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Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus

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INTRODUCTION



Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus have had mysterious careers. Sara Baartman was born on the South African frontier in the 1770s. She lived nearly three decades in South Africa. She then spent some five years in Europe before dying in Paris at the end of 1815. Sara Baartman loved, and was loved, and for many years before she went to Europe she was a mother and a working woman in the Cape. Yet she has come down to us in history captured by the icon of the Hottentot Venus, a supposedly paradoxical freak of race and sexuality, both alluring and primitive, the very embodiment of desire and the importance of conquering the instincts. Writings on Sara Baartman have subsumed the life of this beautiful woman almost totally in those brief, if momentous, years she spent in Europe displayed as the Hottentot Venus. A short period at the end of her life has come to stand for all that passed before.¹

In Cape Town, and then in England and in Paris, Sara Baartman as the Hottentot Venus fancied and troubled the minds of people who, in their often quotidian ways, helped fashion the modern world. It was, by all accounts, an extraordinary epoch. During her lifetime American colonists declared their independence and quashed Native American cultures. In Saint Domingue, slaves revolted and created Haiti, a new society free of the plantation master but still full of sorrow. Across Europe revolutions came and went, in France by the stamp of feet and the guillotine's percussive thump. Napoleon's armies marched and perished. The masses moved in and out of the factories of Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, or worked on the docks of the great city of London. The Luddites rioted against the factory system. Gas lighting came to Soho. King George III went insane. The Romantics imagined the beauties of nature, the emotions

and the transcendental, the monstrous and the exotic. Scientists measured and classified the world.

Where, Europeans wondered, did the Hottentot Venus fit in the order of things? What makes us human? What is intellect, feeling, love? Many believed the Hottentot Venus was more ape than human, or that she represented a fifth category of human, a *Homo sapiens monstrous*, a kind of Frankenstein's monster scarcely capable of emotion and intelligence yet also a reminder of the primitive living deep within the self.

That fiction became a constant presence throughout much of Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On Baartman's death in December 1815, Georges Cuvier, then Europe's most revered scientist and the father of comparative anatomy, eagerly dissected her body for his investigations and remade her in a plaster cast as the Hottentot Venus. Sara Baartman disappeared from history as the identity she had performed on-stage and in Europe's halls was entombed in science and figured ever more prominently in the Western imagining of women, race, and sexuality: the primitive woman with extraordinarily large buttocks and, so many were told, remarkable sexual organs. A huge illustration of the Hottentot Venus greeted the tens of thousands of visitors who crowded into the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889, and her plaster cast was made available to the more than thirty-one million people attending the International Exhibition of 1937, just before the outbreak of the Second World War when ideas about the supposed inferiority of the races nearly destroyed Europe. Dickens and Darwin, Hugo, Freud, Picasso, Eliot, H. G. Wells, James Joyce, and many others knew or wrote of the Hottentot Venus, as did the most important writers on the so-called inferiority of the darker races. "Every one, the basest creatures, every Hottentot," Wells wrote, "every stunted creature that ever breathed poison in a slum, knows that the instinctive constitution of man is at fault here and that fear is shameful and must be subdued." The Hottentot figured in Gobineau's famous *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1855), one of the foundational texts in the rise of modern racism and translated and published throughout Europe and America. The *Essay* was especially influential in the American South and in Germany in the decades that led to spectacle lynching and to the Holocaust. As the venerable *Edinburgh Review* put it in 1863, "There is no vast difference between the intelligence of a Bosjesman and

that of an oran-ûtan, and that the difference is far greater between Descartes or Homer and the Hottentot than between the stupid Hottentot and the ape.”²

The Hottentot Venus confirmed to Europeans the inferiority of the Hottentot and people with dark skins. It also confirmed the inequality and unfitness of all women, for women were closer to nature, and the Hottentot Venus was closest of all. “Hottentot women,” Robert Knox wrote in his *Races of Man*, “offer certain peculiarities more strongly marked than in any other race”—by which the Scottish anatomist, infamous for stealing corpses, meant women’s buttocks and genitals. The sexual body determined character, being even. Politicians and bureaucrats devised laws throughout Europe to control the biological deviance of prostitutes and their Hottentot sexuality that preyed on men. Well into the twentieth century, doctors in Europe and America excised women’s genitals to make them less pronounced, less like those of the Hottentot Venus, to better control their presumed sexual cravings and brute drives.³

In the 1940s and 1950s, Percival Kirby, a Scottish musicologist working in South Africa, wrote a series of articles on the Hottentot Venus. Most everyone had forgotten about the Hottentot Venus, even if her ghost continued shaping people’s perception of black women’s sexuality. Feminism helped her resurrection. In the 1980s the Hottentot Venus returned, as a symbol not of sexual excess and racial inferiority but of all the terrible things the West has done to others. Scholars started reading Kirby. His investigations became the basis for poems, plays, sculptures, and other representations that now powerfully depicted the terrible display of the Hottentot Venus in Europe as the moniker of everything wrong with Western civilization: Enlightenment science, racism, the abuse and exploitation of women, the travesties of colonialism, and the exoticization of non-Western peoples—the so-called “Other.”

Sara Baartman also reappeared in South Africa. In 1994, apartheid ended. South Africans began demanding the return of Baartman’s remains for proper burial in the place of her birth. The French refused: they claimed her body was theirs. Baartman’s history became the grist of domestic and international politics. Baartman emerged as South Africa’s “mother and her life as the Hottentot Venus a reminder of the injustices black South Africans have endured over the past three and a half centu-

ries.” For the French, retaining the body meant defending the power and enlightenment of French science. But science so clearly tied to race could not win: Sara Baartman was reburied in a state funeral in South Africa on National Women’s Day in August 2002.

