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# BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD'S MULTIMEDIA RECEPTIONS OF CLEOPATRA

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Barbara Chase-Riboud is an African American artist, poet and novelist, who was raised and educated in Philadelphia and now divides her time between Paris and Rome.[1] Her long time fascination with Cleopatra VII of Egypt has resulted in six large scale sculptures, three mixed media wall pieces of a projected dozen, her poetry and several allusions in her novels. The result is not only a very personal reception of the historical Cleopatra, but also an intelligent and informed contribution to the ongoing dialogue about Cleopatra's race, gender and sexuality.[2]

These roughly twenty works can all be approached as individual works of art, but taken as a body of work extending over forty years they raise compelling questions. The Egyptian queen has inspired many artists but rarely so prolifically. What has triggered and sustained this fascination? Often receptions of Cleopatra bear little resemblance to the verifiable realities of her life. How much of this reception of Cleopatra can be characterized as historical? Ultimately we cannot hope to escape from the legends and calumnies that have built up around her because her reception has had a life of its own. How has Barbara Chase-Riboud conformed to or altered this process? She has succeeded in drawing together a rich and multifaceted array of influences into a portrait which is quite as "real" to her and her audience as any vain attempt to resurrect the historical queen of Egypt.

## CLEOPATRA IN BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD'S WORK: "THIS THING ABOUT CLEOPATRA" [3]

As we turn to her specific images of Cleopatra, bear in mind that Barbara Chase-Riboud is not the only, or even the first, artist to offer a visual reception of Cleopatra which is outside of the Classical and Neoclassical canon. Compare the efforts of Salvador Dali, Jules Olitski and Bella Koen to name a few. Her poetry can also be abstract and surreal, but no more so than that of Horace and Pushkin. Her own reception of Cleopatra is derived from a complex set of influences and interests which reflect her own life and passions. In one way or another Chase-Riboud has been engaged with the Cleopatra image and narrative for the last four decades. It seems best to begin with a simple chronology.

### Cleopatra and Barbara Chase-Riboud: A Chronology

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| 1958 | BCR studies at the American Academy in Rome and visits Egypt. |
| | Sculpture: *Portrait of the Artist on the Via Appia* (Selz 1999: 29). |
| 1965 | Visit to China; views the Han dynasty sarcophagus. (Selz 1999: 76). |
| 1973 | Sculpture: *Cleopatra's Cape* (Selz 1999: 79). |
| | Mixed: *Cleopatra's Marriage Contract* (Selz 1999: 84) Number 1? |
| 1974 | Poetry: *From Memphis & Peking*. |
| 1984 | Sculpture: *Cleopatra's Door* (Selz 1999: 78). |
| 1987 | Poetry: *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*. |

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|---|---|
| 1990 | Basis for a cantata by Andy Vores. |
| 1994 | Sculpture: *Cleopatra's Chair* (Selz 1999: 77). |
| 1997 | Sculpture: *Cleopatra's Bed* (Selz 1999: 80). |
| 2000 | Mixed: *Cleopatra's Marriage Contract III* (Walker (2001: 360-361). |
| 2003 | Sculpture: *Cleopatra's Wedding Dress* (http://chaseriboud.free.fr/index.html). |
| c. 2006 | Sculpture: *Cleopatra's Staircase* (mentioned in *Callaloo* 32.3 (2009: 752). |
| c. 2013 | Novel: *Central Park* (forthcoming: excerpt in *Callaloo* 32.3 (2009: 999-1013). |

Cleopatra fits quite well into the context of Chase-Riboud's preoccupations: a fascination with Egypt and China; Africa; the slave trade and the quest for a diasporic history; female sexuality; and power and powerlessness. As she said in an interview: "The genesis of my interest in Cleopatra is based on my fascination with POWER as wielded by women throughout the ages. The concept of women ruling the earth and shaping society in immutable ways continues to be a revolutionary idea even though it has been a fact for eons. The exceptional woman - a woman of legendary status - is the essence of what Cleopatra is. She is an icon for modern women."[4]

Her education had made her well aware of European traditions, and when she received a John Hays Whitney grant to study at the American Academy in Rome in 1958, she was again immersed in Greek and Roman art and history. The impact is evident from the small bronzes which she produced while in residence, especially one depicting the Via Appia.[5] As a result of a dare at a Christmas party that year, she left for a trip to Egypt. It was a formative event:

> "I grew up that year. It was the first time I realized there was such a thing as non-European art. For someone exposed only to the Greco-Roman tradition, it was a revelation. I suddenly saw how insular the Western World was vis-a-vis the nonwhite, non Christian world. The blast of Egyptian culture was irresistible. The sheer magnificence of it. The elegance and perfection, the timelessness, the depth. After that, Greek and Roman Art looked like pastry to me. From an artistic point of view the trip was historic for me."[6]

