

Race and Erasure: Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London

Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais

From the fall of 1810 until April 1811, Sara Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman from the Cape Colony, appeared on stage in London. For two shillings, people entered 225 Piccadilly and watched Sara Baartman walk onto a stage, sing a song, and turn around. The spectators could even poke her with their walking sticks. In September and October 1810, the showman was Hendrik Cesars, a man from Cape Town. He displayed Baartman as “the Hottentot Venus,” a marvel of nature, if a freakish one, whose large bottom and “Hottentot” identity made the suffix of “Venus” supposedly a joke.¹ Alexander Dunlop was the organizer.

Cesars’s display of Baartman particularly outraged some members of the anti-slavery lobby, including Zachary Macaulay of the African Institution.² They disliked a Dutch settler keeping a Khoekhoe woman in a state of bondage in a free England exulting in its recent abolition of the slave trade. Macaulay asked the attorney general to investigate whether Baartman displayed herself of her own free will or whether she was enslaved. According to the court paraphrase of the interview with Baartman, she said that she stayed in London to earn money. Although she was cold, she wanted to remain in England until it was time to return to the Cape.

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¹ This article is drawn from a larger work, Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

² On the African Institution, see Michael J. Turner, “The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints and the ‘African Question,’ c. 1780–1820,” *English Historical Review* 112, no. 446 (April 1997): 319–57. Cesars’s name is spelled in a variety of ways throughout the sources. We have taken the spelling from his will. See “Will of Cesars and Staal,” 29 March 1810, filed 16 May 1811, Cape Archives (CA), MOOC 7/1/61.

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The court of the King's Bench ruled that Baartman was a free person.³ The proceedings ended, and the show of the Hottentot Venus continued for a number of months in London before moving to the provinces.

Contemporary accounts of the Hottentot Venus began with cartoons and letters commenting on Sara Baartman's display in London in 1810. From 1815, Georges Cuvier and other French scientists' treatises on the Hottentot Venus ensured the longevity of that iconic representation in Europe. The dissemination of the images and meaning of that icon continued to resonate in British popular culture in the mid-nineteenth century—Robert Chambers's *Book of Days* of 1864 carried a notice of the 1810 display of the Hottentot Venus.⁴ In the 1930s, fascists resuscitated these representations in Italy.⁵ In the 1940s and 1950s, a South African musicologist, Percival Kirby, published a series of articles in a South African journal about Sara Baartman and French science that set the parameters of many subsequent publications in the 1980s.⁶

Since the 1980s, a vast literature has emerged that analyzes the Hottentot Venus as a foundational figure in the rise of racial science and cultural perceptions of the black female body. Stephen Jay Gould introduced the history of the Hottentot Venus to a new generation in *The Mismeasure of Man*.⁷ Richard Altick's magisterial *The Shows of London* included a discussion of Baartman's display in London. Sander Gilman's work on the black female body and representations of prostitutes in nineteenth-century France brought the Hottentot Venus to the attention of a generation of scholars interested in cultural studies. In the 1990s, feminist scholars, poets, and playwrights also turned their attention to the Hottentot Venus. Anne Fausto-Sterling, Zoë Strother, and T. Denean Sharply-Whiting, among others, have created an important body of work that explores the intersection of gendered and racial stereotypes in the rise of European scientific racism. Zine Magubane argues persuasively that the theoretical suppositions of much of the scholarship on Baartman have prevented a serious analysis of the ways in which race and gendered discrimination arise out of particular political formations.⁸

³ Records regarding the Hottentot Venus, 21–28 November 1810, The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO), King's Bench (KB) 1/36/4.

⁴ For examples of British popular interest, see Mrs. Charles Mathews, *Memoirs of Charles Mathews*, vol. 4 (London, 1839), 136–39; Robert Chambers, ed., *The Book of Days: a miscellany of popular antiquities, in connection with the calendar, including anecdote, biography, & history, curiosities of literature and oddities of human life and character*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1863–64), 2:621; Daniel Lysons, *Collectanea; or a Collection of Advertisements and Paragraphs from the Newspapers, Relating to Various Subjects*, vol. 2, unpublished scrapbook, British Library, London, c.103.k. See also the Bodleian Ballads Catalogue online, Harding B 25 (863) for a ballad, "The Hottentot Venus."

⁵ On Italy, see Barbara Sòrgoni, "'Defending the Race': The Italian Reinvention of the Hottentot Venus during Fascism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 411–24.

⁶ Percival R. Kirby, "The Hottentot Venus," *Africana Notes and News* 6, no. 3 (1949): 55–61, "La Venus Hottentote en Angleterre," *Aesculape* 33, no. 1 (1952): 14–21, "More about the Hottentot Venus," *Africana Notes and News* 10, no. 4 (1953): 124–33, "The 'Hottentot Venus' of the Musée de L'Homme, Paris," *South African Journal of Science* 50, no. 12 (1954): 319–22, "A Further Note on the 'Hottentot Venus,'" *Africana Notes and News* 11, no. 5 (1955): 165–66.

⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1996).

⁸ Richard Altick, *The Shows of London: A Panoramic History of Exhibitions, 1600–1862* (Cambridge, 1978); Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of Hottentot Women in Europe, 1815–1817," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor, MI, 2002), 66–95; T. Denean Sharply-Whiting,

Yvette Abrahams, almost exclusively, has sought in her work to examine the ways in which Sara Baartman the individual was objectified and sexualized in particular ways as an African woman.⁹ Abraham concludes that as a young woman brought from a state of bondage from the Cape, Baartman could not have known her rights. Nor could she have been able to negotiate the law in London or to understand the politics of her exploitation. Yet, even as Abrahams's work tries to highlight Baartman's experiences, it renders her as a kind of classic noble savage victimized by Europe and unable to negotiate the challenges of modernity.¹⁰

The question of agency has always haunted representations of Sara Baartman. In 1810 and 1811, the participants in the proceedings before the King's Bench, as well as contemporary newspapers and cartoonists, accepted that Baartman wanted to remain in London. They represented her as an individual with the capacity to exercise free will. Macaulay, some letter writers, and many subsequent scholars fashion Sara Baartman as a defenseless poor black woman taken advantage of by white men, an innocent aborigine, an example of nature sullied by Western civilization. But the notion that Baartman either possessed agency or did not presents a binary of power or victimization that forecloses our ability to grapple with the complexities of her life.¹¹

In general, historians still struggle to develop analytic models that allow us to better explore the complexities of power, individual motivations, and social ascriptions, which we concede perhaps more clearly in the present than we can render in the past.¹² Here we want to consider how looking at the different sites, the Cape and London, might allow us to begin to ask different questions about Sara Baartman's relationship to the Hottentot Venus, the person to the image she came to represent—embody, even. An important challenge is to resist substituting an

"The Dawning of Racial-Sexual Science: A One Woman Showing, A One Man Telling," in *Ethnography in French Literature*, ed. Buford Norman (Atlanta, 1996), 115–28; Z. S. Strother, "Display of the Body Hottentot," in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington, IN, 1999), 1–61; Zine Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter? Feminist Post-structuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the Hottentot Venus," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 6 (December 2001): 816–34. Recently, Sadiah Qureshi has argued that Sara Baartman's display was part of a much wider history of freak shows and the display of indigenous people. See Sadiah Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus,'" *History of Science* 42, no. 2 (June 2004): 233–57.

⁹ Yvette Abrahams, "Disempowered to Consent: Sara Baartman and Khoisan Slavery in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony and Britain," *South African Historical Journal* 35 (1996): 89–114, and "Images of Sara Baartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington, IN, 1998), 220–36.