In the 1990s, Sara Baartman thus began appearing from history’s shadows. But who *was* this person who became the Hottentot Venus? Until very recently when the question has been posed, if it has been posed at all, the answer has focused on the five years Baartman lived in Europe and performed as the Hottentot Venus. Various publics around the world took the European representations of Sara Baartman and turned them on their head to expose modernity’s darker side. Scholars used Kirby’s work as gospel, assuming that nothing could be found out about Sara Baartman’s life in South Africa: her colonial history either remained of no interest or was presumed inaccessible.⁴

As historians working on topics such as colonialism, race, gender and sexuality, we wondered if a different approach to Sara Baartman’s life might be possible. What if we looked at the totality of her life and resisted the temptation of reading her history backward as a story of inevitable victimization? How might the past look then?

We began work on Sara Baartman’s life in 2003, fascinated by the tremendous, perhaps impossible, burden that seemed to be placed on this African woman who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We began innocently, perhaps naively, wanting to discover the person behind the Hottentot Venus, where necessary to set the record straight, to tell the story of a woman who grew up in South Africa and who was killed in Europe by a figment of other people’s imagination.

The journey took us to three continents and research in five countries in more than a dozen archives and libraries. We tried to track down every possibly relevant record in the period especially from about 1750 to 1816, and then from the 1990s to the present. We conducted genealogical research to identify some of the possible relatives of Sara Baartman. Discussions with people brought us from the outskirts of Port Elizabeth to the small town of Graaff Reinet to the desolate and impoverished community of Lavender Hill near Cape Town. We spoke as well to various interested parties. Some people refused to speak with us. Others requested anonymity. What seemed like a puzzle, the search for pieces of evidence to complete a picture, became more like a mystery full of twists and turns with

one issue leading inexplicably to another and some questions left unanswered and perhaps unanswerable.⁵

All the while the very act of writing raised perplexing issues. We learned that biography was a genre more suited to the life of the Hottentot Venus than to the fragments recorded for posterity about Sara Baartman, even as we still found out far more about the person than people had thought the records would reveal. Fixing Sara Baartman within the conventional genre of biography raises fundamental questions about how we know what we know and how we write about people whose lives traversed so many geographies and different cultural worlds. Sara Baartman's life confounds conventional narrative biography in at least two senses. She was in many senses one of the "defeated and the lost" whose history, as one philosopher put it, "cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative."⁶ Yet the closer we get to the defeated and the lost, the more fragmentary the evidentiary record becomes. This is the case not simply with Sara Baartman but with the great swath of humanity, the billions of people who bequeath posterity the simple lineaments of their lives. Sara gave only one interview during her life, in London, and it was given in Dutch, under the watchful eyes of officers of a court, and then translated and handed down to history as a paraphrase. Two other interviews in Paris are probably fictive. These are not the materials most biographers have to work with. Sara Baartman left, then, mere fragments of history.

Biography also promises "to satisfy the lingering desire for a solid world peopled by knowable characters"⁷ by arranging the life of a person absent its strangeness, as if culture was but the patina etched by history upon a universal unchanging self. Biography, however, emerged at a particular time and place in Europe's imagining of the self; indeed, biographical writing was being crafted in Sara Baartman's lifetime. It emerged along with the idea of the possessive individual, that person who has agency, autonomy, a vision of self. This idea of the person, of the self, is not so easily transferred to anytime and anyplace and to worlds where there is no clearly possessive subject, no "me," "myself."⁸

And live she did. Should history write only of people at the moment of their fame, or of people with sufficient privilege to preserve in the present the lineaments of their lives? We think not. We are drawn to Sara Baartman's life and to the strange legacies of the Hottentot Venus. Therein one

can find many fascinating, if disturbing, stories. But her story—or perhaps their stories—also is a cautionary tale about silence and the limits of history, and about what happens when someone, or something, comes to stand for too much, when the past can bear no more.

Europeans created the Hottentot Venus as the living missing link separating beast from man, the drives from the intellect, the anxious space between our animal and human selves. Sara entered Europe's psyche, modernity's psyche, not as a woman, a living, breathing person with emotions and memories and longings, but as a metaphor, a figment, a person reduced to a simulacrum. That figment subsumed the person. We will always know more about the phantom that haunts the Western imagination, a phantom so complete that it has nearly become a living, breathing person, than we do about the life of Sara Baartman, the human being who was ultimately destroyed by an illusion.

These paradoxes and silences give us pause. Ghosts haunt these pages. The thousands of people hunted down and murdered on South Africa's eastern frontier appear as partial and veiled images, fragments or traces really. So also those forced into servitude. Sara survived an era of extraordinary violence when all across the world native peoples died out and colonial societies were made and remade and the modern world was born. In South Africa, for the survivors of genocide and colonial violence, the many dead abandoned without proper burial became ghosts visiting in the dry winds of the African veld. Sara lived in a world shattered by violence.

To many South Africans during the 1990s, as the country made its miraculous if painful transition to democracy, Sara remained a mournful spirit exiled from her land of birth; only a proper burial in South Africa might allow her spirit to become an ancestor. And yet she remains imprisoned still, literally behind bars that surround her grave site, but also ensnared by diverse people's expectations, by histories that remain traumatic. In large parts of Africa ancestors are revered but also allowed to finally die, to pass on, ultimately to be forgotten. This book is about discovery, about what really might have happened, and about the extraordinary power of people's imaginations. It also is about letting go, another burial of sorts.