The Woman in the Sideshow

By Doris Jean Austin, *New York Times,* September 30, 1990

(Doris Jean Austin is the author of "After the Garden," a novel.)

Elizabeth Alexander has executed a brilliant literary reclamation with her first
Elizabeth Alexander has executed a brilliant literary reclamation with her first
book of poetry, "The Venus Hottentot." Ms. Alexander reintroduces to Western readers an African woman who was paraded as a sideshow freak in 19th-century Europe and whose preserved genitalia, after her death, were displayed in a Paris museum.

Saartjie ("little Sarah" in Afrikaans) Baartman was the diminutive 19th-century African woman with the ample buttocks characteristic of her people who became the historical Hottentot Venus in one of the most bizarre chronicles of European racism. According to the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould's essay on the subject, "The Hottentot Venus," "anthropological theory assessed as subhuman both malformed Caucasians and the normal representatives of other races." Thus did science uphold the displaying of exotic humans in circus-like exhibitions throughout Europe.

Prior to her death, Saartjie Baartman was exhibited as the infamous Hottentot Venus in and around Paris and London for 18 months, accompanied by an animal trainer. She emerged from a cage on a raised platform, presented as a beast, for the scientific community and their wives, as well as all who had the price of admission. Upon leaving Cape Town she'd been guaranteed half the profits of the tour, a ludicrous contract because, even after death, she remained on exhibition. Ms. Alexander's title poem, which encompasses Part One of this slender volume of prose poetry, is the first voice given to Saartjie Baartman, allowing her a sardonic if posthumous response to the French scientist to whom she owes her first immortality: 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.

Upon Saartjie's death of what was called an inflammatory ailment, in 1815 at the age of 25, it was Baron Georges Leopold Chretien Frederic Dagobert Cuvier (1769-1832) who dissected and immortalized Saartjie — her genitalia preserved under a bell jar — in the Musee de l'Homme in Paris, among the preserved skulls of white males, on a shelf just above Paul Broca's brain and, as Mr. Gould writes, in the company of "the dissected genitalia of three Third-World women. I found no brains of women, and neither Broca's penis nor any male genitalia graced the collection." The reader is tempted to rush from line to line, yet is pursued by scenes so vivid and brutal that every word is a blow.

Part Two is a bit of relief from the intensity of the "Hottentot" story and returns the reader to a more popular version of history in the "civilized" world as the poet offers her own family's voices from Harlem, Jamaica and Washington. Ms.

Alexander, who teaches black women's literature at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, continues her intensely personal and original style in the poem "West Indian Primer," which deftly sketches three generations, three continents: "On the road between Spanish Town and Kingston," my grandfather said, "I was born." His father a merchant, Jewish, from Italy or Spain... His black mother taught my grand- father figures, fixed codfish cakes and fried plantains, drilled cleanliness... "There is no man more honest," my father says. Years later I read that Jews passed through my grandfather's birthplace frequently. This autobiographical section captures grandparents and house parties; a 19-year-old's first summer away from home; a first lover.

Parts Three and Four move toward ancestral recovery, offering intimate poetic sanctuary to, among others, Duke Ellington, Romare Bearden, Paul Robeson, John Coltrane and the black cowboy Nat Love, a k a Deadwood Dick. With the same emotional intensity as in Part One, Ms. Alexander moves effortlessly through difficult forms embracing music, art, heroes, history and politics. Her predominantly first-person narrative style connects her directly to the reader.

This collection is a historical mosaic with profound cultural integrity. The title work exhumes the previous century's mutilated victim of science and history and sets her amid today's heroic voices. The current proliferation of benign, yet soothing works of poetry gives ''The Venus Hottentot'' a particularly exhilarating quality. Readers owe themselves the many pleasures to be found in this book; Elizabeth Alexander creates intellectual magic in poem after poem.

***The Venus Hottentot* by Elizabeth Alexander [Albert Murray] — Stephen Yenser, *Poetry* Magazine,** Page 214, Volume 158, July 1991

Elizabeth Alexander is teaching this at Haverford college and finishing her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, and "The Venus Hottentot" is her first collection of poems. The poems are catchy, seductive, steeped in history, more rewarding on successive readings. Alexander has arranged then carefully in four parts. First is the title poem, which deals with the African woman whose name (at least in Afrikaans) was Saartje Baartman. She innocently sold herself into virtual slavery and degrading exploitation when she contracted to be displayed naked in carnivals in nineteenth-century Europe, so that the "civilized" public could gape at her large buttock — and doubtless at other features. Second comes a set of poems concerned chiefly with Alexander's family and her youth. The third section is a constellation of poems about her heroes and heroines, who include the polemical cultural critic and novelist Albert Murray, his friend the well-known artist Romare Bearden, the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, the actor and singer and celebrated spokesman for the Left Paul Robeson, the photographer James Van DerZee (*The Harlem Book of the Dead,* among other works), the black cowboy Nat Love, and jazz luminaries Duke Ellington and John Coltrane. Last is a group of poems that deal especially with racial issues and with cultural exile.

Alexander's volume is a whole café of different voices. There are a number of epigraphs scattered throughout the book, and the poems include interior monologues, quotations, attributions, indirect speech, and conversations. An epigraphs scattered throughout the book, and the poems include interior monologues, quotations, attributions, indirect speech, and conversations. An epigraph she has culled from Duke Ellington could be adapted to her own work: "So much goes on in a Harlem airshaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love…. You see your neighbor's laundry. You hear the janitor's dog…." Her poems are highly permeable to their cultural context, and that is one reason that they are so lively. Alexander's "own" voice — which in one of its modes we could describe in Baraka's team, "jazzically bluesy" — amalgamates others. Here is the opening of the "Overture" to her sequence entitled "Omni-Albert Murray":

(three four)   The ancestors are humming: *Write a poem, girl.*
Turn the volume up, they say. Loud-talking. Talking loud.
On piano someone plays a boogie-woogie run:
Omni-Albert Murray Omni Omni   Albert Murray.