¹⁰ This is the danger in an approach that assumes victimization without leaving any room for agency. See Abrahams, "Disempowered to Consent." For a popular treatment, see Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Story of the Hottentot Venus* (New York, 2007). See Sharon Marcus, "The Evidence of Theory in Sexuality Studies," paper presented at the session on evidence at the North American Conference on British Studies, Denver, October 2005, for a discussion of how theories help render particular experiences.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this question, see Clifton Crais, "Heterographies: Writing the Self after the Linguistic Turn," Distinguished History Lecture, Southwestern University, 26 October 2006; and Pamela Scully, "Peripheral Visions: Heterography and Writing the Transnational Life of Sara Baartman," in *Biography across Boundaries: Transnational Lives*, ed. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woolcott, submitted to Duke University Press for publication.

¹² On subjectivity, see Angela Woolcott, "The Fragmentary Subject: Feminist History, Official Records, and Self-Representation," *Women's Studies International Forum* 21, no. 4 (July 1998): 329–39.

emphasis on agency over previous arguments where agency appears impossible. Attention to colonial histories of race and identity and their intersections with London provides one way of beginning to engage with the issue of how a person, a being always in the process of becoming, negotiated different historical contexts in all their vexed complexities.

Sara Baartman lived in a time and in places that situated her at the juncture of profound currents of racism and exploitation with which our world still grapples. We suggest, however, that the structures of domination never fully contain the meaning we might derive from a person's life or the meaning an individual gives to his or her life. The contexts of South Africa are vitally important to our understanding of Baartman. Seriously considering Baartman's life before Europe also reshapes our understanding of her role as the Hottentot Venus in London.

Sara Baartman had to learn to act the part of the Hottentot Venus. On stage, Baartman had to erase aspects of her personal history, experience, and identity in order to make her performance of the Venus credible to the audience that was staring at her. As Rosemarie Garland-Thompson has noted, "staring is structured seeing. It enacts a cultural choreography between a disembodied spectator and an embodied spectacle that attempts to verify norms and establish differences."¹³ The Hottentot Venus was an act that was most successful when it appeared natural. By considering race and identity as constantly performative, both in the freak show and without, as stable yet having to be relentlessly reconstituted, we suggest then more complicated histories for Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus.¹⁴

Dunlop sold a product, a racialized and sexualized identity: the Hottentot Venus. He understood that he could represent and market Sara Baartman in very particular ways—and was made to do so by the public outcry. In marketing Sara Baartman, Dunlop rendered parts of her body almost separate from her self: as commodities in excess. Dunlop clearly scripted Sara Baartman's encounters with the British public. In the early months, he presented Baartman as a freak: one of both nature and culture, by focusing on her relatively large bottom in pictures and performance. Later, in response to the public outcry about Baartman's display, Dunlop presented the Hottentot Venus more as an educational opportunity, giving the public a chance to see a supposed ethnographic example of the Khoekhoe from the southern tip of Africa.¹⁵

Sara Baartman's 1810 exhibition in London embodies, literally, the transition between the older tradition of freak shows and the emerging nineteenth-century desire for evidence of the ethnographic "real" and the rise of a bourgeois consumer

¹³ Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, "Narratives of Deviance and Delight: Staring at Julia Pestrana, the 'Extraordinary Lady,'" in *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*, ed. Timothy B. Powell (New Brunswick, NJ, 1999), chap. 4.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–31.

¹⁵ Both Strother in "Display of Body Hottentot" and Qureshi in "Displaying Sara Baartman" discuss Sara Baartman's exhibit in the context of the history of freak shows in London. The advertisement in Bury St. Edmunds, in October 1812, claimed that the Hottentot Venus was a "perfect Specimen of that most extraordinary Tribe of the Human Race, who have for such a length of Time inhabited the more Southern Parts of Africa, whose real Origin has never yet been ascertained" (printed notice, "Hottentot Venus at Mr. Crask's, Angel Hill, Bury St. Edmunds," 1783/91, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds).

culture of the exotic.¹⁶ Freak shows had a long history in Britain. For the mostly illiterate public, live shows and images were key features of popular entertainment.¹⁷ People who were excessively tall, short, or unusual in some way, or those from other parts of the world, displayed themselves or were displayed for profit in popular freak shows. Eighteenth-century Londoners found elite indigenous people from exotic lands to be particularly fascinating.¹⁸ Through the eighteenth century, the English public liked to see if an “indigenous” person could acquire the trappings of English culture through dress and other accoutrements. Pocahontas, for example, arrived in London in the early seventeenth century not only as Pocahontas, but also as Rebecca, the Indian woman Anglicized through marriage to John Rolfe and baptism into Christianity.¹⁹ In the eighteenth century, Captain Cook played with the notion of transforming Omai, a South Sea Islander, into an Englishman through dress, acquired language, and manners.²⁰

The ethnological freak show, however, centered on the display of an “essence.” Sara Baartman’s significance to the English public was indeed that she was “authentic” and representative of a people allegedly without a history. Baartman’s display in this regard was unlike later stagings of the indigenous “other” that often used English or Irish actors dressed as Africans. By the mid-nineteenth century, displays that focused on emerging ethnographic conventions increasingly supplanted displays of people as individual “freaks.”²¹ The commodification of race paradoxically allowed both a performative possibility and an identity that became ever more naturalized. By attending to these contradictory tensions, we might be able to understand Sara Baartman not only as cipher for Dunlop and Cesars and the English public, but also as consciously enacting ethnography in complicated ways. Attention to the migration of race and its meanings between the Cape and England also offers us new insights into the lives of Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars. We need to look back at her history, a life lived for some thirty years in South Africa before she ever traveled to London.



The work produced about the Hottentot Venus has relied on a limited set of texts for the basic facts of the story. Scholarship of the last twenty years has tended

¹⁶ Strother, “Display of Body Hottentot,” 29, 35. On the links between imperial knowledge production and racism, see Pippa Skotnes, *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town, 1996).

¹⁷ Altick, *Shows of London*, 34. For an excellent analysis of the notion of freaks, see Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996).

¹⁸ Altick, *Shows of London*, 45–46.

¹⁹ See Rebecca Faery, *Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race, and Sex in the Shaping of an American Nation* (Norman, 1999); Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (New York, 2004).

²⁰ Cook, however, did not imagine that such trappings of culture would indeed change Omai into an Englishman. See Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003), chap. 2.

²¹ See Wilson, *Island Race*, chap. 2; on the Irish and portrayals of Africans in a later period, see Nadja Durbach, “Exhibiting the Cannibal King: Irishmen and Africans in the Victorian Freakshow,” paper presented at the panel on “Spectacular Men,” at the North American Conference on British Studies, Denver, 2005. In these later ethnological exhibits, promoters exhibited people ostensibly from other countries in groups, often in family groups, and in settings supposed to represent timeless ethnographic truths about their natal society.

to approach the cartoons, newspaper reports, and scientific literature on the Hottentot Venus as the only primary sources and to invoke Kirby as an authoritative scholar who, having done all the historical fieldwork, can be relied upon for the basic knowable facts.²² Certainly Kirby was an assiduous and accomplished scholar. Born in Aberdeen in 1887, Kirby immigrated to South Africa in 1914. A musicologist and composer, he is still admired as one of South Africa's first ethnomusicologists. Author of at least three books, from 1921 to 1952 he was professor of music at the University of the Witwatersrand. His interest in Sara Baartman possibly arose from his extended project to document and preserve Khoekhoe musical forms, but he did little archival research regarding her.²³

