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Introduction

The Notion of Venus

Bottoms were big in Georgian England. From low to high culture of all forms, Britain was a nation obsessed by buttocks, bums, arses, posteriors, derrieres, and every possible metaphor, joke, or pun that could be squeezed from this fundamental cultural obsession. From the front parlor to Parliament, to prostitution and pornography, Georgian England both exuberantly celebrated and earnestly deplored excess, grossness, and the uncontainable. Much of Saartjie's success was a result of a simple phenomenon: with her shimmying, voluptuous bottom, she perfectly captured the zeitgeist of later-Georgian Britain.

—Rachel Holmes, *African Queen*

This anthology of art, critical writings, poetry, and prose on and around the subject of Sarah, or Saartjie, Baartman, the so-called “Hottentot Venus,” has been a long time coming. The contributions in this collection are scholarly and lyrical, historical and reflexive, capturing the spirit of a new body of literature about Baartman.

In 1991, I first read an article in the *Village Voice* titled “Venus Envy”¹ by Lisa Jones, and since then I have been intrigued with Baartman's life story. I began to create artwork about her and the notion of beauty in an effort to find a way to expose this story to a wider audience. This book began as a dialogue with artist and writer Carla Williams, my coauthor on *The Black Female Body in Photography: A Photographic History*, and with a number of friends and colleagues who were researching, writing, and making art about the body, all of whom had referenced Baartman in their work.

Although Baartman has become a focal point of reference for contemporary black artists, particularly women—from playwright Suzan-Lori Parks to novelist Barbara Chase-Riboud to photographer Carrie Mae Weems—few books have been written about her with regard to issues of representation.² Working closely for a number of years with Carla Williams, I initially became interested in organizing a collection about Baartman, her memory in our collective histories, and her symbolic history in the construction of black women as artists, performers, and icons.

Nearly two hundred years after her death and four years after her “homegoing” burial in South Africa, I have noticed a number of new books and films about Baartman. They include Zola Maseko's mesmerizing films *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* and *The Return of Sara Baartman* and the riveting and informing books *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* by Rachel Holmes and *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* by Janell Hobson.

Over the years I have been enriched by discussions in the classroom as Baartman's story continues to be written and as more and more writers and artists discover her and respond to her image. It is important to place Baartman in context within a discussion of images of women of African descent, particularly in Western culture. The inspiration behind this volume came from a wide variety of sources, some discovered while researching *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* and others emerging more recently in images of the so-called video vixen in music videos. In 2002, at a reading and book signing for *The Black Female Body* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, performance artist and curator Rashida Bumbray, then a graduate student in my class at New York University, opened up the event with a presentation. For a class project, Bumbray had choreographed a performance to Jill Scott's 2001 poem/song "Thickness," in which Bumbray takes the "stage" (an overturned box) and slowly disrobes, "displaying" her full body à la Baartman as Scott sings/speaks about the sexual objectification and exploitation of a physically mature adolescent black girl. It was a provocative and powerful performance; Bumbray's courage in positioning herself as a physical spectacle challenged the contemporary viewer to imagine what it would be like to live in her skin, in her body, in a culture that persistently degrades her image.

Who was Sarah Baartman? The facts of her life have been distorted and mythologized, and misinformation abounds surrounding the details of Baartman's short life. To begin with, no one can really agree on the spelling of her name, though assuredly virtually none of the versions in use reflect her given name, which remains unknown. They include Ssehura (thought to be closest to her given name); Sartjee, Saartje, Saat-je, Saartji, Saat-Jee, and Saartjie (all derived from the Afrikaans pronunciation, diminutive forms of Sara); as well as the Anglicized Sara or Sarah. The Afrikaans diminutive ending "-tjie" is now generally regarded as patronizing,³ thus Sarah is one of the most common spellings currently in use. Her surname, presumably given to her upon her baptism in Manchester, England, in 1811, has been represented as Baartman, Bartman, Baartmann, or Bartmann. Likewise, her captor/handler is represented variously as Hendrick, Henrik, or Hendrik Cesar, Caesar, or Cezar. Most of the contributors to this volume chose different spellings, and I felt it was more instructive to allow these variations, which in themselves speak to the way in which others have chosen to understand this woman and to interpret her life.

