

**INVENTION: NEW RESEARCH  
QUESTIONS AND IMAGINATION:  
CENTER OF THE ARTS**

**Making Silence Speak**

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I am glad to be here with you today, and glad that women’s studies has birthed gender studies and conferences with names like *Gender Matters*. As those of us who think about such questions know, in understanding the issues that women face in society and culture as well as how “woman” as a category is variously imagined and constructed in different times and places, it is just as important to ask the same feminist questions in particular about the construction of masculinity. We need to be able to take apart the category in order to envision what we would hope for from men, actual men, the men who are now, for example, just about exclusively the people who are making decisions all around the world for the majority of us.

However, in the 1990s, when I was developing courses and teaching in the gender studies program at the University of Chicago and thinking about these matters in a specific institutional context, I became concerned at what I sniffed as a trend—the trend to so theorize and construct and deconstruct “categories,” that some

were apt to forget women themselves, women in bodies who wrote things that we should read and who also were still grossly underrepresented among the tenured professoriat, women whose voices and actions, in historical, political, and cultural life, were too often marginalized, trivialized, or forgotten. I saw this trend as related to a concurrent rise in cultural studies and diaspora studies—incredibly important fields that make vital contributions—but as “race” also became a category, and much intellectual energy was put into critiquing “essentialism,” I think the focus was lost on actual people of color, *their* voices and contributions, as well as more practically the importance of increasing their—our—presence on campuses and in workplaces. The extreme reaches are not unimaginable: a gender studies without women, “race” studies without black people and other people of color, as though the political struggles of those very people to make those classes and books and programs and departments exist were no longer relevant, as though we were now on the proverbial level playing field.

Perhaps I am an old-fashioned feminist. I *am* an old-fashioned feminist, and a new-fangled, old-fashioned “race-woman.” I came of age as a young woman on the tails of the civil rights and women’s movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I was lucky enough to experience the thrill of my chosen academic field of African-American literature changing dramatically as I studied. In a Black Women’s Literature Class I took as an undergraduate with Henry Louis Gates, with Gloria Naylor as T.A. and mentor, we read books by nineteenth century black women writers that would come back into print, some for the first time since their birth, as the 30-volume Schomburg Library of Black Women Writers. My professionalization has taken place concurrently with a huge and exciting outpouring of writing and scholarship. A Ruth Simmons leads Brown University while Condoleeza Rice guides the President through world crises. This is progress, isn’t it? The bodies are in the right places, but examining the leadership of these accomplished and powerful black women offers a chance to ask, how does gender matter, from a new angle, a harder one

that might go back to uncomfortably essentialist questions about how black women in a white man’s world might hope to improve it.

I also want to share some of my work, some of my poems. The first one I would like to read to you is called “The Venus Hottentot” from my first book, of the same name. A lot of my poetry work is informed by my scholarly interests, which include an interest in recovering and imagining some of the voices of black women whom history has misplaced, ignored, and distorted. This woman called Venus Hottentot was a Southern African woman named Saartje Baartman—we do not know her Xhosa name—who was brought to Europe in the 19th century, thinking she was to become a performer and take money back to her family. She was instead exhibited, nude and caged, at private balls and circuses in London and Paris. People would pay to come and see her and what they wanted to see was her behind and genitalia. The period engravings show a behind that is improbably large, and I believe they tell much more about who was looking than they do about the woman herself. A French scientist named George Cuvier performed all sorts of experiments upon her body. He was interested in the variety of scientific racism that said that if you measured and examined a brain of a European man, that would tell you about his essence. That was where you needed to look to find out about European men, where you could extrapolate from one brain to all of these people. In such a schema it followed that if you were to understand the essence of African women, he believed you should examine—indeed, dissect—their genitalia. He believed the same for Irish prostitutes. As I read about her I thought to myself, the one thing that I needed to hear that I couldn’t find in the historical record was her voice. That is where being a poet gave me a way to imagine it although a great deal of historical research went into the poem because I wanted to be very clear about having it exist in the historical milieu.

