

VENUS

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Dramaturgical Research

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From Clifton Crais & Pamela Scully's *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (2009)



Fig 1. Lewis engraving, September 1810



Fig 2. Lewis engraving, March 1811

TIMELINE

The Life of Sara Baartman

“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...than we do about the life of Sara Baartman, the human being...” (Crais & Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, 6).

1770s Sara Baartman is born in the Gamtoos River Valley in South Africa into the Gonaqua tribe of the eastern Cape, a subgroup of the Khoisan (Khoekhoe) people, the first aboriginal inhabitants of the southern tip of Africa. The Baartmans were born into a life of colonial servitude to a poor Dutch farmer, named David Fourie.



1779 David Fourie died and the Baartmans were transferred to the keeping of Cornelius Muller. Sara became a young woman on his farm, The Kraal of War near the Gamtoos River where her father tended livestock and she worked domestically. She learned to speak Dutch, the settler’s language, here.

1780s Her parents died.

1790s Cape Town was a port city, teeming with sailors, merchants, slaves, and prostitutes. Women’s domestic labor was in high demand as the white population had doubled with the British annexation of 1795. A slave woman’s position was a doubly insecure one; the threat of beatings, rape, moving from one master to another, having to sell one’s body for food or money were constant.

1795-6 Sara was sold to a trader named Pieter Cesars, the employee of a wealthy Cape merchant and butcher named Jan Michiel Elzer. She went with Cesars to Cape Town just as her people, the Gonaqua, were disappearing as an independent people. Sara left a rural life for an urban one in the city of Cape Town. As a colonial woman, she first lived in Strand St, in the heart of the city, as Elzer’s servant. It is likely that Sara experienced sexual exploitation, as many slave women at the time did.



1795 The British annexed the Cape Colony to prevent the French from occupying this strategic place. The British would once again capture the Cape in 1806 and this time, they would keep it.

Saartjie's first pregnancy. Buried in an unmarked grave, most likely in Prestwich Place, the slave cemetery in Cape Town. No details are known about how this child was conceived or with whom.

1799-1802 During the so-called Hottentot Rebellion, Khoisan rose up in an unsuccessful but protracted rebellion in the eastern districts of the Cape against the colonial authorities.

1800 Sara moves to Pieter Cesars' small house in Papendorp at the bottom of Devil's Peak and serves as wet nurse to Cesars' infant son after his wife, Johanna Staal dies.

1803 Sara moves to Pieter's brother, Hendrik Cesars small holding, Welgelegen (Happily Situated) with his wife, Anna Staal. This was a "Free Black" community in Cape Town, which indicated social status not race, and was riddled with disease and depressed economics. Free Blacks were bound by sumptuary laws to wear clothes that marked their social standing.

1803-6 Sara's romance with and common law marriage to a young drummer in the 22nd Battalion of the Batavian infantry, named Hendrik van Jong. She walked between Cesars' house in Papendorp to Hout Bay, on the other side of Table Mountain, to be with him.

1804 Sara's second pregnancy. The baby also died.

1806 Sara bid farewell to Hendrik as he returned to Holland with the Batavian navy. Sara's third pregnancy, possibly by Jonge, a Mozambican slave in the Cesars household. Child did not survive.

The second British occupation brings scores of sailors to Cape Town.



1808 Sara's owner, Hendrik Cesars, displays her to medical patients in the military hospital in Cape Town to pay off his debts. Cesars was deeply indebted to Jacobus Johannes Vos, a wealthy merchant and usurer. It's unknown if Sara exchanged sexual favors during these encounters.

Since 1800 On Hottentot Square in the Malay quarter of Cape Town was the African Theater, run by Charles-Maurithurin Villet, a French vaudevillian. Jean Reaux (also spelled Riaux) was one of his collaborators and ran a shop of curiosities. Several years later (1814-15), Sara will be exhibited in Paris by a man named Reaux, who also has a shop of curiosities. Coincidence? The same person?

1806- Alexander Dunlop, a Scottish surgeon, came to the Cape, facing mandatory retirement from the military within a few years. He faced financial penury and had a great incentive to find a way to make money. He was appointed medical superintendent of the Slave Lodge and by April 1808 had begun treating "sick Hottentots and others."



1809 Dunlop encounters Sara and begins negotiations with Cesars to bring Baartman to England. Contracts were negotiated between the men but Sara was not included on the deal. She refused to go to England without Cesars.