Born in South Africa in 1789, Baartman was brought to England and placed on exhibit in 1810. She was exhibited on stage and in a cage in London and Paris and performed at private parties for a little more than five years. The "Hottentot Venus" was "admired" by her protagonists, who depicted her as animal-like, exotic, different, and deviant. Rachel Holmes observes:

Almost overnight, London was taken with Saartjie-mania. She instantly captured the public imagination. . . . There was an outpouring of "Sartjee"-themed popular poesy, ballads, broadsheet caricatures, articles, and printed satires. Her image proliferated, seemingly everywhere reproduced, on brightly colored posters pasted in shop windows, on penny prints held aloft by street sellers, the human tabloids who raised the cry of "Sartjee" and "Hottentot" throughout the metropolis.⁴

Sander Gilman describes the impact of Baartman on European society in this way:

It is important to note that Sarah Baartman was exhibited not to show her genitalia but rather to present another anomaly which European audiences . . . found riveting. This was the steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, the other physical characteristic of the Hottentot female which captured the eye of European travelers. . . . The figure of Sarah Baartman was reduced to her sexual parts. The audience which had paid to see her buttocks and had fantasized about the uniqueness of her genitalia when she was alive could, after her death and dissection, examine both.⁵

Baartman's attribution as a Hottentot is widely agreed to be erroneous, and the term itself is contentious. According to contributor J. Yolande Daniels:

The origin of the word "Hottentot" has been the source of debate. That the *Khoi-khoip* (*Khoi*: a person, *Khoip*: a man, *Khoi-khoip*: the men—a Hottentot) referred to themselves as "Hottentot," serves to illustrate how the European world view was superimposed onto the "natives" of Africa and their descendants. The language of the *Khoisan* peoples ("Hottentot" and "bushman"), consists of a range of phonetic clicking sounds. The *Khoisan* language was interpreted by the Dutch seamen of the Cape as stuttering and labeled with the Dutch slang then common.⁶

In Kimberly Wallace-Sanders's book *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, Anne Fausto-Sterling points out: "Some nineteenth-century words, especially *Hottentot*, *primitive*, and *savage*, contain meanings that we know today as deeply racist."⁷ Usage of "Hottentot" throughout this volume should be understood in the same vein.

This book is arranged into four text sections with a Prologue, an Epilogue, and a separate section of illustrations. The Prologue, Elizabeth Alexander's 1990 poem "The Venus Hottentot," takes a provocative, postmodernist approach to the visualization of Baartman's dissection by introducing the scientist Georges Cuvier in the first stanza. In Baartman's voice, Alexander imagines her display in England, gives her agency, however flawed, and eventually offers the reader an imagined dialogue as the Venus talks back and takes back her identity. Referencing science and spectacle, Alexander's poem also sets the tone for the volume—a mixture of fact, fiction, pathos, and resistance.

The essays in Part I, Sarah Baartman in Context, introduce Baartman from both historical and contemporary frames of reference. Reprinted is Sander L. Gilman's groundbreaking and influential essay, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," from his 1985 book *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. This essay is a revision of the often-cited "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth

Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” which appeared in the Henry Louis Gates Jr. volume *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* (1986). Gilman’s essay offers both a historical account and a contemporary analysis of the perception of sexuality and the black female in medicine and popular culture. Many of the contributors here reference this seminal work, so I am especially pleased to include the essay in this volume.

Historian Robin Mitchell’s analysis, “Another Means of Understanding the Gaze: Sarah Baartmann in the Development of Nineteenth-Century French National Identity,” provides the readers of this volume with the details of Baartman’s life. This essay examines the role that Baartman played in the formation of French national identity in the early nineteenth century, going beyond a focus on Baartman’s sexuality to discuss the economic and political climate in which she appeared.

Zine Magubane deconstructs the “biological essentialism” that she reads in much of the prevailing scholarship about Baartman through a discussion of the socioeconomic realities of nineteenth-century Europe. Like Mitchell, Magubane questions the basic premise of Gilman’s essay, arguing that “‘blackness’ is less a stable, observable, empirical fact than an ideology that is historically determined and, thus, variable.”⁸

Architect J. Yolande Daniels’s “Exhibit A: Private Life without a Narrative” reenacts a case study that explores the physiological and psychological threshold of the space in which Baartman performed. Daniels discusses the female (biological) versus the feminine (cultural), physical versus psychological, white versus black. “What meaning could physical surroundings have had for one who was alienated from her physical body by voyeuristic audiences for up to eleven hours a day? When the first physical house, the body, is divorced from the mind, does a shed, or for that matter, city, register? What meaning could architecture have had in this life?” she asks.⁹

Holly Bass’s engaging and seductive poem “crucifix” ends the section with a plaintive challenge of longing and desire: “look at me.”