The first line of the poem that came to me was, “I am called Venus Hottentot,” because, of course, that was not her given name. After I found a voice for her and wrote her section, I thought, I need to imagine Cuvier. I need to understand. I know

what I think is horrible about him and what is horrible about what motivates him, but what is beautiful about what motivates him? And I thought about somebody looking under a microscope and seeing the world open and bloom. So the poem is in two sections, two created voices.

*The Venus Hottentot 1825*

I. Cuvier

Science, science, science!

Everything is beautiful

blown up beneath my glass.

Colors dazzle insect wings.

A drop of water swirls

like marble. Ordinary

crumbs become stalactites

set in perfect angles

of geometry I'd thought

impossible. Few will

ever see what I see

through this microscope.

Cranial measurements

crowd my notebook pages,

and I am moving close,

close to how these numbers

signify aspects of

national character.

Her genitalia

will float inside a labeled

pickling jar in the Musee

de l'Homme on a shelf

above Broca's brain:

"The Venus Hottentot."

Elegant facts await me.

Small things in this world are mine.

2. There is unexpected sun today  
in London, and the clouds that  
most days sift into this cage  
where I am working have dispersed.

I am a black cutout against

a captive blue sky, pivoting

nude so the paying audience

can view my naked buttocks.

I am called "Venus Hottentot."

I left Capetown with a promise

of revenue: half the profits

and my passage home: a boon!

Master's brother proposed the trip;

the magistrate granted me leave.

I would return to my family

a duchess, with watered-silk

dresses and money to grow food,

rouge and powder in glass pots,

silver scissors, a lorgnette,

voile and tulle instead of flax,

cerulean blue instead

of indigo. My brother would

devour sugar-studded non-

pareils, pale taffy, damask plums.

That was years ago. London's  
circuses are florid and filthy,  
swarming with cabbage-smelling  
citizens who stare and query,  
"Is it muscle? Bone? Or fat?"  
My neighbor to the left is  
The Sapient Pig, "The Only  
Scholar of His Race." He plays

at cards, tells time and fortunes  
by scraping his hooves. Behind  
me is Prince Kar-mi, who arches  
like a rubber tree and stares back  
at the crowd from under the crook  
of his knee. A professional  
animal trainer shouts my cues.  
There are singing mice here.

"The Ball of Duchess DuBarry":

In the engraving I lurch  
towards the *belles dames*, mad-eyed, and  
they swoon. Men in capes and pince-nez  
shield them. Tassels dance at my hips.  
In this newspaper lithograph  
my buttocks are shown swollen  
and luminous as a planet.

Monsieur Cuvier investigates  
between my legs, poking, prodding,  
sure of his hypothesis.  
I half expect him to pull silk  
scarves from inside me, paper poppies,  
then a rabbit! He complains  
at my scent and does not think  
I comprehend, but I speak

English. I speak Dutch. I speak  
a little French as well, and  
languages Monsieur Cuvier  
will never know have names.  
Now I am bitter and now  
I am sick. I eat brown bread,  
drink rancid brother. I miss good sun,  
miss Mother's *sadza*. My stomach

is frequently queasy from mutton  
chops, pale potatoes, blood sausage.  
I was certain that this would be  
better than farm life. I am  
the family entrepreneur!  
But there are hours in every day  
to conjure my imaginary  
daughters, in banana skirts

and ostrich-feather fans.  
Since my own genitals are public  
I have made other parts private.  
In my silence, I possess  
mouth, larynx, brain, in a single  
gesture. I rub my hair  
with lanolin, and pose in profile  
like a painted Nubian

archer, imagining gold leaf  
woven through my hair, and diamonds.  
Observe the wordless Odalisque.  
I have not forgotten my Xhosa  
clicks. My flexible tongue  
and healthy mouth bewilder  
this man with his rotting teeth.  
If he were to let me rise up

from this table, I'd spirit  
his knives and cut out his black heart,  
seal it with science fluid inside  
a bell jar, place it on a low  
shelf in a white man's museum  
so the whole world could see  
it was shriveled and hard,  
geometric, deformed, unnatural.