Recently discovered land, census, legal, and estate records located in the Cape archives allow us to better construct Sara Baartman's life in South Africa. She was part of the last generation of the Khoekhoe on the frontier to have connections with the world before the imposition of white colonial rule. She was born in what is now the Eastern Cape in the mid-1770s. This makes her considerably older than all writing on her suggests. She was born not in the Gamtoos River valley, but some fifty miles to the north. Many misunderstandings of Sara's life have flowed from these simple mistakes and from the assumption that historical research in South Africa would yield little additional information.²⁴

When Sara Baartman moved to London, she was over thirty years old. She had worked as a nursemaid and a washing woman, and had moved from the rural frontier to the urban diversity of Cape Town. This brief recitation of Sara Baartman's life in South Africa points to the historical silences produced by narratives that attend only to her representation in Europe as the Hottentot Venus. Her four years in Europe represented but one part of her life, a part that cannot stand for the whole. Despite the obvious appeal of the image of the noble savage wronged by avaricious colonizing men, the trope of Sara Baartman as the innocent indigenous woman occludes a more complex rendering of her life. The fact that Sara Baartman was at least ten years older than most accounts have stated also changes how we understand her. She was no colonial naïf wrenched immediately from the frontier and taken to London. Her considerable time in Cape Town and her experiences as a servant, mother, and lover suggest a life that was complex and rich, framed by violence, and ultimately tragic.

²² See, e.g., Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman"; Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation."

²³ We are grateful to Jonathan Frost, curator of the Bensusan Museum of Photography at Museum Africa, in Johannesburg, for his help with our research on Kirby. Kirby composed music informed by his interest in indigenous musical forms. His "Three African Idylls" was performed on 3 July 2004 at the NewMusicSA music festival in Grahamstown, South Africa.

²⁴ Authors have accepted that she was twenty-six when she died, which places her birth in 1789. This seems incorrect. Sara gave birth to a child around 1796, which, assuming the 1789 date, would have placed Sara at seven years old. Our cross dating of land records showing when settlers came into the region, the movement of Pieter Cesars to the frontier, and testimony by a variety of witnesses, including Sara Baartman, lead us to put her age at much closer to forty when she died. The deed of the farm from which Sara's surname is derived can be found at CA RLR 17/1, 4 March 1763. See esp. Cape Papers: Correspondence, Reports and Legal Papers Concerning the Female Saartje's Departure to and Exhibition in England, 1810–11, a microfilm of records located in the PRO, Northern Ireland, ZI 1/25 2431/12/1, CA. The inscription in the museum case at the Jardin des Plantes that held her remains listed her age at death as thirty-eight, and thus born in 1777 (Kirby, "Hottentot Venus," 61).

Sara Baartman's people, the Gonaqua Khoekhoe, called the region the Camdeboo. The Gonaqua were pastoralists. Europeans often referred to them as one of a number of Hottentot tribes living in the Cape. Hottentot is a pejorative word invented by the Dutch to describe pastoralist communities who spoke very difficult click languages. The word comes from Huttentut, "to stammer." European use of the term Hottentot thus implied that the Khoekhoe were without language and thus possibly not part of human society. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Gonaqua numbered perhaps twelve to sixteen thousand people.²⁵ The clan that would earn the surname "Baartman" likely numbered around thirty or forty people.²⁶ Sara grew up on a colonist's farm, where over the years her extended family was drawn into the orbit of colonial servitude. "Baartman" means bearded (to the Dutch of that era, uncivilized) man. It is thus a marker of colonized status. Sara's parents gave her a name that disappeared amid the violence of the late eighteenth century. The record is silent as to whether Sara remembered the names she had lived by in the Eastern Cape. The Cape records call her Saartje, a Dutch diminutive of Sara. In the Netherlands, a diminutive was often a name of affection.²⁷ At the Cape, however, such names also frequently signified colonized and servile status in Dutch society. "Saartje Baartman," in effect, meant savage servant.

Sara's parents lived on land claimed by a settler. In 1763, the Cape government granted David Fourie a (very) roughly six thousand acre swath of Camdeboo pastureland. Fourie called his stock farm Baartman's Fonteyn—the Savage's Fountain, or spring. Fourie likely laid claim to the spring precisely because it sustained the Gonaqua's flocks of cattle and sheep. Savage's Fountain both acknowledged the Gonaqua's presence and then denied them a right to it through its naming. Baartman's Fonteyn lay near the Reed (Riet) River in the Zwartland, the Black Land.²⁸ In 1779, Fourie died, and in the next decade, the Baartmans dispersed throughout the region. Sara went with her immediate family to farms owned by Cornelius Muller.²⁹ A few years later they moved again with Muller to his farm Kraal of War, near the Gamtoos River and a main wagon trail heading west to Cape Town. The move split Sara's family from the other Baartmans who remained in the Camdeboo, although many likely fled southward at century's end.³⁰

By the time of Sara's childhood, settlers had shattered whatever autonomy the Gonaqua still enjoyed. The Baartmans learned Dutch. They had to speak it to the settlers now owning the land and forcing them to work it as herders and domestic servants. Members of her family, and perhaps Sara as well, heard of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society, with their ideas of the rational individual capable

²⁵ For a general introduction, see Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840* (Middletown, CT, 1988).

²⁶ This we know from the records of men contracted to labor for white farmers: Contracts, 1786, Magistrate of Graaff Reinet, (1/GR) 15/43, CA.

²⁷ Thanks to Lydia de Waal, Petra Kalshoven, and Zoe Wicomb for this insight.

²⁸ Loan farm deed granted to David Fourie, 4 March 1763, CA RLR 17/1.

²⁹ We are able to trace the location of settlers through land and estate records. Our very deep thanks to Leonard Guelke for sharing his extensive (Excel) database with us, EDLF1.WK3 and EDLF2.WK3. This database contains information on all farms established during the Dutch period.

³⁰ For information on the location of various Baartmans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Contracts, 1786, (1/GR) 15/43, CA; tax roll, Theopolis, n.d., J 405; tax roll, Bethelsdorp, 1822, J 405.

of shaping their world.³¹ Sara and her family also participated in a world in which news, people, and commodities flowed between the frontier and Cape Town. Visiting traders, preachers, explorers, and people fleeing colonial settlement to the west connected the Eastern Cape not only to Cape Town, but also to Europe, South Asia, Indonesia, and other parts of Africa. From the vantage point of a bonded woman on the Dutch frontier, Cape Town, which the British first captured in the 1790s, might well have appeared as an escape from slavery; Sara knew about life in the city because her father was a cattle driver who went frequently to the Cape.

In the 1790s, the demand for servants, particularly women, had grown considerably in Cape Town, the vibrant capital of the colony. The port was a distance of some four hundred miles from Sara's home. Cornelius Muller sold Sara to Pieter Cesars, who worked for Jan Michiel Elzer, a butcher in Cape Town. Baartman probably arrived in Cape Town in the summer of 1797.³² Elzer employed her in his household in the center of Cape Town until his death. After this, she went to work for Pieter Cesars.³³

The port city experienced a constant flow of sailors and commodities from all around the world. Portuguese, Khoekhoe, Dutch, German, English, French, and Indonesian languages coexisted. People lived together in conditions of freedom, bondage, violence, and intimacy. Sara spoke Dutch and some English. In about 1803, she moved from the home of Pieter Cesars to work for Pieter's brother Hendrik and his wife Anna Catharina Staal. It was Hendrik with whom Baartman went to London in 1810. The Cesars family, their children, their slaves, and Khoekhoe servants lived in a neighborhood called Papendorp, a poor suburb near the beach on the fringes of the city, where soldiers and sailors from visiting ships came to socialize.³⁴

Baartman came to Cape Town a woman, not a young child. She had lived in the port city for about fifteen years, roughly half her life, before she left for London in her thirties. She had three children; all died in their infancy, their names unrecorded.³⁵ The children's fathers were a Khoekhoe servant (perhaps a man she met on the frontier), a drummer from Batavia, called Hendrik de Jongh, and a slave of Hendrik Cesars.³⁶ The Netherlands formed the 22nd Battalion of the Batavian infantry in 1802 specifically for Cape service. The drummer moved from

³¹ Various members of the Baartman clan have Christian names such as Isaac, Abraham, and Jacob. See Contracts, 1786, (1/GR) 15/43, CA. This suggests that these were members of the second generation of people associated with European colonists. On the impact of missionaries, see John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), esp. 60–70.