Part II, Sarah Baartman’s Legacy in Art and Art History, focuses on contemporary art references and the art historical aspect of Baartman’s legacy. Many people have asked one of the most obvious questions surrounding the interest in Baartman—why her? She was neither the first nor the only African woman on display in Europe. Numerous writers have noted that at least one other African woman was exhibited as a “Hottentot Venus” after Baartman’s death, and as Debra Singer points out, “many other unidentified women from Africa with similar physiques were photographed naked into the 1880s.”¹⁰ (See Figure 7.) We have only to look at contemporary culture to see the way in which Sarah Baartman’s image continues to be recycled as fashion in the works of some contemporary photographers. Baartman was the most *imaged* of these African women, and it is this plethora of visual representation that makes her so significant, so enduring. What she represented visually—even exaggerated and distorted—had a much greater audience and extended life and impact than her physical self ever could have. In England, her likeness illustrated the five of clubs in a deck of playing cards. (See Figure 2.) In France, Baartman posed for artists J.-B. Berré, Léon de Wailly, and Nicolas Huet le Jeune, whom Georges Cuvier had commissioned to make anatomical studies of her.¹¹

The essays in Part II analyze contemporaneous and contemporary works that have imagined Baartman in different ways. Despite their common point of departure, the works demonstrate the multiple possibilities in recuperating Baartman's story as they traverse the crossroads of sexuality and specularity, past and present, production and reception of visual representations. Several emphasize concerns relating to ideals of feminine beauty and racialized notions of the erotic. Others make explicit connections between Baartman and Africa, pointing out how "looking at" may be perceived as a form of "possessing" and foregrounding issues of control over the display of the body.

Lisa Gail Collins's "Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth" compares the visual evidence made of Baartman during her year in France with daguerreotypes made as visual evidence for Louis Agassiz in 1850. Collins concludes with a discussion of the works of Renée Green, Carla Williams, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lorna Simpson, contemporary African American women artists who confront and create images about Baartman and their own bodies. Debra S. Singer focuses on African American visual artists Green, Simpson, Weems, Renée Cox (with Lyle Ashton Harris), and Deborah Willis, as well as performance artist Joyce Scott. Using a wide spectrum of media, the artists Singer explores use Baartman's history and likeness to investigate the ways in which her story is theirs, is ours.

Kianga K. Ford examines the works of Kara Walker in "Playing with Venus: Black Women Artists and the Venus Trope in Contemporary Imaging." Manthia Diawara's "Talk of the Town" takes a historically grounding look at women's portraits in the work of the late African studio photographer Seydou Keita.

In "The 'Hottentot Venus' in Canada: Modernism, Censorship, and the Racial Limits of Female Sexuality," Charmaine Nelson expands the discussion north to Canada, an often overlooked site of cultural production and representation. Calling for a postcolonial intervention in art history, Nelson examines the exclusivity of the definition of Modernism in art historical practice. Looking at art historian T. J. Clark's analysis of Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and the censorship of three female nudes at the International Exhibition of Modern Art in Toronto in 1927, Nelson asserts, "We need to ask what art historical discourse, especially its Modernist permutations, makes possible and what it suppresses as well as through what logic and apparatus its borders are policed."¹²

In the late 1980s, art historian Kellie Jones explored the possibilities of organizing an exhibition using the art of contemporary artists as a starting point to address the life, work, and afterlife of Baartman. Working in the format of exhibitions and installations featuring the works of contemporary artists, Jones explored the notion of female agency and how women claim and control their bodies and sexuality. Jones's essay "A.K.A. Saartjie: The 'Hottentot Venus' in Context (Some Recollections and a Dialogue), 1998/2004" is a collaborative one, including the voices of South African artists Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa, Penny Siopis, Veliswa Gwintsa, Berni Searle, Marlaine Tosoni, and Tracey Rose, who responded in a transatlantic roundtable to a series of questions designed by Jones regarding their experiences in making art about Baartman and working on themes relating to sexuality.

To end the section, Linda Susan Jackson's poem, "little sarah," takes us on a biographical journey with Baartman from her homeland and back.

Nikky Finney's poem "The Greatest Show on Earth . . ." introduces Part III, Sarah Baartman and Black Women as Public Spectacle, forging a connection between Baartman and other black women in various forms of public display. Ranging from the carnival sideshow to *National Geographic* exhibitions, Finney's poem segues neatly into "The Imperial Gaze: Venus Hottentot, Human Display, and World's Fairs," Michele Wallace's discussion of human display in the context of international world fairs and expositions. Wallace reminds us of the prevailing role hegemony plays in the construction of the gaze.