The influence of Egypt and the classical world is still present as in *Isis* from 1995[7] and in the homage to the Nike of Samothrace in the 1994 public monument *Africa Rising* at the African Burial Ground near Wall Street in New York, illustrating her focus on monuments and memorialization.[8] There is an accompanying poem of the same name. She has also designed and is championing a memorial to the 11 million Africans who perished in the infamous Middle Passage slave trade, for which she has produced several models and drawings and personally wrote to President Clinton. She produced a whole series of monument drawings, including one to Hadrian, many of which evoke the same portal image as her 1984 sculpture, *Cleopatra's Door*,[9] which was produced while writing her first two novels, *Sally Hemings* and *Valide*, and working on her next book of poetry. This large work, 340 cm or 11 feet high, is constructed of bronze plaques linked as kind of shawl 7

wide and draped over an oak armature, which uncharacteristically Chase-Riboud celebrates rather than conceals. Instead of fabric we find the bronze treated as textile as the structural oak provides the organic element, emphasizing the allusions to both her power and her sexuality. This open and beckoning portal bears a striking resemblance to several of her monument drawings such as those for the proposed Middle Passage memorial and the actual monument *Africa Rising*. There is clearly a thematic relationship. As Cleopatra will say in *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*: "...Know that I love you, That door after door will open for you... (XVI - Cleopatra)."
While in Rome, she came under the influence of many and diverse artists, but the Baroque in general and Bernini in particular added exuberant emotion to her abstractions. She has frequently expressed her admiration for another African-American who also worked in Rome and who shared her fascination with Cleopatra - Edmonia Lewis, although rejecting her already dated neoclassicism.[10] I am not the only one to see homage to Lewis' *The Death of Cleopatra* (1867), which shows the dying queen slumped on her throne, in *Cleopatra's Chair* (1994).[11] Power seems to pulse from it, a seat of power, but also in most stories of her end, the site of her demise. [12] Selz and others have relayed Barbara Chase-Riboud's admiration for Lewis's sculpture of the dying queen: "The queen is dying with a sense of pride."[13] In the words of Scott Trafton, Lewis' Cleopatra is "...a racially ambiguous, sexually transgressive, powerful yet tragic figure, with an African past and an American future, who seems exhausted to death."[14] That could apply to all three women. Chase-Riboud's *Chair* is empty, like Bernini's unoccupied *Cathedra Pietri*.[15] When I think of all the thrones, especially empty ones in Cleopatra movies, this becomes all the more poignant as a symbol of her power and her powerlessness.

Her 1958 trip to Rome and Egypt, but her 1965 visit to China also had a profound effect on Chase-Riboud's art and poetry. According to Selz, "The effect of this experience resonated in her work, in the luxuriant presence of her later sculpture, such as the *Tantra* and the *Cleopatra* series, in the white silences of spaces in her drawings, and, certainly, in her poems."[16] The title of her first book of poetry, *From Memphis & Peking*, reflects this influence. Among the things she saw were her husband's photographs of the recently excavated Han dynasty sarcophagi of Liu Sheng and Dou Wan made of jade plaques wired together with gold.[17] Chase-Riboud herself has connected this to her Cleopatra sculpture series.[18] According to a dedication, the poem "Han Shroud" was written about the time she was creating her first Cleopatra sculpture[19] as was, I believe, the poem "The Divorce of Comrade Wu and Comrade Liu"[20] in the same volume. The experience clearly made her think of Antony and Cleopatra, their revels, their marriage and especially their deaths. In the same volume, she also alludes to Egypt "Did she remember/The Nile?"[21] and to Cleopatra and her sexuality: "And over all, Cleopatra's Asp hovers:/Sliding between legs/That perpetually open to power:/Posing the essential question on split tongue:/Why did we leave Zanzibar?"[22]

That first sculpture to reveal the influence of the Han Shroud was *Cleopatra's Cape* (1973), which is now at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It is made up of 3500 multicolored bronze squares of different sizes engraved with 13 different designs and a length of braided hemp. The 200 cm high piece "...appears to rest softly on the ground" according to Selz who believes it is meant to reflect Plutarch's description of Cleopatra's arrival in Tarsus.[23] Perhaps, but I think it is more likely to mirror his description of her death given the funereal nature of the Han inspiration pieces. Chase-Riboud was to utilize these bronze plaques for other pieces, which all reference Cleopatra. Since she speaks often of her interpretation of fabric as female and African as opposed to bronze being male and European, it becomes clear that she is thinking of Cleopatra as very similar to the protagonists of her novels caught between different worlds. *Cleopatra's Chair* offers a good example. It connects with the *Door* in the draping of the cross piece but with the complete concealment of the oak frame by the 'male' bronze plaques.