³² In November 1810, Sara said that Pieter Cesars brought her to the Cape (TNA: PRO, KB 1/36/4). Anna Catharina Staal's deposition mentioned Pieter's employer, the butcher Jan Michiel Elzer (statement by Anna Catharina Staal, in Civil Court, Cape Town, February 26, 1811, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA). We know that Sara was in the Western Cape by the beginning of 1799 because Elzer died in February of that year. See Cape Papers, 1810–11, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

³³ Cape Papers, 1810–11, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

³⁴ Information on the Cesars household can be found in the tax rolls, esp. List of Free Blacks, 1797, J 443, CA; and the Cape tax rolls for 1805 (J 39) and 1807 (J 41). On Sara's working life, see Cape Papers 1810–11, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

³⁵ Cape Papers, 1810–11, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

³⁶ Ibid.

Cape Town to Hout Bay. Sara visited him on a regular basis, and they lived together for some years before he left the Cape in 1806, when the British took over the colony.³⁷ Thereafter, Sara Baartman's life remained more enmeshed with that of the Cesars family.

The coming of the British created new opportunities for Hendrik Cesars to make money. Thousands of soldiers entered the port looking for entertainment. Like many port cities, Cape Town depended on commerce, and the sale of women's bodies was fundamental to the local economy. The Dutch East India Company, which ruled the Cape from 1652 to the late eighteenth century, had long maintained a slave lodge in the city, where women slaves had to engage in prostitution.³⁸ It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Hendrik Cesars forced Sara into prostitution, given her status as a distinctive woman from the frontier. In a later court investigation into the governor's role in Baartman's move to London, Anna Catharina Staal, Cesars's wife, argued that Sara often went to the nearby naval hospital to show herself to the military men. Staal was clearly an interested party in purveying the information: she offered this as part of a testimony to prove that her husband took Sara to England with the governor's permission.³⁹ Staal imparts on the figure of Sara Baartman complete free will, suggesting that Baartman displayed herself of her own initiative. However, Baartman was a servant within Staal's household and thus not entirely free. And, formally, Cesars could make claim to any wages Sara earned.

It was in the hospital that Cesars and Baartman probably encountered Alexander Dunlop, ship's surgeon to the British Navy and, at the time, surgeon at the Cape Town Slave Lodge.⁴⁰ Dunlop's job at the Slave Lodge was ending: the British planned to close the lodge, and he looked to new ways to make money. He was also facing retirement. He started scheming to take Baartman to London as early as 1808, but various arrangements with other military men to help finance the trip fell through. On 7 April 1810, Cesars, Dunlop, Dunlop's slave boy, and Sara Baartman set sail for London.⁴¹ Sara's life as the Hottentot Venus was just beginning, but the elements of that identity were forged in Cape Town.



Sara Baartman passed her twenties in the ambiguous spaces of Cape Town's urban culture. She lived on the edge of slavery and freedom as defined under Dutch and later British rule. People of Hottentot or Khoekhoe status could not be formally enslaved—the Dutch had forbidden enslavement of indigenous people. However, as we have seen, Baartman lived in the Cesars household alongside slaves and servants and in conditions akin to slavery, particularly to urban slavery, in

³⁷ Cape Papers, 1810–11, Anna Catharina Staal, 26 February 1811, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

³⁸ Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover, NH, 1994).

³⁹ Cape Papers, 1810–11, Anna Catharina Staal, 26 February 1811, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁴⁰ The Dutch East India Company established the slave lodge in the seventeenth century to house company slaves. Under the British the slave lodge was also a hospital. Dunlop stated in a memorial to Caledon that he looked after "sick Hottentots" and other people (Memorial of Dunlop, 16 June 1809, Colonial Office [CO] 3871, CA).

⁴¹ Cape Papers, 1810–11, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

which slaves often had quite a degree of autonomy during the day.⁴² Her daily life—at one time laboring for her master, and living with a European man “as husband and wife” at another—suggests how complicated the relations were among power, servitude, and status in the Cape Colony.⁴³

Since 1652 Cape Town had been an outpost of the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch understood status and identity as forged primarily through the categories of Christian versus non-Christian and, more important, through a person's relationship to slavery. When the British took over the Cape in 1806, they initiated a long process of trying to forge relationships through contractual obligations. The 1809 Caledon Code sought to bring the indigenous people of the Cape, the Khoekhoe, out of the bondage of illicit slavery and into the contractual sphere of wage labor. Categories such as citizen, slave, or free black signified a person's status in the city. Free black status included those individuals recognized as descending from slaves, political exiles brought by the Dutch from their East Indies possessions, as well as people who arrived from India and China. Descent from slave status appears to have been the most accepted definition.⁴⁴ In addition, identification with Britain shown through attending mission schools, speaking English, and participating in a British civic culture came to be criteria for inclusion in the body politic.

Well into the nineteenth century, a classificatory system according to skin color did not operate explicitly as a marker of status. Free blacks could be as pale as settlers: many settler families were themselves descended from slaves and Khoesan, a fact denied until recently.⁴⁵ However, settlers seem to have perceived women of color as de facto prostitutes and slaves. Settlers would have perceived a woman of Khoekhoe descent from the frontier as particularly suited to menial tasks and available for sexual exploitation.⁴⁶ The wider slave community—and here we include Khoekhoe servants working in conditions of bondage alongside slaves—seems to have accorded relative privilege according to gender and work status. Men working in skilled occupations enjoyed the highest status, women in agricultural work the least. The place of women engaged in domestic work remained ambiguous. On the one hand, they were vulnerable to rape by masters. On the other hand, their intimacy with the family through wet nursing and indeed through sexual violence opened the window of manumission.⁴⁷

Sexual exploitation paradoxically enabled women to move from slave to free black status. Free blacks enjoyed a complex intermediate status between citizen and slave. Male artisans who had made money through independent work, a feature

⁴² On urban slavery, see Andrew Bank, *The Decline of Urban Slavery at the Cape, 1806–1843* (Cape Town, 1991).

⁴³ Cape Papers, 1810–11, Anna Catharina Staal, 26 February 1811, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of free blacks at the Cape, see Richard Elphick and Robert Shell, “Intergroup Relations: Khoikhoi, Settlers, Slaves and Free Blacks, 1652–1795,” in Elphick and Giliomee, *Shaping of South African Society*, chap. 4. For different definitions of free black status, see Robert Shell, “Cape Slave Transactions 1658–1731,” <http://www.stamouers.com/Shell.PDF>, n. xvii.

⁴⁵ On marriages between settlers and free blacks, see Vertrees C. Malherbe, “Illegitimacy and Family Formation in Colonial Cape Town,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 1153–76.