Cheryl Finley discusses photographer Joy Gregory's work in "Cinderella Tours Europe." Using a pair of gold pumps, Gregory takes the body of the Caribbean woman on the Grand Tour of Europe. Focusing on a different kind of platform, Michael D. Harris's "Mirror Sisters: Aunt Jemima as the Antonym/Extension of Saartjie Bartmann" challenges the reader to consider the role of black servants and their relationships to their white "masters," in particular the mammy, embodied in the fictionalized persona of Aunt Jemima, who was viewed as the exemplar mammy in American culture and carried with her a message, a valuation, about the nature and characteristics of black women. Harris argues: "Like Baartman, she entered public life as a spectacle, a popular curiosity, and she served as a text for the delivery of certain sexual politics and definitions."¹³

Part III concludes with E. Ethelbert Miller's "My Wife as Venus," a thoughtful meditation on his wife's body—his relationship to it, and hers.

Part IV, *Iconic Women in the Twentieth Century*, includes essays that examine the lives of women who were and who remain icons today. Holly Bass's poem "agape" evidences a charged, complex sexual dynamic not unlike that in *Venus*, Suzan-Lori Parks's 1990 play, which introduced a contemporary audience to Baartman's experience through a spellbinding and controversial performance at the Public Theater in New York City, or in the work of Kara Walker, discussed earlier in Kianga Ford's essay.

Carole Boyce Davies's study of carnival and the carnivalized body, "Black/Female/Bodies Carnivalized in Spectacle and Space," offers a provocative characterization of the black female body as spectacle and performance art. She explores the difficulty of locating one's self as a woman, feminist, and intellectual yet willing carnival participant in the space of the spectacle.

In her essay "Sighting the 'Real' Josephine Baker: Methods and Issues of Black Star Studies," Terri Francis imagines Josephine Baker's agency in the public arena on stage and film. She writes, "one of my clearest agendas has been to distinguish and understand the issue of Baker's authorship—which goes to agency. Since most accounts of women (particularly black women) in film convincingly describe their being controlled in many ways by the apparatus of the film industry, the gaze, and the pleasures of the spectator, a feminist ethic asks: What role did Baker play in the choreography of her dancing? How did she contribute to her films other than through acting? These are some of the questions that address Baker's agency through textual specificity."¹⁴

In "The Hoodrat Theory," William Jelani Cobb, a professor at Spelman College in Atlanta, recounts his students' response to a 2004 music video by rapper Nelly for the song "Tip Drill" (slang for "an ugly woman with a big butt," not unlike the way Baart-

man was regarded by European men), in which Nelly swiped a credit card between the buttocks cheeks of a black woman portrayed by Atlanta performer White Chocolate.¹⁵ Nelly rebuffed the students' request for dialogue, during a proposed campus visit, about the pervasive hypersexualized depiction of black women. Cobb reflects on these portrayals and on his role as an educator at a historically black women university.

The Epilogue is the perfect final chapter for this project. It is a poem by a woman of Khoisan descent, Diana Ferrus. Her words helped to convince the French government to return Sarah Baartman's remains to South Africa. Ferrus wrote "A Poem for Sarah Baartman" while she was a student in Utrecht, Netherlands, in 1998. She states, "One evening I was looking at the stars and I thought to myself, 'They're so far away. But if I were home, I'd be able to touch every one of them.' My heart just went out to Sarah, and I thought, 'Oh, god, she died of heartbreak, she longed for her country. What did she feel?' That's why the first line of the poem was 'I've come to take you home.'"¹⁶

Although initially conceived as integral parts of each section, the visual work is, of practical necessity, in a separate section of reproductions. Roshini Kempadoo's *Banking on the Image* series includes photographs she made over a period of ten years merged with images housed in public repositories. She re-examines and re-interprets images found in these collections and constructs tableaux referring to ways in which black women survived under oppression. "I work from archived images I would describe as stereotyped 'exotic,' provocative, sexually charged, titillating images 'existing to serve the ends of white male desires,'"¹⁷ Kempadoo writes, "to render them into specific and different contexts. The photographic archive becomes a visual presentation of a matrix of experiences in which the white bourgeoisie male is at the centre, the norm, unexplained, whilst the identities of those seen as the Other are constantly interrogated, investigated and monitored."¹⁸

Using iconic images that circulated in the 1800s, Hank Willis Thomas conjures a moment in time for two renowned and revered women—Harriet Tubman and Sarah Baartman. His work acknowledges their presence in visual history, their clothed and unclothed bodies, as well as their significance today. Two of the most imaged women in the nineteenth century, these iconic figures are portrayed as markers for women who made history in different ways.

