

# Review

*Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*  
(Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 200.)

Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully

Reviewed by Shireen Hassim

As the recent furore over the sex of Caster Semenya brought so sharply to the fore, the experience of Sara Baartman 200 years ago is disturbingly familiar in the present.

Baartman represents feminist resistance to supposedly Western preoccupations with the black female body; the symbol of all that is deformed in the colonial imagination of the black other; the epitome of the racist underpinnings of modern science.

Baartman's story, in these terms, is a central one to cultural activists and historians.

She was born some time in the 1770s and she left South Africa in the early 19th century for Europe. There, for a brief five years before her death, she was exhibited like a strange and wild animal, her genitalia the prurient interest of Europeans in their quest for rational classification and for reminders of how far they had evolved from the primitive.

Baartman was treated either as a freak or a scientific curiosity – frequently both. And for some she was an entirely new category of human, *homo sapiens monstrosus*. She was paraded on public stages in London and Paris, often on a leash. Part of the 'show' included her following a set of orders from a 'keeper', in the manner of a circus and observers were encouraged to prod and to poke with canes and parasols, the better to provoke a response from her.

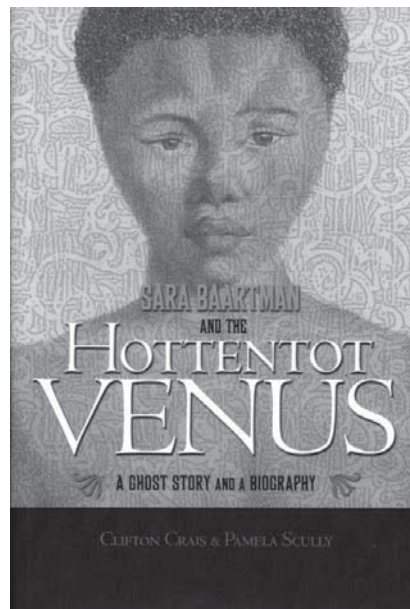
Baartman was a human curiosity, part of an array of 'human freaks' which included the woman with a

beard, the 'spotted boy', the living skeleton, the dwarf – and therefore not unique. But, as many have argued, she was presented as a particular type of freak whose value transcended the economic rewards for the circus owners.

As Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully tell in their book, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* 'The Hottentot Venus' confirmed to Europeans the inferiority of the Hottentot and people with dark skins. Baartman also confirmed the inequality and unfitness of all women, for women were closer to nature, and the Hottentot Venus was closest of all. Crais and Scully describe Hottentot Venus exhibitions as creating the new phenomenon of "the ethnopornographic freak show".

It is testament to earlier researchers of these horrific excesses of the past that the Baartman story has become known to so many, and so easily recalled as a cautionary tale. To use Crais and Scully's metaphor, she is the ghost at the feast of democracy, disrupting the Enlightenment pretensions of France and implicated in debates about memory and forgiveness.

Yet she is also rendered in many of these histories as victim, as the appropriated one, as voiceless. She is everywoman; she is every black person. In the process she disappears from view as an individual in much the same way that Caster Semenya is invisible in the glare of the public posturings in her name.



Contemporary understandings of race, gender and indeed labour are projected back two centuries as Baartman is re-appropriated as 'one like us', with the difference that where 'we' now have agency and voice, she was silent and choiceless.

Indeed, the project of 'rescuing' Baartman, through the repatriation of her remains from Paris to South Africa in 2002, is tied up with the project of nation-building under Mandela. The entangled politics of culture, identity and representation and the grubbier pursuits of money and status in the post-apartheid era caught Baartman in its web, offering her story up as "one way of negotiating an uncertain present". The story of the Hottentot Venus, the authors argue, threatens to obliterate that of Sara Baartman.

Crais and Scully cover well-worn ground in detailing the many indignities in the Hottentot Venus shows. They remind us of the relationship between racism, sexism and imperialism and the ways in which the modern and civilised was demarcated from the primitive and savage.

However, the authors tread new, and politically dangerous ground in the ways in which they deal with the question of human agency and forced labour, and they take debates on Baartman in an altogether different direction.

They open the book by reminding us that Baartman is not just a symbol of resistance: "Sara Baartman loved, and was loved, and for many years before she went to Europe was a mother and a working woman in the Cape". This is emblematic of the humanising tone of the book. Baartman is presented as a complex person, living in "an extraordinary epoch" characterised by rapid change and intellectual and scientific ferment.

Baartman left no written words of her own on which to build a biography, yet Crais and Scully weave together a wealth of detail, including rich descriptions of landscape, place, politics and economy, to evoke the context of her life.

They argue that while material conditions may constrain human agency in the most dire fashion, people do negotiate the conditions of their life in ways that may seem unfathomable in retrospect. They write Baartman's life as the story of an ordinary woman of her time, rather than the extraordinary example of human exploitation. In so doing, they gently rescue Baartman from the historical burden of "standing for too much", such that "the figment subsumes the person".

The authors humanise Europeans too, by discussing the several ways in which the moral and legal questions about the treatment of Baartman were raised by the growing band of human rights activists in the nineteenth century.

The authors' approach raises the thorny question of what agency means in unfree societies, and particularly of how we make sense of the distinction between complicity and coercion. They are at pains to point out that Baartman was not a slave; however constrained her circumstances, she made some choices.

To be sure, Baartman was treated as a commodity, traded like livestock, but that is not the same as to be completely unable to negotiate one's life. Where previous studies have treated the relationship between Baartman and Peter Cesars, to whom she was sold as a virtual slave, as a simple story of domination and control, Crais and Scully refuse such categorisations.

Baartman left the Cesars' brothers and then returned to their employment as a domestic worker and wet nurse. For several years she "lived in the interstices between slavery and freedom, more a servant than a slave, sometimes a companion but always enthralled to others, free to come and go at one level but never truly independent." Her prospects were oddly tied to the fortunes of the men for whom she worked. As Hendrik Cesars' financial woes increased he was tempted to sell Baartman to a military doctor, Dunlop, who had the idea of putting her on show in London.

However, "the threads of business and personal relations had created messy and near-intractable knots" and Baartman refused to go without Hendrik

Cesars. She successfully forced this issue, because Cesars was too indebted to refuse Dunlop's offer. Although it is not clear what Baartman's reasons were these are signs of a woman with some power, who was prepared to exact at least some contracts on her own terms.

Crais and Scully certainly make it clear that life in the Cape held little comfort or attraction for her by 1810. Her ties to her community had weakened and living in a port city opened the world to her in new ways. She bore and lost three children and had relationships with men but never married. Her body, like that of many enslaved women, might have become her ticket out of the Cape. Remarkably, Baartman held the copyright to images of her own body although she most likely earned no royalties from these. She preserved a sense of privacy in her shows, refusing to display certain parts of her body, suggesting at least that she may have colluded in deciding how to titillate, and fleece, the punters.

Do all the examples add up to economic agency? Crais and Scully are far too careful to overstate the case or to presume that an answer is even possible in the absence of Baartman's own account of her life. They do, however, point us in the direction of more nuanced studies of the relationship between exploitation, complicity and negotiation, and of the relationship between individual lives and the larger social, political and economic landscape in which they are lived. This is an excellent and provocative study that invites debate. LB

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