FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

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Race, Science and Gender

Producing the black woman's body as the deviant, degenerate “other”

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When an article on the high risk of lower cognitive functioning of “coloured” South African women appeared in March 2019, there was a justifiable outcry from the public, academics, and activists alike that the article perpetuated racial stereotypes. Such stereotypes about the deviance and degeneracy of black bodies had for centuries circulated through colonial discourses on race and white supremacy. These discourses solidified into what critical race theorists have named scientific racism, a type of racism produced by the colonial intellectual enterprise, which sought to classify and codify as inferior any subjects not white and European. In producing the Sport Science article, five white women researchers uncritically and unreflexively reproduced these racist arguments, ignoring decades of anti-racist and postcolonial scholarship. The fact that these researchers had not interrogated their positionality as white women “investigating” the cognitive functioning of “coloured” women, who historically were positioned in subordinate race and class positions to the researchers, further ignited the ire of the article’s critics. What has been missing, however, from most analyses of the article and its scientific flaws, is a discussion also of its sexism, and how discourses of racism and sexism intersect to produce the constructed category “coloured women” as cognitively deficient.

It is no accident that the small sample of 60 subjects focused on women, specifically, as opposed to “coloured” men, or a mixed-gender sample population of women and men. Indigenous South African women, and those descended from enslaved and

hybridised populations during the nineteenth century (i.e. the forebears of those who are today considered “coloured”) have historically been represented as paradoxically deficient and excessive, both intellectually and corporeally.¹ The Sport Science article draws on such stereotypes of bodily excess and intellectual deficiency, which have for centuries clung to the bodies and experiences of indigenous and black African women in the Cape. These discourses were produced through colonialism’s economic project of enslavement and trafficking of the indigenous peoples encountered through conquest. They persist today around the bodies of “coloured” women, and when used in so-called scientific literature, continue to produce dangerous stereotypes about the bodies of “coloured”/black women in South Africa.

What is needed in critiquing these freshly-produced discourses of deviance and degeneracy in “coloured” women is a critical tool that lays bare the ways in which racism and sexism (or gender discrimination) intersect to produce the category “coloured women”, taken as a monolithic racial and gendered group by the researchers of the Sport Science article. With this aim in mind, this chapter seeks to sketch a brief history of representations of race, gender, and sexuality in Southern Africa. It proposes to map the ways in which Western discourses around race and gender produced indigenous Southern Africans as the colonial “other”, and doubly “othered” indigenous and black women through discourses of deviant sexuality and the body. The chapter will describe and outline practices of scientific racism, and focusing on the figure of Sarah Baartman, will show how such theories of race produced gendered as well as racialised colonial subjects. In other words, it will show how race and gender during the colonial period co-constituted each other to produce the racialised and gendered colonial “other”, who lives on today in the degenerate figure of the “coloured” South African woman as produced by the Sport Science article.

On race and racial terminology

The authors of the Sport Science article define the category “coloured” quite narrowly, and their simplistic definition is partly responsible for the outrage against their article. They argue that “the coloured community is, in terms of social class, considered the most homogenous group in South Africa and are generally described as a poor, lower working-class community”.² Such a gross generalisation flattens the fluidity and provisional nature of “coloured” identity, which is generally taken as a socially constructed racial category by critical race theorists.

For the purpose of this chapter, I use the term “coloured” to denote an apartheid racial category, lawfully consolidated by the white Nationalist regime at the start of formal apartheid via legislation such as the Population Registration Act

of 1950. The category “coloured” remains contested in South Africa, and is often mistakenly thought of as shorthand for mixed-race. However, critical race theorist Zimitri Erasmus defines “colouredness” as exemplifying creolised cultural identities “comprising detailed bodies of knowledge, specific cultural practices, memories, rituals and modes of being”.³ Those classified as “coloured” by the apartheid regime include a hybrid mix of the descendants of indigenous Southern Africans; descendants of enslaved people forcibly brought to the Cape from Malaysia, Indonesia, other Asian territories and Madagascar; and descendants of Dutch and British colonisers not designated “white” under apartheid.