Photographs by Petrushka A. Bazin and Radcliffe Royce provide striking visual demonstrations of the sense of "freedom, movement, and resistance" of women taking space in the public arena that Carole Boyce Davies describes in her Part IV essay. Bazin's images of Jamaican dancehalls illustrate the complexity of representing women's bodies and how they choose to display themselves in public spaces. The young women in Royce's photograph demonstrate the power of posture and movement in expressing attitudes and states of engagement.

Finally, in a dramatically different portrayal of the woman's body, Simone Leigh's *Venus* series vessels were:

conceived of as a way of memorializing [Baartman's] tragic life. . . . Venus is icon, fetish, me, reincarnated as African pot. It is also an exploration of the meaning of my own life and my own personal humiliations. I . . . explore what is the

“essential” pot, body, container, spiritual vessel; and also how that container—pot/body describes identity. . . . I am playing with the idea of the fertility goddess; the multiple breast form is taken directly from East Indian art. I am also exploring certain taboos: mixing up the sacred and the profane places that both the African-American woman and the “African pot” occupy in Western culture. I am approaching pain and humiliation in a typically African-American way: by transforming scars into something more beautiful. Each piece in this series involves going from hatred to scar to adornment.¹⁹

What of Baartman in the interim period between her institutionalization at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris in the early nineteenth century and her repatriation to South Africa in the early twenty-first? Reports vary as to exactly how long her physical remains were on public display, but, it was not until the late twentieth century that her remains were removed to storage before their return to her homeland. British historian Tony Kushner writes of finding her image in a reissued George Cruickshank print, *The Court at Brighton a la Chinoise!*, for sale in the summer of 1996 at the Brighton Pavilion commercial heritage shop.²⁰ As historian Robin Mitchell discovered in late 2004, only Baartman’s physical remains returned to South Africa; the plaster cast and all documentation remain at the Musée, and Mitchell was floored to find herself alone with “her” for a few minutes to quietly hold her hand. Indeed, I recall the moment I viewed the plaster cast and how it silenced me into a state of sorrow, as I remembered my early quest to find meaning about her life.

As many articles and as much information as I have collected about Baartman over the years, I know there is still much more work to be done. This unique project is but one of many. However, I believe that the collective voices and vision of the contributors in this volume offer another legacy of Baartman’s display—a legacy that is personal and universal. *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”* represents the most compelling writing and visual response to Baartman that I have witnessed today. It also represents the variety of responses to her by poets, historians, architects, ceramists, photographers, installation artists, and writers over the years. Some are scholarly, some are highly personal, a few are slightly humorous, yet each one grapples with the enduring legacy of how beauty is marked in difference.

Epigraph: Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (New York: Random House, 2007), 43.

1. Lisa Jones, “Venus Envy,” *The Village Voice*, vol. 36/28 (9 July 1991), 36.
2. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999) was the first volume devoted primarily to a study of Baartman, but its focus was on literature, with one chapter devoted to Josephine Baker.
3. “Sarah Baartman, At Rest at Last,” <http://www.southafrica.info/about/history/saartjie.htm>.
4. Holmes, 42.
5. Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature” in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, eds., *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 223.

6. J. Yolande Daniels, "Black Bodies, Black Space: A-Waiting Spectacle" in Lesley Naa Norle Lokko, ed., *White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 370. Daniels continues: "See *The Word 'Hottentot'*, State Library, Pretoria, 1971, for articles from the debates of the Philosophical Society of London (1866)."
7. Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815–17" in Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, ed., *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002), 66.
8. Zine Magubane, this volume, 47.
9. J. Yolande Daniels, this volume, 62.
10. Deborah Willis, "Introduction: Picturing Us," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: The New Press, 1994), 19.
11. Z. S. Strother, "Display of the Body Hottentot," in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Berth Lindfors (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 25–34, including a reproduction of an engraving by Louis-Jean Allais after the painting by Berré.
12. Charmaine Nelson, this volume, 112.
13. Michael D. Harris, this volume, 163.
14. Terri Francis, this volume, 199.
15. dream hampton, "She's Got Game," *Suede* 1:1 (Fall 2004), 223.
16. "Sarah Baartman, At Rest at Last."
17. Quoted in bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 25.
18. Unpublished artist's statement, December 1998.
19. Unpublished artist's statement, 1998.
20. As Kushner notes, hers was the only likeness of a non-white person for sale in the shop. Tony Kushner, "Selling Racism: History, Heritage, Gender and the (Re)production of Prejudice," *Patterns of Prejudice* 33:4 (1999), 70–71.