Next is a poem where the poetic imagination and the scholarly imagination intersected. Yolanda DuBois was the only daughter of W.E.B. DuBois. She is historically a more shadowy figure than her accomplished and famed father. She fascinated me, and I began to listen for her voice. There is a reference in the poem to her very brief marriage to the poet Countee Cullen. Harlem had never seen such a wedding. It was the wedding of the decade. And then afterwards, the groom and the best man went off together, more or less. There is at least one letter from DuBois to Cullen saying, Do be patient with Yolanda, she is young, you must make this marriage work, and so forth, so I thought, let's hear from Yolanda.

*Yolanda Speaks*

I know some call him  
"Doctor Dubious."  
  
I hear how people  
talk. I know who's  
  
called my marriage  
counterfeit. I know  
  
who thinks me stupid.  
I would love  
  
the peace and quiet  
of stupidity,

having witnessed  
the hot hiss of

true intelligence,  
a white noise, a

camphor that over-  
takes the globe.

I have laughed  
at my father's gloves

and spats. My pace  
is my own. I am

a sputtering  
cadmium light

turning on  
like the R.K.O.  
Radio Tower.

And finally, a few poems from my new book, *Antebellum Dream Book*, which has a long section of dream poems, poems which began as dreams and are dreamscapes themselves. I have been thinking about "dream space." There are some writers who have very interestingly said more African Americans should write science fiction because it is such a crucial job to truly imagine the black future, rather than take it as it appears to be mapped out for us. Science fiction is a space where that can happen. So I have been thinking about dream space as a free zone where race and gender and all other sorts of other particulars of identity exist and are present, but perhaps resemble themselves in surprising ways. So I am going to read a few of these dream poems. There is also some relevance in the poems to women and mentorship. First, "The Toni Morrison Dreams." This is for Gloria Naylor, for I was reading Toni Morrison for the first time when I was becoming friends with Gloria. And, of course, Toni Morrison is so important to her work, too. Miss Morrison has come into my dreams.

1. *The Toni Morrison Dreams*

Toni Morrison despises  
conference coffee, so I offer  
to fetch her a Starbucks  
macchiato grande, with turbinado sugar.

She's delighted, can start her day properly,  
draws on her Gauloise,  
shakes her gorgeous, pewter dreads,  
sips the java that I brought her  
and reads her own words:

Nuns go by, as quiet as lust

Everything in silver-gray and black.

2. Workshop

She asks us to adapt  
Synge's "Playboy of the Western World"  
for the contemporary stage.  
She asks us to translate "The Birds."

She asks us to think about clocks,  
see the numbers as glyphs,  
consider the time we spend watching them  
in class, on line, at the hairdresser's.

In class she calls me "Ouidah" and I answer.

"I am the yellow mother  
of two yellow boys," she says.  
I sit up straight.

Now the work begins, and  
Oh  
the work is hard.

3. She does not love  
my work, but she loves  
my baby, tells me  
to have many more.

4. A Reading at Temple University  
"Love," she wrote,  
and "love" and "love" and "love,"  
and "amanuensis," "velvet," "pantry," "lean,"  
Shadrack, Solomon, Hagar, Jadine, Plum,  
circles tsch runagate  
and then,  
she whispered it,  
  
love

I will end with a funny little poem that I think is another "gender matters poem"! It is called "Postpartum Dream Number 12" and is particularly suitable since we are in the Law School:

*Postpartum Dream # 12: Appointment*

I answered all  
the Chief Justice's questions  
impeccably, and it wasn't  
very hard.

I waited  
with my father  
for the phone call.

“I guess I’ll be  
the first black woman  
on the Supreme Court  
if I get this.”

“Damn straight,”  
said my Dad.

The President  
appeared on television  
playing golf and smiling.  
He has a secret.  
His secretary phones  
and asks the question.

Maybe I could do it  
when the baby  
goes to kindergarten. Maybe  
I could do it  
on alternate Mondays.  
Maybe my baby  
could gurgle and coo  
in a pen in my chambers,  
pulling at the curls  
on my barrister’s wig,  
spitting up on my black robes.

Meanwhile,

I’m excited. I turned out  
to be a good lawyer, the best,  
just like my Dad.