Mohamed Adhikari notes that the term “coloured” does not designate blackness in South Africa, as it has historically in other regions, such as Great Britain and the United States of America.⁴ Tracing the genesis of the term “coloured” as a racial signifier in the late nineteenth century, after slave emancipation in Southern Africa, he conceptualises “colouredness” in terms of hybridity:

The coloured people are descended largely from Cape slaves, the indigenous Khoisan population and other people of African and Asian origin who had been assimilated to Cape colonial society by the late nineteenth century. Being also partly descended from European settlers, coloureds are popularly regarded as being of “mixed race” and have held an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population.⁵

Adhikari notes that in the years following the end of formal British slavery at the Cape in 1838, “coloured” identity started forming when the heterogeneous labouring class in the Cape Colony cohered around shared socioeconomic status and assimilation into the lower ranks of colonial society at the Cape:

The emergence of a fully-fledged coloured identity as we know it today was precipitated in the late nineteenth century by the sweeping social changes that came in the wake of the mineral revolution. Not only did significant numbers of Africans start coming to the Western Cape from the 1870s onwards but assimilated colonial blacks and a wide variety of African people who had recently been incorporated into the capitalist economy were thrust together in the highly competitive environment of the newly established mining towns. These developments drove acculturated colonial blacks to assert a separate identity in order to claim a position of relative privilege to Africans on the basis of their closer assimilation to Western culture and being partly descended from European colonists.⁶

What Adhikari’s research shows is the formation of a highly fluid racial and cultural identity, shaped by political, social, and economic forces, and in the crucible of a rapidly intensifying capitalist economy. The category “coloured” was further forged by political exclusion during the first half of the twentieth century in the Cape,

such as the ineligibility of “coloured” people to be elected to the parliament of the Union of South Africa formed in 1910, and finally solidified into a legal identity by apartheid law in the 1950s.

After the end of formal apartheid, the category “coloured” has remained a self-referential racial term for some South Africans, who have subverted the intended white supremacist meanings of “colouredness” and have chosen to embrace and celebrate the idea of being “coloured”. Adhikari argues that the category “coloured” has rapidly transformed in the years following the end of apartheid, and has needed to shift from racial identity into more of a “social identity”.⁷ Erasmus’s contemporary definition of “colouredness” refers to a population group as “loosely bound together for historical reasons such as slavery, creolisation and a combination of oppressive and selective preferential treatment under apartheid: ‘coloured’ is neither a common ethnic identity nor a biological result”.⁸

These are the nuances around “coloured” identity disavowed by the authors of the 2019 article, who chose, instead, to essentialise “colouredness” as “homogenous” and “poor, lower working class”.⁹ After defining the general category “coloured” in this way, the authors go on to produce a number of gendered claims about “coloured” women specifically, staking out their scientific rationale for why this particular group (whom they name “community-dwelling coloured South African women”¹⁰) were deserving of their own study on cognitive functioning:

Coloured women in South Africa are a vulnerable population group, not only at high risk for cardiometabolic diseases, but as the findings of this study suggest, also possibly for low cognitive functioning.¹¹

Before discussing their findings, the authors note that, “It is hypothesized that lower cognitive functioning will be associated with older age and lower levels of education.”¹² The authors go on to say, in their discussion of their findings, that:

Previous research also established that coloured women present with a high incidence of risky lifestyle behaviours including tobacco use, excessive alcohol consumption and recreational drug use as well as an increased prevalence of cardiometabolic diseases ...¹³

What is evident in these representations of “coloured” women is an inherent view of their deficiency and inferiority: if all “coloureds” are generally deemed “poor” and “lower working class”, as the Sport Science article’s definition implies, they are already approached with a deficit mentality. They are presumed to be disadvantaged and lesser than some mythical standard of what is considered fully human. It is hypothesised, even prior to the research study, that the sample will show lower cognitive abilities (than others), specifically at an older age and with lower levels of education. There is already an assumption, going into the research, that lower

cognitive functioning will be found. In the discussion of results quoted above, the group of women are, indeed, found to exhibit “a high incidence of risky lifestyle behaviours including tobacco use, excessive alcohol consumption and recreational drug use ... Thus, evidence suggests that coloured women are exposed to most factors that have known negative effects on cognitive functioning”,¹⁴ rounding off a circular argument and self-fulfilling prophecy where the anticipated degeneracy is, indeed, found to be present in the sample of “coloured” women.