⁴⁶ On the early Cape, see Elphick and Giliomee, *Shaping of South African Society*. For details relating to Sara Baartman's time in Cape Town, see Cape Papers, 1810–11, ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁴⁷ On gender and slavery, see Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853* (Portsmouth, NH, 1997), chap. 1.

of urban slavery, and women manumitted by masters, often also the fathers of their children, formed the bedrock of the community.⁴⁸ Free blacks themselves owned slaves. The free black community also purchased slaves as a mechanism to free people from settlers. In the eighteenth century, free blacks manumitted their slaves at far greater numbers than did settler owners.⁴⁹

We think Sara might have begun to see herself as a Hottentot in Cape Town, that is, prior to going to London.⁵⁰ On the frontier, in her natal home and family, she would have presumably thought of herself as Gonaqua, as belonging to her clan, and as a colonized person. In Cape Town, Baartman probably appeared novel to the larger community. Although numbers are hard to come by, few women from the frontier came to live in Cape Town. Baartman's foreignness rendered her different in a way that might have made her more conscious of her identity as a Khoekhoe woman from a distant frontier.

Sara Baartman confronted a regime of expectations centering on her position as female and Khoekhoe, as servile, and, increasingly, as exotic. In this regime she lived within the discursive and the everyday. The Cesars household included people defined both as slaves and as Khoekhoe. Her visits across the mountain to see her partner in the village of Hout Bay and her relative freedom of movement would have inscribed Sara Baartman's status as a Khoekhoe, with more freedom than the slaves in the Cesars household, into everyday life. At the same time, Europeans came to the Cape "knowing" about the exotic—and the sexual—Hottentot. By the early nineteenth century, images of the unusual Hottentot enjoyed widespread dissemination as part of the popular culture and renown of science during this period. Indeed, Anders Sparrman and Francois Le Vaillant, whose writings critically shaped European perceptions of the Khoekhoe (Hottentots), had traveled near Baartman's Fonteyn in the latter part of the previous century.⁵¹

If the port helped shape the consciousness of the relationship between status and identity within households, it also privileged the self-conscious performance of racial and sexualized identities. In Cape Town, Sara Baartman would have become familiar with Europeans' popular obsession with the bodies of Khoekhoe women, particularly their genitalia. By the early nineteenth century, scientific circles fetishized Khoekhoe women's bodies as reposing truths about the development of humankind. This knowledge created yet another context in Cape Town through which a young Khoekhoe woman might have come to see herself. In defense of his display of Sara Baartman in London, Cesars (although the author of the letter was probably Dunlop) argued that English interest in Sara Baartman in Cape Town had led him to believe he might make money by showing her. "Since the English took possession of the colony, I have been constantly solicited to bring her to this

⁴⁸ Robert Ross, "The Occupation of Slaves in Eighteenth Century Cape Town," *Studies in the History of Cape Town* 2 (1980): 1–14.

⁴⁹ Elphick and Shell, "Intergroup Relations," 208.

⁵⁰ Given the sources available, we cannot prove such an analysis, but given the ways in which European travel accounts produced ideas about Hottentots and, especially, Hottentot women, this seems likely.

⁵¹ Anders Sparrman, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and Round the World; But Chiefly into the Country of the Hottentots and Caffres, from the Year 1772, to 1776*, 2nd ed. (London, 1785); Francois Le Vaillant, *Travels into the interior parts of Africa by the way of the Cape of Good Hope; in the years 1780, 81, 82, 83, 84, and 85*, 2nd ed., trans. M. Le Vaillant (London, 1796).

country, as a subject well worthy the attention of the Virtuoso, and the curious in general.”⁵² Baartman visited the naval hospital. Either at Cesars’s demands or on her own initiative, she began displaying her body to sailors. There she began to perform a Khoekhoe identity as the exotic female of travelers’ accounts; likely it was in Cape Town that the idea of the Hottentot Venus was born.



Dunlop and Cesars brought Sara on board the HMS *Diadem*, bound for Chatham in April 1810, in order to sell the idea of the Hottentot Venus to London.⁵³ Dunlop was the mover in the display of Sara Baartman as the Hottentot Venus. He had connections in London: the group’s first rooms were in a building frequented by naval types in St. James. Dunlop also initiated contact with William Bullock, owner of the Egyptian Museum.⁵⁴ The public response to Sara was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, some audience members enthusiastically took up Cesars’s offer to poke Sara and to feel her bottom: an experience that apparently required extra payment. Other viewers were apparently revolted and saddened by what they saw.⁵⁵ One Humanitas exhibited sympathy for Sara Baartman, writing letters to the newspapers wondering if she had come of her own free will.⁵⁶

Macaulay and other people involved in bringing the case to the King’s Bench reacted negatively, in particular, to Cesars, the initial showman. Macaulay described Baartman as being “under the restraint and controul of her exhibiter and is deprived of her liberty.”⁵⁷ *The Morning Post* remarked on 29 October 1810:

Considerable interest has been excited by the situation of an unfortunate being who has for some weeks publicly shown in Piccadilly, like a *prize ox* or a *rattle snake*, and from some letters . . . it seems to be more than insinuated that she has been brought by artifice or force from her own country for this abominable purpose and is at this moment in a state of slavery *in England*. Two of the letters are signed by *a foreigner*, purporting to be her keeper, which are of a kind so equivocating, the writer of them so evidently avoids satisfying the doubts to the Public as to the real situation of this poor creature, that they must conclude their suspicions to be well founded.

The London public perceived Cesars as a white Boer, a Dutch settler. Macaulay helped establish this perception partly through his imagining Cesars’s prior relationship with Sara Baartman in Cape Town. (Baartman would subsequently state in her interview to the court that she had been “in the service of Hendrik Casar

⁵² Hendrik Cezar, “Letter to the Editor,” *Morning Chronicle*, 23 October 1810, 4.

⁵³ Material for the HMS *Diadem* and its sister ship, the *Raisable*, is located at TNA: PRO ADM 37/1973, 51/2284, 51/2751; see also David Lyon, *The Sailing Navy List* (London, 1993).

⁵⁴ Testimony of William Bullock, 21 November 1810; Testimony of George Mooyen, 28 November 1810, TNA: PRO KB 1/36/4.

⁵⁵ According to Mrs. Charles Matthews, the actor John Kemble was shocked: “They ill-use that poor creature . . . how very shocking!” Sara apparently much appreciated his empathy (Altick, *Shows of London*, 270).

⁵⁶ Humanitas, “Female Hottentot,” *Morning Chronicle*, 17 October 1810, 3; “Female Hottentot,” *Morning Chronicle*, 24 October 1810, 3.

⁵⁷ Affidavit of Zachary Macaulay, 17 October 1810, Z1/25 2431/12/1, CA.

as his nursery maid.”)⁵⁸ However, the representation of Cesars as a Boer occluded a more complex understanding of his relationship with Baartman and, crucially for our purposes, created a narrative in which Baartman becomes a defenseless subject rendered passive by colonial tyranny.

The Khoekhoe were of course the very group that British missionaries had targeted as needing protection by the British state against the depredations of the Boers.⁵⁹ Sir John Barrow, traveling in the Cape at the turn of the century, popularized the notion of the Boers as European savages, rendered uncivilized through their many years of living in Africa.⁶⁰ The Khoekhoe in many ways occupied a charged symbolic place in British discourse against the Dutch after the British takeover of the Cape in 1806. Focusing on the Khoekhoe helped mark the Dutch as particularly evil vis-à-vis the British.