The author of "The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture" (1970), Murray wants his title to indicate the diversity in unity of our culture. The United States, he observes, is "a nation of multi-colored people," and "any fool can see that the white people are really white, and the black people are black. They are all interrelated in one way or another." Elizabeth Alexander is the great-granddaughter of a Jewish merchant, whether Spanish or Italian is uncertain, and a Jamaican woman. Her great-grandmother, the neighbors said, " 'Musta ate / chalk, / Musta ate / starch, cuz / why else / did her / babies / look / so white?' " Alexander was born and raised in this country, where her experience has been both distinctively black

("My first week in Cambridge a car full of white boys / tried to run me off the road, and spit through the window") and not (she has degrees from Yale and Boston also). "Omni" in her definition means "having unrestricted, universal range," and as she has it in "today's News": "I didn't want to write a poem that said 'blackness / is,' because we know better than anyone / that we are not one or ten or ten thousand things." The poem reflect that knowledge — so that the first line of the "Overture," for instance, incorporates three voices, one of them plural. As she changes voices, so she shuffles words: "Loud-talking. Talking loud." This is the second stanza in the "Overture":

In my mind and in his I think a painting is a poem.
A tambourine's a hip shake and train whistle a guitar.
Trains run North/South home their whistles howling Afro…Am.
Black and blue Blue Afro-blue blue-black and blue blew blew.

The opportunity offered by the abbreviated phrase "Afro-Am" to glance at Amtrak and to usher in the first person singular verb, the title of one of Murray's books, "Train Whistle Guitar," several dimensions of the phrase "black and blue," John Coltrane's nickname, the quick pun on "hip": Alexander shakes such things together into lines that are anonymous, they are so "omni," yet wholly her own.

When she turns to "John Col" himself her language turns to jazz. It is no fair to the poem to quote it in part, even though she refers to it as a "poem snipped / from paper," but I shall have to do so:

Or
a battered brass
blood-blowing horn

the bloody foot-
lights cup the dark
where red and black
are beautiful

a terrible beau-
ty a terrible
beauty a terrible
beauty a horn

And this brass heart-
beat the red
sob this this
John Coltrane Col-
trane song.

She has so liberated her syllables that it is hard to know how to corral their associations, especially because she has prefaced the poem with A. B. Spellman's remark that "trane's

horn had words in it." Like others before her, she finds the "train" in "trane" and lets the one's sound and power merge with the other's. The "red" that her "black" bleeds into, the "red" that is a "sob" even as it is a "heart- / beat" skipped (as the line break mandates) and that is "brass" heartbeaten, or a horn that is a heart, derives in part from the earlier phrase "shred- / ding of my heart." The word "shredding" is shredded so that its affinity with "red" and even "battered" is exposed and so that it fits into this poem "snipped / from paper." The snipping comports with the hyphenation of Coltrane's name, which yields not only the train and its black fuel but also the pass or col it whistles through. Or perhaps it's more to the point to notice that the last line break, in the wake if the "sob," bends the musician over the curved neck or col of his tenor sax. We can hear the "sob" before it is named, in the preceding stanza's enjambment and elision, when "a terrible / beauty a horn" is born from Yeats's refrain in "Easter 1916." That refrain is changed, but not changed utterly, since Yeats's is also a poem resurrection (a theme Alexander touches on in "the bloody foot-" and in her epigraph from Michael Harper, who has written his own poem about Coltrane: "I reach from pain to music great enough to bring me back").

Alexander's experiments owe as much to her study of collage as to her appreciation of jazz and blues. At one point she wonders whether she will "find names like Trueblood [which she found in Ellison's *Invisible Man*] and shapes for my collage," and in her elegy for Bearden she equates "these stanzas on the page" with "discarded strips from your collage." In this poem itself, "Farewell to You," she slips into the narrative an unexpected snippet, / snake-hips unmoored / in a blue-black sea." Elsewhere she interlocks details in a way that might be traced back to Bearden: "Those brownstone textures, marcelled hair, / iron faces, gathered drapery, / smooth foreheads, porcelain brains."

There are any number of remarkable poems here — "Deadwood Dick" is a model of fierce succinctness and "Painting," a monologue from the point of view of Frida Kahlo, has the vehement immediacy of Ai's small triumphs — but the volume is most likely to be remembered for its title poem, the first half of which, written in dry, clinically precise two-line stanzas, is put in the mouth of Baron Cuvier, the French naturalist and anatomist who identified the pterodactyl — and dissected the Hottentot woman and preserved her genitalia in a jar that now rests "in the Musee / del' Homme on shelf / above Broca's brain." The second part of the poem, in gracious eight-line stanzas, is spoken by the woman herself, who by the poem's end lies on the autopsy table — though by then it is clear that Cuvier is the one who is dead, his heart "shriveled and hard, / geometric, deformed, unnatural," deserving of preservation in formaldehyde. In the end the accident that put the African woman's genitalia above Broca's brain makes a point. This volume makes it too, accidentally or not, when it begins with the word "Science" and ends with the word "love," in the phrase "brotherly love," which is the only possible effective response to the kind of seemingly disinterested search for "Elegant facts" that motivated Curvier — who by the way also preferred the theory of catastrophism to the theory of evolution. I am not sure that its title poem will prove to be this book's most important poem to Elizabeth Alexander herself, but I am sure, or as sure as I can be, that it will be a landmark in American poetry, and that The Venus Hottentot is a superb first book, and that Elizabeth Alexander can be about as good a poet as she cares to be.