A brief history of race science

Generally, the humanities and social sciences approach the category of race as socially constructed. Kwesi Kwaa Prah, in deconstructing the idea of race, argues that:

There is only one human race ... We know currently that the genetic material responsible for the characteristics that are generally viewed as racial, like hair texture and skin colour, forms less than half of one percent of our genetic make-up and has no cultural or behavioural implications.¹⁵

The use of race as a classificatory system in modern times finds its beginning in colonisation and European imperialist expansion, which included the practice of enslaving human beings for economic gain. European race theorists from the 1600s onward, providing the so-called science behind imperialism’s drive to “other”, and providing a rationale for conquest and enslavement, worked on producing systems of racialisation in the colonies European nations were establishing. Carl Linnaeus, born in 1707, is considered the father of such racial classificatory systems and he identified four races. Part of the work of classifying human beings into different races involved labelling each race with characteristic features that differentiated them from other races, and also producing a hierarchy of superiority. Linnaeus, for example, in his eighteenth-century classificatory system, asserted that:

The American is reddish, choleric, erect; the Asiatic, yellow, melancholy, tough; the African, black, phlegmatic, slack. The American is obstinate, contented, free; the European mobile, keen inventive; the Asiatic cruel, splendour-loving, miserly; the African, sly, lazy, indifferent. The American is covered with tattooing, he rules by habit; the European is covered with close-fitting garments and rules by law; the Asiatic is enclosed in flowing garments and rules by opinion; the African is anointed with grease and rules by whim.¹⁶

Linnaeus’s taxonomy was also hierarchical, with the European at the top of the hierarchy and the African at the bottom. He further named a subspecies *Homo Monstrous*, a category not-quite human, within which he classified the “Hottentots” of Southern Africa. Linnaeus is widely regarded the founder of race science, and his work underlies many later classificatory systems.

Another iteration of scientific racism and its construction can be found in the example of Thomas Jefferson, American president and an author of the American Bill of Rights, who called on scientists to determine “the obvious inferiority” of the racialised, enslaved “other” – partly to justify the practice of slavery, of which Jefferson was a practitioner. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson described black people as follows: “They seem to require less sleep. A black after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning.”¹⁷

I quote these two thinkers, amongst others, to make two points. First, the seeming ease, authority and sense of entitlement evident in both men’s writing, which makes it seem their God-given right to name, define, categorise and define the “other”. The second point the writing demonstrates, in the case of Jefferson, is the work of rationalisation such science performs in order to justify the ongoing enslavement, mistreatment, dehumanisation, and murder of the “other”.

Feminist historian Yvette Abrahams, in the article “The Great Long National Insult: ‘Science’, Sexuality and the Khoisan in the 18th and Early 19th Century”,¹⁸ shows how the Jeffersonian impulse took shape in Southern Africa. Abrahams describes the racist depictions of Africans and the Khoisan in colonial writing as a type of “mental abuse” of indigenous peoples, originating at a time when the Khoisan were subject to enslavement, colonisation and genocide. She argues that the science of classifying, naming and ranking human beings served imperialism by

producing an orderly, known hierarchy in which the place of the white man at the top was legitimised as the “natural” order. In the case of the Khoisan, Linnaeus’s classification system relieved them of the guilt of genocide – when white settlers went to murder the Khoisan, European science offered them the conviction that the people they were killing were not human.¹⁹

Moreover, if indigenous or colonised populations are inferior, less than human, by colonial logic, this provides a justification to steal their land, enslave them, brutalise them when they resist such treatment, and ultimately kill them by genocide, if necessary. It also follows that if the subject thus classified is inferior to Europeans, then Europeans, by white supremacist colonial logic, have a duty of stewardship over indigenous or black people, who, by virtue of being so patently inferior, need guidance. This sense of stewardship flows from a deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of whiteness, and the inherent deficiency of all others not so classified. These are impulses that are evident in the Sport Science article.

These ideologies around the deficiency and degeneracy of blackness and indigeneity found resonance also in representations of blackness and indigeneity under slavery in the nineteenth century. In her work, feminist scholar Desiree Lewis shows how

white femininity during the colonial period was constructed directly against the stereotype, produced in word and image, “of the black/African body as grotesque, uncivilised and crudely sexual”.²⁰ Lewis notes that texts by colonial scientists, travel writers, novelists, artists and poets imagined whiteness through constructing the racialised “other” as bestial, a trope which constructed Africans as innately “biologically different and degenerate”,²¹ and produced indigenous and black/African women in particularly sexualised ways:

Both African men and women have been defined in terms of sexual excess, bestiality and bodily deviance. As many feminist scholars have pointed out, however, gender provides a foundation for the further othering of African female bodies.²²

Abrahams describes the colonial obsession with African bodies as the “genital encounter” that “set the terms for future interaction (between colonists and Khoisan) ... and lies at the heart of the history of Khoisan interaction with whites”.²³ She further shows through her historical research how the nineteenth century marked an increasing obsession with analysing and measuring indigenous African women’s bodies, especially their genitals.

