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Barry David Horwitz

From Venus Hottentot to Slumdog Millionaire: Imperialist Culture in Suzan-Lori Parks' Venus

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Suzan-Lori Parks' play, *Venus*, is based on the journey of Saartjie Baartman, an African woman taken from South Africa in 1810 to exhibit herself in London and Paris. It is a story of commercial, scientific and sexual exploitation that reveals the cultural consequences of imperialism.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L288xH369/VenusPostersm-ddce8.jpg>

Baartman's voyage seems like a strange theme for a young African-American playwright in 1990. Why does Parks, who won the Pulitzer Prize for *Topdog-Underdog* a few years later, choose this ugly episode in the history of empire? Why does she bring forth the case of one exploited young African woman who was exhibited as a "freak" in Europe from 1810 until her death in 1826?

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Baartman, who became a marvel for her Steatopygea, stands for the many victims of English, French, Dutch, and South African colonialism. Her elaborate and extensive *derriere* amazed, amused and startled Europeans, making her a challenge to standards of beauty in the Romantic era. As the so-called "Venus Hottentot", she became a sideshow freak, earning money, fame, and love at the hands of her capitalist masters. In Parks' play, she has no other name but Venus. Parks' play poses a question: Is she the victim of colonization, or does she profit from her own exploitation?

The idea that the oppressed are somehow complicit in the system responsible for their subjection and exploitation is nothing new. In her play Parks reveals that the methods of imperialist oppression have not changed.

In this light, a comparison with Danny Boyle's film, *Slumdog Millionaire* can be instructive. Boyle portrays the slums of Mumbai in all their sordid horror, but tells a story of rags to riches suggesting that exceptional intelligence can win out over social discrimination and oppression thanks to a televised quiz show! Is Saartjie Baartman's situation similar to that of the Indian children in *Slumdog Millionaire*, somehow exploiting the system that has ground them down for generations? Strange as it may seem, this interpretation has been suggested in both these cases.

Today, movies have replaced the "freak" shows of the past. Instead of bringing African peasants or Indian children to amuse us, now we film Indian children suffering in Mumbai to watch at home. This way we don't have to pay them too much, perhaps only a plane ticket to the Oscars. *Slumdog Millionaire* denies the impoverished children their creativity and humanity. Creativity seems to emanate from the powerful westernized producers of the TV show — "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" — and the film itself. The TV quiz show in Danny Boyle's movie is the freak show that puts the suffering of the poor victims on stage for the "civilized" world to see and enjoy. Like Parks' *Venus*, the children are put on a pedestal for admiration and exploitation.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L301xH400/Baartman-1-259b9.jpg>

Do Venus and Jamal, Boyle's young genius in *Slumdog*, represent the lucky survivors of western imperialism, or are they the rare token Cinderellas who lure untold millions to their destruction? In other words, are they literary pawns to assuage western consciences and to justify continued oppression in America, in Europe and beyond? *Slumdog Millionaire* rationalizes our continuing to live the way we live. While *Slumdog Millionaire* exploits our prejudices and prejudgments, Parks' *Venus* explains how gender and class exploitation remain the basis of capitalism in America and the west. We are not much further from slavery than was Baartman.

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Venus becomes the exotic African, the hip hop princess of the upper crust for Europe, the Marilyn Monroe of her day. Like rich white teenagers who imitate rap and hip-hop fashion, Parks' representation of the 19th century bourgeoisie

reveals how this ascendant capitalist class emulated, or rather mimicked the colonial slave. They imitated her fashions and physical attributes. Imitation of the real or imagined physical attributes of African people became a fashion in contemporary America as it did in Venus' London and Paris.

In Park's play, the Venus seems to fall for the Baron Docteur, alluding to the Baron Frederic Cuvier's early biological research. In fact, it's the westerners who fall prey to her exotic beauty. In Parks' play, her Venus consumes his exotic chocolates including the *Capezzoli de Venere*. However, Venus catches a venereal disease from her exposure to the Europeans. The very concept of love is exploited to include acquisition of traits and cultures not your own, as heady aphrodisiacs for the anemic, feeble, imperialist culture that surrounds her.

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Cherished values are celebrated, sentimentalized in *Slumdog*, values like cleverness, ingenuity, community, survival and street smarts. These are also the values preached by capitalism and supposedly exemplified in the main character, Jamal. The idea seems to be that the Indian underclass will survive no matter what happens to them. But are these real values or characteristics that these oppressed can ever achieve? The difference between these two works is that Parks' play is based on a real person, whereas Boyle's film is a complete fantasy. And Parks introduces a probing satire that analyses the culture. Boyle wipes out the reality of oppression in India by romanticizing and sentimentalizing his characters. Through their ingenuity they overcome all odds and adversity, including social class and caste, sexual and social exploitation, organized crime, prostitution and torture. *Slumdog* is a wonderful fairy tale in which the underdog wins.

In contrast, Parks' *Venus* reveals the inhumanity residing at the black heart of imperialist culture. For Saartjie Baartman — the anti-Venus — there could be no salvation, no exit from complete degradation. No redeeming sentimentality can be called forth from this romantic European early-nineteenth-century fantasy of scientific progress during which human beings were reduced to objects for the pseudo-scientific scrutiny of people who used them to slake their sexual desires.

Can the Venus or Jamal ever speak with a cultured western accent and access the trivia, the fashions, the knowledge, the literacy and the literature of the west all in one gulp? Why does Boyle pose this question in the movie? Is the knowledge of trivia what the west finally prides itself on, in quiz shows, in examinations, in university degrees? It is difficult not to see Boyle's film as a glorification of the western matrix of trivia, game shows, gambling, and easy money. It is a love story against a backdrop of dumbed-down education, lotteries, and the Las Vegas kitsch that prospers at capitalism's crumbling center. But it doesn't feel like Boyle knew what he was doing or asking.

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As for Suzan-Lori Parks, she too has been accused of siding with the devil. That is some critics claim that she presents the victimized girl as desiring the wealth and luxuries of the western world, which drove Baartman to make the voyage from South Africa to London in 1810. However, the play presents the lies she was told and the degrading treatment to which she was subjected in Parks' comic and evocative style.

In fact, presenting her play in 1990, at the end of the Reagan years, Parks was talking about the situation of African Americans in the USA as a case of domestic imperialism where they have been treated as non-citizens or non-people. Long after the Civil Rights Movement, the United States was still living in a fantasy world of denial and projection, pretending jobs and opportunities were available to African Americans. Baartman, like scores of African-American cultural "attractions", represents an early manifestation of imperialist cultural production in which exoticism entertains the multi-faceted perversities of a master-class. Baartman, the Hottentot Venus, lived at the dawn of this "post-colonial" phenomenon. So the first world still has its own colonies — but they also live at home in the heart of the empire: in the belly of the beast!

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Will the western world ever tire of artistic depictions of the "other", whether the "freak" show from Africa or Asia, or the horrors of Mumbai in *Slumdog Millionaire*? How long will the fruits of imperialism be picked over the delight and titillation of the capitalist world? Although the cultural decadence of a system of oppression involves a long agony, it cannot prevail indefinitely.