1810 **20 March:** Dunlop received permission to travel to England with “his Servant,” a young slave boy named Matthias and Cesars were approved to travel with “Free Black Saar.” This trip enabled several shifts in identity: Matthias, a slave, became a servant, Sara was a Free Black and thus avoided the letter of the law, and for, Hendrik, leaving the Cape erased his status as a Free Black and made him a Dutch colonist in the eyes of Europeans.

7 April: Sara Baartman, Hendrik Cesar, Alexander Dunlop and Matthias set sail for England on the *Diadem*, a military transport ship. As the only woman on board, Sara confined for most of the trip below deck in tiny, dank quarters (for her own safety, as was custom). The 4-month journey took them up the West Coast of Africa, to Saint Helena, Ascension Island, the Cape Verdes, and to Lizard Point, England.

July: The party disembarked at the Royal Dockyards. The metropolis of London was the center of the world but for as much elegance and sophistication, there was also depravity, abject poverty, disease and overcrowding. It’s population was twice that of Paris at the time, at over a million inhabitants. The party roomed at the White Bear Inn, only a few doors down from 225 Piccadilly, where Sara would be displayed as the Hottentot Venus. Sara was both the main attraction of her own show and the maid to Dunlop and Cesars in her private time.



August: Dunlop contacted William Bullock, who ran the very popular Liverpool Museum of natural history at 22 Piccadilly. Bullock turned down the offer to display Sara, fearing that “such an exhibition would not meet the countenance of the public.”

Dunlop, instead, “created an exhibition that combined science and the freak show, and alluded to the public interest in the figure of the prostitute.” (Crais & Scully, 70-1). Tapping into London’s fascination with exhibiting the strange and the curious, Dunlop set

about creating The Hottentot Venus, who would “stand at the line between the sexual, the wondrous, and the ethnographic...an ethnopornographic freak show” (72-3).



18 September: Dunlop creates first promotional broadsheet (aquatint poster) of The Hottentot Venus with Frederick Christian Lewis. “S. Bartmaan” is credited with the image; Sara owned the copyright to this image though it is unlikely she ever saw a penny of the profits. The image depicts a profile view of a nearly naked Baartman in Khoekhoe dress (See Fig 1). Crais & Scully argue that the Khoekhoe details suggest that Baartman “sought to render her depictions with verisimilitude, even if the overall design of the poster was out of her control” (75).

20 September: The first advertisement of The Hottentot Venus appeared in the London papers.

Sara appeared in the homes of the wealthy and aristocratic and private showings were also offered at 225 Piccadilly. People paid two schillings to see Sara in a very tight brown dress that accentuated her bottom and gave off the semblance of nudity without violating decorum or propriety. Cesars was part of the show, her

keeper, who gave her directions to “turn around” and offered audiences the chance to “feel her posterior parts.”



11 October: Zachary Macaulay, one of the Four Saints (a group of evangelical reformers and abolitionists who were influential in the creation of Sierra Leone) visited Sara at 225 Piccadilly.

12 October: Macaulay published anonymously as “An Englishman” in the *Morning Chronicle* on the condition of the “wretched creature” he had seen the day before. “This poor female is made to walk, to dance to shew herself, not for her own advantage, but for the profit of her master, who, when she appeared tired, holds up a stick to her, like the wild beast keepers, to intimidate her into obedience” (Crais & Scully, 89).

Sara becomes embroiled in the slavery question. The slave trade was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1807; the practice of slavery continued until the *Slavery Abolition Act of 1833*.

13 October: Because he was central to Macaulay’s indictment, Hendrik Cesars submits a response the following day in the papers claiming Sara was in England of her own free will. (Cesars was illiterate and therefore it’s likely Dunlop was the letter’s author and scribe).



15 October: Macaulay, along with Thomas Babington (another Saint) and Peter van Wageninge (who spoke Dutch), went to interview Sara at 225 Piccadilly. She refused to answer their questions (most likely because her master was there).

In response to the media attacks, Dunlop got rid of Cesars, whose boorish (read Boer-ish) tone offended audiences. He also eliminated the tight body stocking that suggested Sara’s nudity.

29 October: Dunlop drew up a contract with Sara that employed him as her domestic servant. Sara understood very little of this arrangement.

November-December: The media controversy caused a sensation and sensations draw audiences. London literati, including Jane Austen, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge all new of Sara. She became a popular icon and her image was used in political cartoons and lampoons.