In tracing the relationship of slavery to the sexualisation of the racialised “other”, Gabeba Baderoon²⁴ traces the ways in which discourses of black female sexual deviance were projected by slave owners onto the enslaved. Conceptualising black bodies as deviant and hypersexual provided the rationale for raping women slaves to increase “stock”, to prostitute them, and to enact other forms of sexual violence on them. This normalised sexual violence against black women, so that “enslaved and Khoisan women’s bodies were designated as available for sexual access with impunity”.²⁵ This is evidenced by the fact that not a single man, enslaved or free, was ever convicted of the rape of an enslaved woman during the entire period of slavery at the Cape.²⁶

The intersection of racism and sexism can also be seen in the inhumane treatment of Sarah Baartman by the French scientist George Cuvier, who dissected her body after her death to measure her genitalia and other body parts. Baartman was taken by Hendrik Cezar from the Cape to London, where she was exhibited as the “Hottentot Venus” on the basis that her buttocks were perceived to be abnormally large by European colonisers.²⁷ Attracting large crowds from all over Europe, she was seen as exemplary of the Khoisan of Southern Africa, and displayed as a “freak” by her handlers. After outrage about the indecent nature of her exhibition in London, leading to a court case in which it was unsuccessfully argued that she was being kept illegally as a slave, Baartman was taken to Paris in 1814, where she was examined for her “unusual” anatomy by Cuvier and a team of other French scientists, including anatomists and zoologists. Cuvier measured her body parts, going as far as making a

plaster cast out of her body, and concluded that she was the “missing link” between animals and humans. After her premature death in France in 1816, Cuvier dissected Baartman’s body, preserving both her brain and genitalia, which were on display in the Musée de l’Homme (Museum of Man) until 1972. Baartman’s remains were only repatriated to South Africa and buried in 2002.

Here we see the particularly sexualised way in which indigenous women were viewed as a curiosity, subjected to investigation, measured and represented for posterity. For Abrahams, the development of scientific racism and its gendered aspects rested directly on the body of Baartman and the fascination of colonisers with indigenous women’s anatomies. Scientific racism made indigenous women’s bodies measurable and analysable in terms of sexual deviance. In this way, Abrahams argues, the bonds between sexism and racism became further strengthened in scientific racism, at a historical moment when the physical bonds of slavery were being abolished. For the feminist historian Paula Giddings, the rising fascination with measuring Baartman’s body parts and sexualising her body arose at the same time that freed slaves in Britain and North America were anticipating inclusion into their respective societies as freed citizens and making citizenship claims in spaces where they were formerly enslaved.

While both formerly enslaved/black men and women were hypersexualised under this colonial anxiety, black women were portrayed as sexually “more savage” than men – an idea that underpinned the formation of the Victorian ideal of white womanhood.²⁸ While white women were increasingly denied sexual expression, sexuality came to define black women, and Baartman’s display “was crucial to the success of this process”.²⁹ Abrahams succinctly sums up the colonial obsession with measuring, sexually defining, and sexually “othering” the previously enslaved and indigenous: “As the physical bonds on black people weakened, the discursive ones had to grow correspondingly stronger. Racism and sexism developed together and not separately.”³⁰

Contemporary recursions of scientific racism, and how they produce gender

I locate the contemporary impulse to measure, scientifically name, and define the racialised and gendered “other” – in this case, “coloured” women – with the colonial obsession with naming, measuring and categorising indigenous and African peoples globally.

Nearly a century after Baartman’s cruel display and dissection after death, in 1937, a study was conducted at Stellenbosch University in which 133 men were enlisted in order to document and construct racial categories. The aim of the study was to distinguish white Afrikaners from “coloured” men and, according to journalist Christa Kuljian, it measured skin colour, eye colour, hair texture and more than 80 other

characteristics of the head and body to determine racial type. Thus, we see a continuation of this type of race-based scientific research into the twentieth century, for the purposes of constructing and upholding apartheid racial categorisation. The Sport Science article on “coloured” women continues in a similar vein.