In London, Macaulay and his allies saw in the tableau of Cesars and Sara Baartman a vignette of Boer/slave relations, which the British takeover of the Cape in 1806 was supposed to have helped end. They cast Cesars in the role of the awful Dutch farmer who had slid into barbarity himself. In London, then, the public understood Cesars as European, albeit a European of inferior birth. It is as such that he has come down to us in the scholarly literature—as a curious figure about whom we know little, but whom scholars have not felt moved to investigate further. For example, Qureshi says that “nothing more is known about Cezar” and refers us to Kirby, as does Strother. Fausto-Sterling says the Cesars were “a boer family.”⁶¹ This disinterest in Cesars arises in part perhaps because Sara Baartman’s story has seemed to be so centrally about European people’s rendering of her as the Hottentot Venus. Scholars have rarely seen the multiple aspects of her life in the Cape and in Europe as important to know about, or as informing each other.

In his 1949 article, Kirby does wonder about the identity of Hendrik Cesars. He says Cesars’s last name “seems to be an epithet such as might have been bestowed on a coloured inhabitant of the Cape.” However, Kirby then suggests that the surname might be a misspelling of Kayser or some other Cape Dutch name and proceeds to carry on writing of Cesars as if he were a Dutch man.⁶² Attention to the archival records in Cape Town shows that Kirby’s initial hunch about the name was correct. The Cape colonial context and Cape racial taxonomies designated Hendrik Cesars as free black. The tax rolls of Cape Town list all the members of the extended Cesars family as free black.⁶³ As we indicated earlier, the free black community was made up of individuals who were understood as descending from a state of slavery at the Cape or had been brought against their will from the East Indies. Most people designated as free black had origins from the slave trade or convict trade with the East Indies.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Sworn Deposition of Samuel Solly, 27 November 1810, TNA: PRO KB 1/36/4.

⁵⁹ See Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal, 2002).

⁶⁰ Sir John Barrow, *An account of travels into the interior of southern Africa, in the years 1797 and 1798* (London, 1801–4).

⁶¹ Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman,” 253 n. 13; Strother, “Display of Body Hottentot,” 52 n. 40; Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race and Nation,” 76.

⁶² Kirby, “Hottentot Venus,” 59.

⁶³ List of Free Blacks, 1797, J 443, CA.

⁶⁴ Malherbe, “Illegitimacy and Family Formation,” 1163.

In 1810, the Cesars were in a precarious financial and social standing because of Hendrik's debts to a leading Cape Town merchant, Jacobus Johannes Vos, who threatened him with ruin.⁶⁵ Vos was a very wealthy member of the settler community. Ironically, Vos's own family had managed to suppress their complicated historical links to slave status and had moved into the settler community.⁶⁶ With a promise of money from Dunlop, Cesars finally agreed to take Sara Baartman to London. According to Staal, Sara had always refused to go without Hendrik.⁶⁷ It was only under threat of debt collection and financial ruin that Cesars got on the boat in April 1810.

On his arrival in London, Cesars might well have been surprised to find that he was now not a man identified through Cape status classifications, but through local ones. He also therefore had to perform an identity, which he now tried on in a new context. On seeing the show in early October, Macaulay saw Cesars as "foreign." He literally mistranslated Cesars. The British taxonomies of identity did not render Hendrik's Cape subjectivity visible in Britain. Perhaps this enactment became one of his investments in the business of the Hottentot Venus. For a brief while, one might imagine that Cesars enjoyed his new status freed from the shackles of Cape classification.

However, as we have seen, England rendered his status problematic. Some viewers cast him as a colonial brute. Cesars's performance of race in England was thus double edged. On the one hand, it gave him status of which he could only dream of in the Cape. On the other hand, it also complicated his public relationship with the display of Sara Baartman—to the extent that he withdrew from his public role.⁶⁸ Dunlop quickly concluded that Cesars's presence was proving detrimental to his moneymaking venture. In an October 1810 letter purportedly from Cesars, published in *The Morning Chronicle* just a month after the show began, Dunlop stated: "As my mode of proceeding at the place of public exhibition seems to have given offence to the Public, I have given the sole direction of it to an Englishman, who now attends."⁶⁹

Dunlop perhaps did not fully understand the full extent of public concern. He seems to have interpreted the difficulties of display as concerning only Cesars's "foreign" status. He does not appear to have registered that Cesars's threatening

⁶⁵ Elphick and Shell remark that free blacks were generally forced into smaller shopkeeping and artisanal trades and that "colonists and officials could very easily stop the free blacks from rising beyond a certain point by not extending credit." While they say direct evidence for this is hard to find, they say that no free black ever applied for a license in 1715, which would enable them to "practice the more lucrative trades" (Elphick and Shell, "Intergroup Relations," 224).

⁶⁶ Will of Jacobus Johannes Vos, 6 May 1819, CA, MOOC 7/1/79. A list of property is located in J 37 (tax roll), 1803. For a discussion of the Vos family, see Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, 114.

⁶⁷ Cape Papers, 1810–11, Anna Catharina Staal, 26 February 1811, Z1/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁶⁸ The last record we have of Hendrik Cesars is the letter he writes from Minorities, in the East End (Hend. Casar, *Morning Chronicle*, 22 October 1810). He was dead by 1815. The tax roll for 1815, J 46, CA, identifies Staal as a widow, as do subsequent tax rolls. We suspect that Hendrik had died by May 1811, when Staal filed their will, or at least that Staal concluded he was dead. See "Will of Cesars and Staal," 29 March 1810, filed 16 May 1811, CA, MOOC 7/1/61.

⁶⁹ The letter was signed "Hend. Casar" (*Morning Chronicle*, 22 October 1810). Hendrik could not write his name in Dutch, let alone compose a letter. His will shows him making a mark instead of signing his name ("Will of Cesars and Staal," 29 March 1810, filed 16 May 1811, CA, MOOC 7/1/61). Free blacks had virtually no access to education. The British had been in the Cape scarcely more than a decade, time enough to master some English but not the written word.

tone to Baartman caused unease. With histories in a rough colonial town as a slaveholder, and as a surgeon working in the slave lodge, Cesars and Dunlop perhaps took for granted a certain brutality that did not sit well on a London stage. Their defense lawyer later better understood some of the dynamics. He argued in the investigation by the King's Bench that most of the affidavits against her display referred to "an occasion when the keeper had been observed to hold up his hand to the woman in a menacing posture; the fact being, that the person alluded to, had from that very circumstance, been removed from his situation."⁷⁰ This suggests that it was the threatening interaction as much as the identity of the showman that caused unease among viewers. Both factors undoubtedly came into play. The perception that Cesars was a colonial foreigner confirmed his viciousness toward the Hottentot Venus.

The story of two European men—in particular, one a white Dutch settler—displaying an African woman in England seemed so obvious, so fitting with everything one knows about race in Europe in the nineteenth century and the dark side of science and the Enlightenment.⁷¹ Scholars thus concentrated on the workings of race and racial science in the construction of the Hottentot Venus, whereby the making of an icon stood for an entire life. The racial identity of Cesars became a central assumption of the scholarship. Of course, if the archives reveal a truth, it is not that the story of Sara Baartman has ceased to be a racial story or ceased to be a story of racism. However, it does alert one to the very complex dynamics of racial identities and racial orders in the early nineteenth century and the way the meaning of race changed, depending on whose perspective one is analyzing and where they lived.⁷² It suggests again that one locates race and understandings of race always within particular historical and political formations, and that scholarly writings on race and racism be attentive to the varying meanings of identity that pertained to different contexts. The historiography of Sara Baartman has resulted in both a heightening of particular understandings of race's relationship to science and the public, and the erasure of other salient racial performances.