13 November: Sara had a private showing with the Duke of Queensbury, London’s most notorious rake, at his home. She was carried in a chair, like high class lady, to the Duke’s apartment where she was then subjected to humiliating scrutiny, “a microscopic inspection, a visual dissection, particularly of her bottom” (Crais & Scully, 95).

Meanwhile, Macaulay and the Saints finally convinced the King’s Bench to submit a writ of *habeus corpus*, an application to request evidence concerning Saartjie Baartman. (This is a landmark legal case that applies in jurisprudence still today.)





Dunlop hired a lawyer to retro-date the Oct 29 contract with Sara and to amend it to stipulate a term of 5 years.

27 November: The court ordered a second interview with Sara, this time “out of the presence of her keeper” (Crais & Scully, 97). Solicitors for the court as well as Dunlop’s lawyer, George Moojen, were present. They interviewed her for 3 hours, asked her to recount her life and how she got to England. The story she told, probably coached by Dunlop, was that she came of her own free will, and that she had no complaints against her situation, or her keepers, beyond being rather cold. She explicitly stated that she did not want to return to the Cape. “Stay here,” she said. Rather than serve the abolitionist’s cause, or potentially escape her plight, Sara continued on the path she was on...

1811 **18 March:** Second promotional aquatint of The Hottentot Venus printed by Lewis and Dunlop (Baartman also owns this copyright). This image shows her in a tight body stocking and is most likely how she was actually exhibited in London (**See Fig 2**). In both images, she wears her tortoiseshell necklace, her only object of value.

Dunlop now shifts his display of Sara from pornography to ethnography. Venus now became an example of lesser evolved humanity.

Her popularity (or novelty) in London waning, Dunlop now took Sara on a tour of the provinces, especially Bath and Manchester.

1 December: Sara was baptized as “Sarah Bartmann” in the Manchester Cathedral by the Reverend Joshua Brookes, who had sought out special permission from the Bishop to do so. Her baptismal record also indicated that she married at the same time. Dunlop signed the record. Could he have been her husband? Was she pregnant?

1812 **April:** Sara tours Ireland and is hardly even noticed at The Limerick Fair.

July: Dunlop dies. Cesars had left already. Sara was alone.

August: Sara is shown at Bartholomew Fair in London, perhaps with Henry Taylor, the man who would later take her to France.

October: She appears at Bury Saint Edmunds near Ipswich in Suffolk as “The Most Wonderful Phenomenon of Nature, The Hottentot Venus” with a clearly ethnographic spin to the promotional materials and at only one schilling a viewing. Her star in England was fading, “Half price, half used, the Hottentot Venus had become a sideshow travelling the circuits of minor pleasure in the wet English provinces” (Crais & Scully, 111).



During this time, Crais and Scully surmise that Sara may have found community amongst the show people of the sideshow circuits. Perhaps this is also inspiration for the Chorus of Wonders in Parks' play.

1814

Baartman travels to Paris with Henry Thomas. Amidst the post-Napoleonic aristocratic fervor for the Grand Tour, Sara arrived in Paris as "The Hottentot Venus," an identity she would ultimately die with. The Palais-Royal was



Paris' pleasure dome, a long parade of shops, cafes, brothels, and entertainment spaces. "In the *palais*, where reality and performance blurred into a kaleidoscope of sensation, one could delight in all pleasures, licit and illicit" (Crais & Scully, 120).

Sara lives and works at 15 rue Neuves-des-Petits-Champs, on the northern border of the *palais*. For 10 hours a day, she endured the gaze and prods of strangers.



10 September: Taylor wrote to the Museum of Natural History, informing them he had the original Hottentot with him but Georges Cuvier, the museum's director and the founder of the discipline of comparative anatomy, declines this invitation.

18 September: Taylor's first advertisements appear in the Paris papers. He called attention to dress and her status as an authentic Hottentot and marketed her as an "ethnographic wonder." Sara's display in Paris was all about maintaining the fiction of her primitiveness, "her fixedness in a kind of eternal ethnographic present and past that allowed for no personal or historical growth" (Crais & Scully, 125).

November: Baartman's success spurred a comic opera in France called "The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of French Women" which played at the vaudeville Theatre across the street from the *palais*. The story concerns a young man who is supposed to marry his cousin but who does not find her exotic enough. The cousin then disguises herself as the Hottentot Venus and the man summarily falls in love with her. (Source for Parks' play within the play).