Her interest in the connections between Europe, America and Africa is also evident in her very abstract pieces such as the *Tantra* series.[24] As Faxon notes: "In works such as *Tantra* (1993), Riboud expresses the poles of her existence - metal in the abstract European tradition and braided and tied silk threads showing customary African techniques."[25] While the *Via Appia* piece is representative of her earlier more figurative works, as is *Tiberius' Leap*,[26] her breakthrough came with the acclaim and criticism surrounding her *Malcolm X*[27] and *Zanzibar*[28] series in the 70's. These pieces also illustrate her signature technique involving wax moulded with a blowtorch, the lost wax method of bronze casting, and the silk, hemp and/or wool draped to hide a steel or wooden armature. Artistically they show her debt to Bernini's sense of movement and the mixing of contradictory elements. As Susan Worteck noted: "...Chase-Riboud views the bronze and silk as the male and female elements: one affects the characteristics of the other."[29] She herself remarked in an interview: "They were the sculptures that began my involvement with combining the soft materials with the bronze and also the inversion of the two materials in that the silk becomes the weighty part of the sculpture and the metal inversely becomes the crushed-in and flowing and soft part of the sculpture."[30] All of her Cleopatra sculptures incorporate these elements. These tensions between black/white, male/female; African/European and powerful/powerless are themes she will explore when she turns to poetry and fiction. Her Cleopatra is very sexual, powerful, violent and African but not black.

We see this in "Why Did We Leave Zanzibar?" the first poem in her first book, which both illustrates her anguish over the African Diaspora and contains her earliest published allusion to the Cleopatra legend.[31] This foray into poetry was a consequence of her artistic success in the 70's - as she is frequently quoted: "First of all, writing isn't my second choice. Writing is a parallel vocation."[32] Indeed Claudine Armand's insightful essay on this work is entitled, "Entre poesie et sculpture: la voix de Barbara Chase-Riboud".[33] Armand devotes most of her article to the critically successful 1974 book of poems (edited by Toni Morrison) *From Memphis & Peking* which reflects Chase-Riboud's greatest passions; her trips to Egypt and China, a hunger for her own history,[34] her focus on black issues in general and the slave trade in particular,[35] and confronting her own sexuality. Many of the poems are autobiographical, especially the Anna poems and the poems which reveal the deep influence of her travels. They are also very visual, being arranged in pyramids, triangles and zigzags almost like Concrete Poetry at times.[36] Other poems create visual impact through short, even single word, lines and the use of parallel or alternating columns, especially in the *Han Shroud*, which is a dialogue between dead lovers. This and several other devices are revisited in her second book of poetry *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra* (1987). It received the Carl Sandburg Prize for Poetry in 1988.

That long poem, *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra* (1987), a collection of 57 sonnets in different voices, is a very personal portrait of Cleopatra. She depicts her as shaven headed, never calls her beautiful or black, but frequently insists that she is African.[37] Chase-Riboud calls the work a 'Melologue', i.e. a recitation with musical accompaniment. The musical origin of the work is reflected in a cantata which Andy Vores created from the poems in 1990.[38] As he notes, "These are intensely erotic poems in which Cleopatra and Mark Antony map out their passion for each other. The poems I have set are all spoken by Cleopatra, and there is a palpable sense of danger in them – the danger of losing all control, of self destruction."[39] The Melologue is a fascinating piece, although the surrealistic and anachronistic portions are challenging for literal minded classicists. It is based largely on Plutarch including quotes from the 1579 North translation, and largely, but not entirely, free from the influence of English Drama and American Film. Here is a sample passage which reflects the influence of Aurelius Victor and Alexandre Pushkin which I will discuss further below:

XXVI – Cleopatra
Beneath the weight of angry pride
My Pharaonian breasts glisten through Sidonian fabric
Wrought in fine texture by the sley of the Chinese.
My bridal gown warped by Egyptian needles,
Who have separated the warp-web of the legally Wedded,
Touching your map of the world with a peacock feather,
Murmuring quietly this…and this…and this…
Sinai, Arabia, Cyprus, Jericho, Galilee, Lebanon, Crete.
You're not the only man to pay for my Egyptian nights.
My Royal Prostitution mortgaged the lives of other men:
Death at dawn was the price of phallic ecstasy, so
Don't wonder that my Tariff is your Territory
Shimmering though Nile woven muslin
Murmuring this…and this…and this…[40]