Sara Baartman arrived in London in the summer of 1810. By September, she was on show at 225 Piccadilly as the Hottentot Venus. In the next six months, she was the talk of the town. Sara Baartman's status in London was perhaps even more ambiguous in London than in Cape Town. By the end of November, the court case had ensured that Sara Baartman was a celebrity. Carried on a chair, she

⁷⁰ "Law Intelligence; Court of the King's Bench, Nov. 28, 'Hottentot Venus,'" *Morning Chronicle*, 29 November 1810, 3. The statement is vague as to who acted to remove Cesars—"the keeper," presumably. Was this Dunlop, in which case he was more involved than he claimed; or rather, as Cesars suggested in his letter, did he himself decide to forgo being involved in the actual tableau as a way of reducing conflict?

⁷¹ On colonial cultures and the modernity of racism in South Africa, see Clifton Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order, 1770–1865* (Cambridge, 1992); Pamela Scully, "Rape, Race and Colonial Culture: The Sexual Politics of Identity in the Cape Colony, South Africa," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 335–59.

⁷² For an elegant discussion of identity as relational, see Wilson, *Island Race*. See also Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter?" for an excellent discussion of the theoretical suppositions informing much scholarship on Baartman.

went to meet a duke.⁷³ Elites from out of town came to visit her. On Duke Street, two African children Dunlop had brought from Cape Town, probably in conditions of slavery, served her and the men. On Sundays, she went for rides in a carriage—much more like a woman of the elite than of the working class. Cartoonists represented her, songs were written, and poems were composed.⁷⁴ Baartman was a celebrity who had to endure people poking her bottom and commenting on her figure. Her experience fit that of many performers of freak shows at the time, when freak meant wondrous or strange as much as it did awful and inferior.⁷⁵

However, she was also a working-class woman, working, cooking at home, and going about a life.⁷⁶ In her daily life, she surely wore the long skirts and accoutrements of working-class London women. With other members of the working class, she experienced the contradictions of living amid the wealth and the poverty squirreled away in the interstices of St. James. Given that Sara was a woman from South Africa at a time when most black Londoners came from India, the Caribbean, and West Africa, she perhaps occupied a charged space of visibility.

Sara Baartman was also a working-class black woman in an era when the black community of London was relatively small, numbering in the thousands, and predominantly male.⁷⁷ Most black Londoners worked as sailors or as servants in this period. Some, such as Robert Wedderburn, participated in a black intellectual community through publications railing against racial and class injustice.⁷⁸ Others followed Olaudah Equiano's earlier example and sought to support the experiment of black settlement in Sierra Leone. Baartman's working life and domestic bonds would have allowed her little chance to participate in such activities. However, St. Giles, down the road from Covent Garden, within walking distance of Duke Street and Piccadilly, was home to many black Londoners. Elite men from the West End liked to ramble to St. Giles, to observe what they saw as the exoticism of working-class life.⁷⁹ Perhaps Cesars and Dunlop walked there too, sometimes accompanied by Sara Baartman—we can only imagine. St. James might also have offered Sara some community with black Londoners, since elites in this period liked to employ

⁷³ *Morning Herald*, 23 November 1810, 3.

⁷⁴ For discussion of these, see Kirby, "Hottentot Venus"; Altick, *Shows of London*.

⁷⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, personal communication, November 2006.

⁷⁶ Duffield argues that life for both African and white working-class women in this period was fragile and very difficult: "The lived experience of plebeian African women in the labour market was not strongly differentiated from that of white plebeian women" (Ian Duffield, "Skilled Workers or Marginalized Poor? The African Population of the United Kingdom, 1812–52," in *Africans in Britain*, ed. David Killingray [Ilford, 1994], 73).

⁷⁷ Norma Myers estimates that there were only some five thousand black Londoners at the end of the eighteenth century (Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain c. 1780–1830* [London, 1996], chap. 2). Myers discusses how difficult it is to come up with accurate numbers.

⁷⁸ Robert Wedderburn, *Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. Ian McCalman (New York, 1991). See also Paul Edwards, "Unreconciled Strivings and Ironic Strategies: Three Afro-British Authors of the Late Georgian Period," in Killingray, *Africans in Britain*, 28–48.

⁷⁹ Jane Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space, and Architecture in Regency London* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), 34. St. Giles was also known as the Irish District (Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730–1830* [London, 1999], 18).

black servants as a sign of status and there might well have been black servants living in the big houses.⁸⁰

Sara Baartman, we are arguing, lived an awkward, often humiliating, but sometimes mundane life in London. Those quotidian experiences provide perspective as we try to account for her life beyond the cages of the freak show and the autopsy rooms of the European imagination. The display of Sara Baartman as the Hottentot Venus was a terrible experience, one that scholars have much explored and with good reason. The display also contained a terrible irony, one that scholars have not considered sufficiently.

Dressed in clothes supposedly appropriate to her race, forced to chant and dance again in ethnographic style, Sara Baartman came to enact a masquerade of culture and race much more acutely attuned to an English fantasy of her life than it was to the reality of her time in London or Cape Town. Baartman's dislocation from Cape Town, her financial dependence on Cesars and Dunlop, and the power of contemporary British images of the Khoekhoe as requiring rescue from the horrors of Dutch enslavement, all helped shape the image of the Hottentot Venus that became so familiar to the British public in 1810. However, Sara Baartman also lived a daily life outside of the icon. In addition, she also contributed to the role that was to make her famous. She did so both in her renderings of the Venus on stage and through attempts to manage publicity for the show.

In September 1810 and March 1811, Dunlop hired Frederick Christian Lewis, a leading English artist, to do aquatints of Sara Baartman; these are some of the most circulated images of the Hottentot Venus.⁸¹ The first was a mere fourteen by nine inches in size, posted outside 225 Piccadilly and made available to the London public. Sara stands alone and sideways to the viewer. She is mostly naked. Her buttocks occupy the center of the image. Her left breast is visible. A kaross, or animal skin, drapes down the shoulder opposite the viewer, serving as a foil for the naked body rather than covering it. A large headband circles Sara's forehead, and her face is painted in strokes somewhat bolder than one would usually have found among the early Gonaqua of the Eastern Lands. Sara holds a staff, smokes a pipe, and wears shoes unmistakably purchased in England. In the second aquatint, Sara faces the viewer, no longer nude in the picture, but in a tight body wrap

⁸⁰ The scholarship on black London concentrates on either the eighteenth century or the Victorian era; see Duffield, "Skilled Workers of Marginalized Poor?" 48–52, for a discussion of the gaps in the historiography. On this period in particular, see Killingray, *Africans in Britain*, chaps. 1 and 2; Isaac Land, "Bread and Arsenic: Citizenship from the Bottom Up in Georgian London," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 89–110. Important works on black British history include Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984); Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995); Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1978); Folarin Shyllon, *Blacks in Britain, 1555–1833* (London, 1977).

⁸¹ Lewis (1779–1856) had trained at the Royal Academy near Piccadilly Circle. He gained fame in the early 1800s for his work in John Chamberlaine's *Original Designs of the Most Celebrated Masters in the Royal Collection* (London, 1812) and had a good career doing aquatints of American landscapes. Like other painters, he worked on commissions for members of the Royal Family. For references to Lewis, see Kenneth C. Lindsay, "John Vanderlyn in Retrospect," *American Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1975): 79–90, 83. The National Portrait Gallery online lists his paintings: <http://www.npg.org.uk>. On aquatints, see Michael Twyman, *Printing 1770–1970: An Illustrated History of Its Development and Uses in England*, 2nd ed. (London, 1998), chap. 6, 88.

similar to the one she had worn in the first months of the exhibit. She wears beads, cloth to cover her pubis, and a kaross hanging from her back. Thick black lines to resemble the eland again decorate her cheeks. In both aquatints Sara wears the tortoise shell necklace.

