dehumanized icon of the Hottentot female. Furthermore, by giving Angelique a story, her voice is made human and rebellious, reclaiming the stories that have been appropriated and silenced. In contrast to the Hottentot female, Angélique demonstrates that her body cannot be claimed.

As demonstrated through Gale’s text, when icons are used to reproduce repressive stereotypes of people, perhaps one of the best ways to enact resistance is to create counter-narratives and counter-representations that oppose the dominant narratives that construct our understanding of individuals. What is perhaps most important about Gilman’s article is that it reveals many of the ways in which race, sexuality and gender are socially constructed instead of being innate. The distinction between social construction and biological essentialism is especially important in terms of deconstructing the icon of the black female. Through the historical examination of the Hottentot female for example, one can examine how the process of “othering” takes place, and the political and economic purposes for which this icon was constructed. Therefore, when the big “T” truths of a society’s discourse become destabilized and questioned, perhaps those who have been “othered” can be given a voice and in turn, revoke authority from the dominant ideologies and figures.

Works Cited