A complete exegesis of this poem will require a separate treatment, but note that Chase-Riboud herself has made a connection between this poem and her Cleopatra sculptures.[41] *Cleopatra's Bed* (1997) is clearly a homage not only to a drawing of Rembrandt's of a nude Cleopatra sitting on a bed, and the frequent references to the queen's bed in the Melologue, but also to its prominence in western depictions of her narrative. Chase-Riboud seems to bring this series full circle back to the seductive opulence of the *Cape* by not only including fabric, but silk - both the mattress and the braided piece at the rear are of silk. This piece evokes Cleopatra's sexuality, but also her display of luxury and power that lured Antony.[42] Up to this point, the large-scale Cleopatras share a common denominator - death. They are all inspired by the Han sarcophagi, and stand as very concrete and mundane objects rendered abstract and surreal by the presence of the 13 bronze plaques repeated and linked to enshroud icons and episodes of her life.

*Marriage Contract #1* (1973) is a "narrative paper sculpture" in a technique which she has used for many subjects. This is the earliest I know of and she has done three versions, the latest in 2000. Perhaps it is also an allusion to Cleopatra and Marc Antony's Donations of Alexandria since that event and her marriage to Antony are featured in *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*. I have not seen *Marriage Contract #2*. *Marriage Contract #3* (2000) was exhibited in the 2001 British Museum exhibition, *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth*,[43] and is the third version of a projected twelve, according to an email from the artist. This one has more sketches including a snake, various body parts mixed in with the 'automatic' writing, and a more varied assemblage of 'seals' on silk threads. It is an ironic piece since the exact legal nature of the marriage of Antony and Cleopatra is problematical.[44] The 2003 sculpture, *Cleopatra's Wedding Dress*, picks up the same theme.[45] In a recent interview Chase-Riboud has referred to a *Cleopatra's Staircase* as the last in the sculpture series, but I have not seen a photograph.[46] *Cleopatra's Wedding Dress* is hung in the way tunics are displayed in museums, with metallic plaques for the fabric and an abundance of braided cord. For me they both invoke the metallic luxury of the scenes from DeMille's *Cleopatra* when Claudette Colbert models her dress on a staicase while waiting in vain for Caesar to return from the senate, and the closing scene where she sits dead on her chair at the top of a staircase in a stunning gown.

Chase-Riboud's 2003 novel *Hottentot Venus*, about Sarah Baartman, the slave brought from South Africa to nineteenth century Europe as a circus attraction, addresses strikingly similar issues.

Baartman also believed she had a valid contract with her owner/husband which promised her money, marriage and a trip back to South Africa. The last she finally received in 2002 when the French government repatriated her remains, her skeleton and her preserved genitalia, which had been on public view at the Museum of the History of Man until the 1970s. This is not the only connection to Cleopatra in the novel. In a fictionalized letter from Jane Austen, Chase-Riboud has her compare Sarah to the queen: "The politics of her, the obscenity of her, as well as her servitude are a scandal and a blot on English society. But even the worst of scandals become romantic and even respectable in two thousand years: witness Cleopatra, Caesar, Mark Anthony and other gentlemen."[47] A telling comment on the power of reception. But Chase-Riboud went further, placing Sarah on the top of the monument *Africa Rising*,[48] in the place of the *Winged Nike* and on top of a portal reminiscent of *Cleopatra's Door*. In the 'history' which Chase-Riboud is writing the tragedies of both of these Africans converge and soar.

It is quite clear from all of her works that Barbara Chase-Riboud is a passionate woman. Her poem *To Gloria* (i.e. Steinem) leaves no doubt.[49] She is best known for her novels and the controversies she seems to stir up with each one. It has been noted that, with the exception of the *Echo of Lions*[50] which concerns the 1839 slave mutiny on the Amistad, her novels tend to focus on "seemingly powerless women" whom she sees "...as powerful because they survived violence, depredation, disdain and contempt in life because their names have emerged 'from the darkness of the past to become part of human history.'"[51] They are: Sally Hemings the quadroon mistress of Thomas Jefferson (*Sally Hemings*, 1979), the white slave who becomes the queen mother of the Ottoman Empire (*Valide: A Novel of the Harem*, 1986), Harriet Hemings, Sally's daughter (*The President's Daughter*, 1994), Sarah Baartman (*The Hottentot Venus*, 2003). But beyond that, five of these novels feature Africans who find themselves caught between the values, traditions and power of their homeland and the imposition of all that is White, Christian and European, nevertheless written by someone steeped in European culture. Due out next is *Central Park* which is excerpted in the 2009 *Callaloo* special issue, which celebrated Chase-Riboud's work.[52] It features a heroine who, Chase-Riboud explains, also "…has this thing about Cleopatra."[53]

## BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD AND THE HISTORICAL CLEOPATRA

Barbara Chase-Riboud certainly has had a clear and consistent image of Cleopatra in mind over almost forty years and dozens of works. This does not mean that her Cleopatra is the historical or "real" Cleopatra. Consider the experience of one of the best of Cleopatra's biographers: "My aim for this project was to try to find the "real" Cleopatra. What I have subsequently realized and accepted is that by "real" I meant "my" Cleopatra."[54] Our most reliable and primary sources are Egyptian inscriptions, official documents and her own official coinage. These testimonies are not extensive and only recently have been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. Her coinage is in desperate need of a thorough numismatic study, similar to that now being conducted on the coins of Marc Antony. Contemporary Roman writers barely mention her (Caesar and Cicero), are lost (Q. Dellius and Livy) or belong to the hostile faction of Octavian (Horace and Propertius). The rest of our ancient sources belong to the next phases of her reception and give widely diverse perspectives on the queen (Lucan and Aurelius Victor for example) which derive from the barrage of propaganda generated by both Augustus and Antony. The most extensive of these is Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, but it can hardly qualify as a "primary" source. Plutarch (who flourished between AD 50 and 120) was in effect just one of the earliest receptions of Cleopatra. His data is quite useful, but he is only as reliable as the sources he used. The marked differences in the varieties of current individual receptions of Cleopatra tend to focus on her race, her gender roles and her beauty/sexuality, and Chase-Riboud is no exception. Her reception of Cleopatra is no more authentically historical than

any other because she chooses very carefully among the episodes of her life and the attributes of her character and person.[55] As many others she is in pursuit of a Cleopatra who seems "real" to her.

Chase-Riboud had a thorough background in the ancient world. The American Academy in Rome where she studied in 1958 is one of the premier centres of Classical Studies where she would have come into contact with the leading scholars of the day not to mention the artistic treasures of the Eternal City itself. Several of her earlier works reflect this intimate acquaintance with classical art and history, including *Portrait of the Artist on the Via Appia* from 1958 which "...consists of a random assemblage of nudes, heads, wings, and other fragments that relate to ancient Roman sculpture, shelved on a stepped platform with the artist herself, wearing a hat contemplating the aggregate."[56] *Hottentot Venus* makes use of classical allusions crucial to the plot and theme of Sarah Baartman's journey by directly and indirectly evoking Homer's *Odyssey* on several occasions. Her interest in the ancient world was not restricted to a received Cleopatra.

She is also quite familiar with Plutarch's *Life of Antony*. She used quotes from North's 1579 translation as transitions for *Portrait of the Nude as Cleopatra*, or "Melologue" as she calls it. She is quite aware of Plutarch's assessment of Cleopatra's unremarkable appearance (Plutarch *Antony* 27.3) and her Macedonian ancestry. Both the Melologue and the sculptures focus on the meeting of Antony and Cleopatra at Tarsus and their subsequent affair, their marriage and the so-called Donations of Alexandria, and finally their defeat at Actium and subsequent deaths. There are numerous allusions to other elements of Plutarch's narrative, but discussing all of them would require a much more extensive treatment. The result is less chronological than impressionistic, and, as she makes clear in her preface, not romanticized. Although Chase-Riboud exercised her literary and artistic license, and, as we shall see, explores alternative receptions, there is at the core of her reception a very Plutarchian Cleopatra.

The race of Cleopatra is still hotly debated,[57] especially between those who see her as culturally if not genetically "a mostly Greek thing" as in the *Lizpatra* line, and the Afrocentrist claim that she is Black. Since the nineteenth century, as Scott Trafton shows, Cleopatra has become a "raced" figure especially for Americans. It is possible that Cleopatra had only 25% Macedonian blood. Huss offers convincing if circumstantial evidence that her mother might have been Egyptian,[58] and Shelly Haley's observations on race puts her unknown grandmother in quite another light.[59] Chase-Riboud chose in the 1980's to think of her nude woman as caught between the establishment Roman world, her corrupt Ptolemaic blood and her African soul. Like the yellow skinned Sarah Baartman and the quadroons and mulattoes of Monticello, the census taker in *Sally Hemings* would not have found Barbara Chase-Riboud's Cleopatra any easier to categorize racially. I think Chase-Riboud is "historically" correct not to make her Black, and ahead of her time in insisting that she is African. There is no compelling evidence to consider her genetically black or negro, but she was born in the cultural mixing bowl of Alexandria and she lived her life on the continent of Africa.