1815

23 January: During that legendary cold winter, Taylor abandoned Sara to a showman of animals named, hauntingly, Reaux.





Reaux exhibited Sara for the whole of 1815, often parading her through cafes around the *palais* on a leash.

Le Quotidienne printed two more “interviews” with Sara, both either fabrications or distortions of actual conversations. In January, a Monsieur Musard (Mr. Lazy) published an account of her life and this is the first mention of Sara’s three dead daughters “by an African prince” in South Africa.

February: A second journalist lamented, in the first person, “My name is Sara, poor Sara. Sara who does not deserve her fate” (Crais & Scully, 129).

March: Reaux approached Georges Cuvier, the man of science, the collector, classifier, and cataloguer of the day. Cuvier had long been looking for “the missing link” and had wanted a Hottentot to add to his collection. For him, the Hottentot was at the “nexus of nature and culture” (132). He was also fascinated by the rumors of the “Hottentot apron,” or elongated labia of Khoisan women. Scientists like Cuvier “married primitiveness to sexuality” and it was the female body – Sara Baartman’s body – that became his object of study.



18 March: Sara visited Cuvier’s laboratory at the Museum of Anatomy. Assisted by Henri de Blainville, four artists drew Sara’s body from every conceivable angle despite her cold and play). Sara refused to concealed,” Cuvier deeply.” In that (Crais & Scully, 135).

Georges Cuvier



discomfort. (Hence the Chorus of Anatomists in Parks’ allow Cuvier to examine her; “She kept her apron would write, “either between her thighs or still more gesture of refusal, we read a profound statement of self.”

De Blainville recorded detailed comparison race, and with the another version of Hottentot, female

the conversation that day and later developed a lecture, “a of this woman with the lowest race of humans, the Negro highest race of monkeys, the orangutan.” (136). Yet Sara’s life that fixed for centuries the way in which the sexuality, and race were envisioned.

December 29: After a bitterly cold winter, and Napoleon’s last stand, which killed nearly a million French soldiers and plummeted Paris into economic privation, life became very bleak for Sara. Penniless and starving, and freezing, Sara Baartman died in Paris, mostly likely of pneumonia.

1816

January: Her body was wrapped in cloth and taken to Cuvier’s laboratory. Cuvier made a full body cast of her body before minutely dissecting her corpse. Her genitalia and brain were preserved in jars and her skeleton macerated and rearticulated. Her body was displayed at the Musee de l’Homme (Museum of Mankind) until 1974, when it was removed from public view, assigned to a storeroom, and forgotten.

8 June: Cuvier delivers his findings and claims that Baartman was more closely related to apes than to humans. His findings are published in 1817.

1889 Sara's body cast greeted people at the Universal Exhibition in Paris.

1937 She moved from the *jardin* (Cuvier's lab) to the Musee de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind).

1974 Baartman's body cast was removed from public view at the Musee de l'Homme.

1982 Baartman's remains (Cabinet Number 33) removed from public view at the Musee de l'Homme.



1994 South Africa ends the 49-year apartheid regime and becomes a democracy

Urged by indigenous rights groups in South Africa, Mandela petitions the French government to return Baartman's remains to South Africa and protracted diplomatic negotiations ensue.



1996 Suzan-Lori Parks' play *Venus* premieres at The Public Theater in New York under the direction of Richard Foreman.

1998 Diana Ferris writes "I Have Come to Take You Home," the poem on a signboard by Baartman's grave in South Africa.

Filmmaker Zola Masked is one of the first black South Africans to make a film by, for, and about blacks in the post-apartheid era. He made two films: *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998) and *The Return of Sara Baartman* (2003).



1994-2002 The Department of Arts and Cultures' Reference Group is formed to prepare for Baartman's return, decide on the nature of her memorialization, and even determine her official name. One of the key issues this group debates is whether or not scientists may take DNA samples from her remains. The decision is to leave her be and not to further violate her already violated body.

2002 **May:** Baartman's remains arrive back in South Africa, almost 200 years after she left the Cape.

August 9 (National Women's Day): Baartman was buried on a hill outside Hankey, near Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape.

Although Baartman had become a symbol for South Africa and for women everywhere, her funeral ceremonies largely involved men speaking on behalf of women, her gravesite



fell into disrepair within months, and was even vandalized. Metal bars now surround her grave: According to her biographers, Clifton Crais & Pamela Scully, “Returned to South Africa, Sara Baartman remains behind bars, imprisoned still” (*Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, 168).