Just like the sexual excess produced by the colonial gaze on black, indigenous women’s bodies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the 2019 study relies on stereotypes of black/“coloured” women as degenerate and revelling in excess. Where the nineteenth century’s race scientists created tropes of sexual excess, the latter-day colonial gaze focuses on brain functioning and cognitive abilities, just a little bit more sophisticated than measuring head sizes, as was done under colonial scientific racism. There is still a discourse of excess produced around black women’s bodies – this time the assumed excess is around consumption of harmful food, excessive alcohol intake, and indulgence in drugs. The gaze may have shifted from the sexualised body, but the perceived degeneracy, and thus, inferiority, of the “coloured” mind is taken as a given. The contemporary obsession with black/“coloured” women’s bodies comes under the guise of good intentions: of wanting to recommend “interventions” to temper the effects of “coloured” degeneracy, paternalistically, “for their own good”. The study further relies unapologetically and unreflexively on apartheid categorisation, racial taxonomy and racial hierarchy, unproblematically labelling “coloureds” the “most homogenous group in South Africa”. In doing so, it seamlessly reproduces colonial and apartheid discourses of the racial degeneracy in black bodies, and excess in black women’s bodies.

Scientists insisting on using race as a category of analysis in contemporary South Africa should note feminist scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola’s admonition that:

The history of race is the history of slavery, colonialism and race science. The various disciplines in the academy that rescue race from an idea and elevate it to a valid ordering and meaning-making system rely on sexual violence, sexual cataloguing and measuring the bodies of the enslaved and colonised.³¹

This does not mean that scholars based in the hard sciences, social sciences, or humanities should altogether refrain from using race as a category of analysis in their research. What is required, however, when using race for the purposes of analysing people’s experiences and lives, is a rigorous reflexivity and critical consciousness of the researcher’s own processes of racialisation, their racial and gendered positionality, and their own racist, sexist and classist assumptions that they bring to such projects. Additionally, what is sorely needed is an acknowledgement of systems of race and racialisation as always socially constructed, specific to historical location, and always embedded within hierarchies and systems of power. Most importantly, researchers attempting to analyse race and systems of racialisation should have a consciousness around race that acknowledges its construction as co-constituting the creation of

hierarchical, unequal power relations globally; its culpability in the creation of systems of enslavement and the forced trafficking of human beings as part of the slave trade; its continued enmeshment in unequal economic and other power relations flowing directly from colonisation and slavery; and its role in contemporary discourses around the degeneracy and deviance of black women's bodies and intellects. Only once race is fully recognised in these ways can one begin productively to account for its implications in contemporary social problems and lives.

Endnotes

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- 2 Sharné Nieuwoudt et al., "Retracted Article: Age- and Education-Related Effects On Cognitive Functioning in Colored South African Women", *Neuropsychology, Development, and Cognition. Section B: Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition* (2019): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825585.2019.1598538>
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- 4 Mohamed Adhikari, "Contending Approaches to Coloured Identity and the History of the Coloured People of South Africa", *History Compass* 3, no. 1 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2005.00177.x>
- 5 Ibid., 1.
- 6 Ibid., 2.
- 7 Mohamed Adhikari, "'Not Black Enough': Changing Expressions of Coloured Identity in Post-apartheid South Africa", 51 (2004): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582470409464835>
- 8 Zimitri Erasmus, *Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017), 112, <https://doi.org/10.18772/12017090589>
- 9 Nieuwoudt et al., "Retracted Article: Age- and Education-Related Effects On Cognitive Functioning In Colored South African Women", 1-2.
- 10 Ibid., 2.
- 11 Ibid., 10.
- 12 Ibid., 2.
- 13 Ibid., 10.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "Race and Culture: Myth and Reality", in *Discourses on Difference: Discourses on Oppression*, ed. Norman Duncan (Cape Town: CASAS, 2002), 12.

- 16 Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae, Sive Regna Tria Naturae, Systematice Proposita Per Classes, Ordines, Genera, & Species* (Leiden: Lugduni Batavorum, 1735), <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.877>, cited in Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "Race and Culture: Myth and Reality", in *Discourses on Difference: Discourses on Oppression*, ed. Norman Duncan (Cape Town: CASAS, 2002), 22.
- 17 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1788). <https://unc.live/2HtFqUK>
- 18 Yvette Abrahams, "The Great Long National Insult: 'Science', Sexuality and the Khoisan in the 18th And Early 19th Century", *Agenda* 13, no. 32 (1997), <https://bit.ly/39EHp4J>
- 19 Ibid., 38.
- 20 Lewis, "Representing African Sexualities", 199.
- 21 Ibid., 200.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Abrahams, "The Great Long National Insult: 'Science', Sexuality and the Khoisan in the 18th And Early 19th Century", 43.
- 24 Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*.
- 25 Ibid., 84.
- 26 Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*.
- 27 Abrahams, "Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth-Century Britain", 220.
- 28 Ibid., 229.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., 223.
- 31 Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (Auckland Park: MF Books Joburg, 2015), 37.

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