She was also ahead of her times in treating gender role issues. Chase-Riboud sees Cleopatra as an "icon for women", but also tragic. She was also caught in the never-never land between male and female roles, where there was no room for a naval defeat. Chase-Riboud's interest in portraying Cleopatra as a powerful woman in a male dominated society reflects the main stream of current scholarship on both the historical and the legendary Cleopatra.[60] Her Cleopatra makes no apology for being ambitious, brutal and manipulative because that came with being a queen. While this gender dialogue is most evident in the poetry, I think that the large sculptures such as the *Chair* and the *Door* express this brilliantly, especially in the use of hard and soft, male and female materials.

Both Chase-Riboud and her Cleopatra are passionate women, comfortable with their faces and bodies and unafraid to give full expression to their heterosexuality. Cleopatra was not as wanton as she was depicted in the Augustan propaganda campaign and certainly no more so than notorious upper class Republican women.[61] Current scholarship tends to agree and is more focused on her political and administrative acumen. Chase-Riboud never claims that her Cleopatra is exceptionally beautiful, but, as Plutarch, she stills finds her alluring. Although Plutarch did not highlight this aspect of her sensuality, she does focus more on Cleopatra's sexuality and sexual exploits. These were clearly part of the ancient traditions which had their roots in the mythopoeic propaganda of both Antony and Octavian.

## BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECEPTION OF CLEOPATRA

A comprehensive history of the reception of Cleopatra remains to be written.[62] In general it is clear that much of Chase-Riboud's fascination with the queen's political struggles and alliances with Caesar and Antony is shared with the traditions which start with Plutarch and continue with Shakespeare and film. She does, however, depart from the more familiar traditions in exploring three significant, but often sidelined, receptions: Rembrandt's drawing of a nude on a bed as Cleopatra; nineteenth century Russian and French interest in the destructive side of her sexuality; and alternative death scenes from medieval England.
She herself notes that *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra* was inspired by a work of art, that drawing by Rembrandt.[63] What struck Chase-Riboud at the time was that she saw a Cleopatra who was just a nude woman sitting on a bed (a later sculpture subject) with none of the attributes from her long reception. "Not one of the famous romantic elements of the historical Cleopatra was evident, but she was more real than any Cleopatra I had ever seen."[64] By 1987 she had produced two sculptures (The *Cape* and the *Door*), the first *Marriage Contract* and several references to Cleopatra in her 1974 book of poetry. There is no indication if she had seen the Rembrandt drawing prior to their production, but it seems likely since all of her Cleopatra works whether they are surrealistic poetry, abstract sculpture or allusions in a novel were based on the conviction that she knew and understood that naked lady on the bed as well as she knew herself.

One of the things Chase-Riboud knew and understood about Cleopatra was her passionate sexuality. For example in Sonnet XXVI, which is quoted above, she demands land from Antony in exchange for sex. This passage alludes to the story, told in antiquity (c. AD 360) only by Aurelius Victor (*De Viris Illustribus Romae* 86.2), that Cleopatra prostituted herself in exchange for the life of each partner.[65] This became an element of the European reception, appearing in an 1838 novella by Théophile Gautier[66] among others, but her allusion is clearly to Alexandre Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights.*[67]

> Who will step up and bargain for passion?
> I sell my love;
> Say, who among you will buy
> A night of mine at the cost of his life?[68]

Chase-Riboud named one of her monument drawings for the Russian poet,[69] and *Egyptian Nights,* the English title assigned to the 1824-35 fragments, was also the English title of a work of hers published only in French, *Roman Egyptien*,[70] By referencing a tradition relatively unfamiliar to English speaking readers, she brings the power politics of the Donations of Alexandria[71] into

passionate eroticism. This European tradition of the man eating "vamp" reappears in works by Swinburne, Haggard and Sardou[72] but is largely absent from American popular culture receptions between the Theda Bara film *Cleopatra* (1917) and literal comic book vampires and mummies in the 1990's.[73]

Almost as shockingly effective is her use of another obscure image from the Cleopatra legend. Chase-Riboud draws on a medieval version of Cleopatra's death, in which she leaps naked into a snake pit. In the preface to *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*, she quotes the version by John Lygate[74] although it also appears in Chaucer.[75]

> And with that word, naked, with ful good herte,
> Among the serpents in the pit she sterte,
> And ther she chees to han hir buryinge.
> Anoon the neddres gonne hir for to stinge, *120*
> And she hir deeth receyveth, with good chere,
> For love of Antony, that was hir so dere:—
> And this is storial sooth, hit is no fable.

As Chase-Riboud's Cleopatra, in sonnet LIII, plunges plain, naked and shorn into the bottomless pit she is assaulted by the constantly changing calumnies of her own reception.

> *LIII- The Snake Pit - Cleopatra*
> I fall away from distant stars.
> Flesh pulled back in the distress of acceleration,
> Stubble wrenched from my shaven head,
> I am not beautiful.
> All my pretensions of normal womanhood
> I've shed with gravity.
> Fragments of myself hang in the air.
> With the feeble determination of the insane, I invent
> Fresh portraits of myself
> That I do not recognize and cannot reproduce.
> Plucking out what I can bear,
> I turn in slow motion prisoner in the Snake Pit,
> Doomed to listen again
> To the recital of my suicides[76]

I quote both in full because they underscore that there are different threads to the reception of Cleopatra which are not all part of the familiar and orthodox queen of stage and film. Chase-Riboud boldly lays claim to her own Cleopatra whose many aspects she has and will explore through sculpture, poetry, drawing and prose.

## CONCLUSION

Barbara Chase-Riboud's infatuation with Cleopatra dates back at least to her experiences in Rome, Egypt and China. Cleopatra also served as focus for her intellectual interests in Africa, feminism

and the strictures of western canons of art. It is not unusual for Cleopatra to strike such chords with whoever encounters her multifaceted reception, but Chase-Riboud also seems to keep discovering connections with her personal and artistic life. As a writer of historical fiction, Chase-Riboud has never felt constrained by mere facts, but has always striven to portray the essential aspects of reality as it appears to her. She has consistently exercised her right to create her own world out of history, often to the dismay of critics who fail to appreciate how flexible reality can be. Since the history of Cleopatra is by no means certain in all aspects, she has much room to manoeuvre. In doing so she has contributed new chapters to the Cleopatra legend and revived some obscure ones. But her unique contribution is to offer us a very personal Cleopatra through the multiple media of prose, poetry, music, drawing and sculpture.

Where is Chase-Riboud going with her Cleopatra? As she says, the heroine of the forthcoming *Central Park* also "…has this thing about Cleopatra."[77] This character Hannah/Bessie "…believed herself to be the reincarnation of Cleopatra. She was a force of nature without really meaning to be; her femininity, her femaleness, her approachability, her maternal instincts, her woman-warrior exterior were overshadowed by her sex, in all its power and imperial improbability. Hannah was like a race horse, centuries of other female bloodlines had produced her and perhaps those bloodlines did indeed go back to ancient Egypt."[78] Hannah also thinks of her elaborate French bed as Cleopatra's throne,[79] which I take as an allusion to two of Chase-Riboud's large sculptures. The remaining chapters might hold even more deliberate parallels. Perhaps there will be a staircase to mirror the newest sculpture?

Chase-Riboud's reception of Cleopatra is no more authentically historical than any other, but I believe that the words she used for Rembrandt, also apply to her: "Yet the woman I saw was a new woman because the artist who had sketched her, however casually, knew her as a writer knows his characters: from the inside out, through his own inclinations. Somewhere the man who had drawn her had met up with Cleopatra knew her very well, through love, pity, or fury."[80] Among the modern receptions of Cleopatra, the art, poetry and fiction of Barbara Chase-Riboud deserves a place of honour and acclaim.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in Philadelphia January 10, 2009. Biographical information is available from her web site http://chaseriboud.free.fr/; Armand, (2006: 15-37; Selz (1999: 135-137; and in Spencer and Miranda (2009: 711-715).

[2] In the sense in which those terms were used by Trafton (2004: 165-221).

[3] Spencer (2009c: 746).

[4] http://chaseriboud.free.fr/Poet2004.htm

[5] *Portrait of the Artist on the Via Appia* 1958. Photo at Selz (1999: 29).

[6] Quoted in A Barbara Chase-Riboud, 1939-, Pasadena College Artist in Residence, 1990.@ at http://www.paccd.cc.ca.us/library/artists/barbara_chase.htm. For a similar quote see Anderson (2000: 111).

[7] Photo in Selz (1999: 63)

[8] Selz (1999: 65-68). See also http://www.africanburialground.gov/ABG_Artwork.htm

[9] Janson (1997); reprinted in Selz (1999: 86-120).

[10] Trafton (2004: 167).

[11] Robinson (1996: 24); Selz (1999: 120).

[12] Currently in a private collection in New York City.

[13] Selz (1999: 49)

[14] Trafton (2004: 213).

[15] Selz (1999: 51).

[16] Selz (1999: 31).

[17] An example is in Selz (1999: 76).

[18] Chase-Riboud (2009: 752).

[19] Chase-Riboud (1974: 93-94).

[20] Chase-Riboud (1974: 74-80).

[21] Chase-Riboud (1974: 35).

[22] Chase-Riboud (1974: 4-5).

[23] Selz (1999: 49).

[24] For example see Selz (1999: cover and 14).

[25] Faxon (1999: 55).

[26] Photo at Selz (1999: 27 right).

[27] Examples in Selz (1999: 8-10, 60).

[28] Examples in Selz (1999: 33, 42, 48).

[29] Worteck (1982: 99).

[30] Armand (2006: 23).

[31] Chase-Riboud (1974: 3-5).

[32] E.g. Wells (2005: 64).

[33] Armand (2008: 185-207).

[34] As in Anna #13 "Any history will do/for those who have none." Chase-Riboud (1974: 45).

[35] As in Anna #3: "Did she remember/the Nile?" Chase-Riboud (1974: 35).

[36] On this aspect of her poetry see Armand (2009: 981-998).

[37] Armand explores her use of the oxymoron in this poem (2009: 995-997).

[38] For more information and the complete score see his website at http://www.andyvores.com/WORKS/WORKS%20PAGES/Voice/Voice/VoiceFrameset.htm and at Vores (2009: 898-909).

[39] Vores (2009: 897)

[40] Chase-Riboud (1987: 58).

[41] Spencer (2009c: 752).

[42] Armand (2009: 995-996) also sees the connection with the poem.

[43] Walker and Higgs (2001: 360-361).

[44] Chase-Riboud has returned to this topic not only here but also in *The Hottentot Venus*, where the status of a marriage/work contract is a plot point.

[45] Email from the artist. An untitled photograph has appeared on her web site, http://chaseriboud.free.fr/index.html labeled '30.jpg'.

[46] Spencer (2009: 752).

[47] Chase-Riboud (2003: 158). Also quoted in *Callaloo* 32.3 (2009: 729-731).

[48] Spencer and Miranda (2009d: 910-933).

[49] Chase-Riboud (1974: 66).

[50] Chase-Riboud (1989).

[51] Wells (2005: 65).

[52] Chase-Riboud (2009).

[53] Spencer (2009c: 746).

[54] Ashton (2008: xi).

[55] There have been several new biographies of Cleopatra recently. In addition to Ashton (2008), an excellent account is Roller (2010). The principal sources are collected in translation in Jones (2006).

[56] Selz (1999: 21).

[57] Useful discussions may be found in MacDonald (2002), Royster (2003), and Trafton (2004).

[58] Huss (1990: 191-204).

[59] Haley (1993: 23-43).

[60] The conflicts between male/female, Roman/Egyptian, West/East have fostered a rich dialogue among scholars of Cleopatra. For examples see Hamer (2008).

[61] See Wyke (2002) for examples and excellent essays on Cleopatra's reception.

[62] Among the best are Hamer 2008, Walker/Higgs (2001) and Hughes-Hallett (1990).

[63] Chase-Riboud has promised to clarify which drawing by Rembrandt triggered the response she details in the Introduction.

[64] Chase-Riboud (1987: 16).

[65] Alluded to in Sonnet XXVI quoted above.

[66] Gautier (1890).

[67] O'Bell (1984).

[68] O'Bell (1984: 11).

[69] Selz (1999: 98).

[70] Chase-Riboud (1994). This is a combination of poems from *Portrait* and additional prose and dialogue.

[71] Roller (2010: 99-100) calls this "…a lavish and theatrical demonstration of the vision of the future that Cleopatra and Antonius had conceived..." and may have included a wedding ceremony. Antony ostensibly divided the eastern empire between himself and Cleopatra and her children.

[72] Algernon Swinburne, "Cleopatra" 1866; H. Rider Haggard, *Cleopatra, being an Account of the Fall and Vengeance of Harmachis, The Royal Egyptian, as Set Forth by His Own Hand,* 1889; Victorien Sardou, *Cleopatre,* 1890.

[73] Daugherty (2009: 221-225).

[74] Chase-Riboud (1999: 18).

[75] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Legend of Cleopatra, Martyr, Queen of Egypt" in *The Legend of Good Women,* 1386.

[76] Chase-Riboud (1999: 100).

[77] Spencer (2009c: 746).

[78] Chase-Riboud (2009: 1005).

[79] Chase-Riboud (2009: 1004).

[80] Chase-Riboud (1987: 17).