The aquatints represent an imagined Hottentot woman.⁸² Except for the tortoise shell necklace and painted face, Sara's costume is more an amalgam of artifice than how the Gonaqua dressed before the colonial period. However, the depictions also are not so far off. Who had the knowledge about Khoekhoe society? Dunlop and Hendrik surely did not. The surgeon never ventured outside Cape Town. Nor could the men easily consult descriptions of Gonaqua. Hendrik could not read. Sara, however, had lived in the fading years of Gonaqua independence. She also had the experience of presenting the Hottentot woman to eager sailors.

Sara Baartman likely sought to render her depictions with verisimilitude, even if the overall design of the poster was out of her control. In addition, she went one step further. Both aquatints state S. Baartman as the official publisher of the famous print, in accordance with the copyright acts passed in the eighteenth century.⁸³ Neither Alexander Dunlop's nor Hendrik Cesars's names appear. This was a move most unusual for the time. Here, the subject of a print managed to hold the copyright.⁸⁴

We do not have evidence that these posters were on sale in London, but Reaux, Sara's owner in Paris, did sell them in his shop.⁸⁵ We can only speculate as to why the aquatint lists Sara Baartman as the publisher. Lewis did the first print before any controversy had arisen. Perhaps Sara Baartman was genuinely the publisher of that aquatint. By March, the court case had made her display somewhat notorious. Dunlop might well have seen a benefit in maintaining her name as publisher to forestall lingering doubts as to her liberty. If Sara Baartman was the publisher of the prints, she had legal title to the proceeds derived from their sale. However, one doubts if she ever saw such money. As so often happens in this story, the most telling aspects are the most vexing, but the history of the aquatints does raise tantalizing possibilities of Sara Baartman's participation in shaping the presentation of the Hottentot Venus, at least in the very early days of her time in London.

⁸² See Strother, "Display of Body Hottentot," for an excellent discussion of the images.

⁸³ See "Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus," London, published as the Act directs, September 18, 1810, by S. Baartman, MA 54/824, Museum Africa, Johannesburg; "Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus. Exhibiting at no. 225 Piccadilly. Lewis Delin et. Scept. London. Published as the Act Directs, March 14th, 1811, by S. Baartman, 225 Piccadilly"; Lysons, *Collectanea*, vol. 1, facing p. 102, by permission of the British Library. On copyright, see Timothy Clayton, *The English Print, 1688–1802* (New Haven, CT, 1997), esp. chaps. 3 and 6. See also Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 2004) for an analysis of popular prints. We are grateful to Cindy McCreery for discussing with us the possible implications of Baartman being listed as publisher of the prints.

⁸⁴ Correspondence with Michael Twynam, 26 April 2006.

⁸⁵ Kirby, "Further Note on 'Hottentot Venus,'" 165–66. In April 1811 Sara Baartman left London and toured the provinces as part of the pleasure fair circuit. By October 1812 she was in Bury St. Edmunds, appearing at the local fair, where tickets were sold at half the price of what people paid to see her in 1810. Her sale to an animal trainer in Paris in January 1815 is further evidence of the continuing degradation she suffered before her death at the end of 1815. On her time in Paris, see Gerard Badou, *L'Enigme de la Venus Hottentote* (Paris, 2002); Holmes, *African Queen*; and Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, chap. 6.



The investigation by the King's Bench, which unfolded in October and November 1810, also captured Sara Baartman within the paradigm of the suffering woman, allowing for none of the complexities suggested by the quotidian details of her life and the creativity involved with the show of the Hottentot Venus. The proceedings of the King's Bench highlighted the tensions around exploitation, experience, and agency that remain so vexing in historical analysis to this day. The African Institution, which made Baartman's situation known to the King's Bench, was interested only in the vignette of the gentlemen of London rescuing the suffering slave woman from the tip of Africa.⁸⁶ The attorney general followed its lead.

While a justice of the King's Bench argued that an interested party could bring a criminal case for a "breach of public decorum" (Baartman first appeared on stage in a tight-fitting brown dress to show off her figure), the attorney general chose not to do this.⁸⁷ The investigation proceeded on the grounds of slavery or freedom. The key witness in this investigation would be Sara Baartman herself. In his submission to the court on 24 November, the attorney general proposed that the court arrange an interview with Sara in her native tongue.⁸⁸ However, the court determined that Dutch would have to suffice, given the absence of anyone who could communicate in the Khoekhoe language.⁸⁹ The court also ordered that the interview be done "out of the presence of her keeper."⁹⁰

Particular historical understandings of race, gender, and place created the experiences of Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London, and it was through the prism of London that the case proceeded. Macaulay and the attorney general of the King's Bench could not imagine Hendrik Cesars in some way as a man also victimized by race and class, in part because they read him as a settler. Their disinterest in interrogating Cesars's life story had sad implications for him: Cesars left the show at the end of October, moved to Minories in the East End, and we think died early the next year. Hendrik Cesars never returned to the Cape; the details of his death are unknown to this day. The court's certainty that Cesars was the power broker, the one to get rid of, also affected Sara Baartman. Dunlop remained in the room when Sara Baartman was interviewed. While Cesars

⁸⁶ It is striking that Macaulay never brought the status of the two African boys brought from Cape Town to the attention of the court. For a discussion of Macaulay's reasons for structuring the case in the way he did, see Pamela Scully, "Sara Baartman, Zachary Macaulay and Sierra Leone," paper presented at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association, San Francisco, November 2006.

⁸⁷ "Law Report, Court of the King's Bench, November 24," *Morning Herald*, 26 November 1810, 3. See also "Copy from Mr Guerne's Short Hand Notes of the Proceedings in the Court of King's Bench, 24 November 1810," ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁸⁸ "Law Intelligence, Court of the King's Bench, Saturday, November 24, 1810, The Hottentot Venus," *Morning Chronicle*, 26 November 1810, 3. See also "Copy from Mr Guerne's Short Hand Notes of the Proceedings in the Court of King's Bench, 24 November 1810," ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁸⁹ See comments of Lord Ellenborough and the attorney general in "Law Intelligence, Court of the King's Bench, Saturday, November 24, 1810, The Hottentot Venus," *Morning Chronicle*, 26 November 1810, 3.

⁹⁰ "Law Intelligence, Court of the King's Bench, Saturday, November 24, 1810, The Hottentot Venus," *Morning Chronicle*, 26 November 1810, 3.

was indeed Sara Baartman's employer, Baartman had known him much longer than she had known Dunlop. Sara Baartman had refused Dunlop's first proposals that she go to London, saying she would go only if Hendrik Cesars went too. Cesars's departure from the show put Dunlop in control.

On 29 October 1810, as the investigation got under way, Dunlop drew up a contract with Baartman, employing her as a domestic servant. The contract, retroactively dated to 20 March 1810, was supposed to be five years in length.⁹¹ The timing of the contract and its retroactive implementation testifies to Dunlop's growing concern about the charge of slavery the public leveled at the exhibit. But Dunlop made the contract one of domestic service, rather than that of an actor vis-à-vis a showman. The exhibit of the Hottentot Venus thus fell under the right of the employer to contract out his servant's labor, not as one in which Sara Baartman directed her own exhibit.

On 27 November, accompanied by the Coroner of the Court, two merchants who could speak Dutch went to interview Sara Baartman at Duke Street, at the rooms she shared with Dunlop and the two slave boys. A notary accompanied them.⁹² The testimony of the lawyer Mr. Gaselee shows that Dunlop was present at the interview.⁹³ The men spoke to Baartman for three hours, asking her to recount her life story, how she came to London, if she remained in the city willingly, and if she had any complaints about her situation and treatment.⁹⁴ After all the publicity and the controversy, Sara Baartman's voice finally enters the archival record, but perhaps not in ways the antislavery activists and scholars have wished. This is the only record we have where Sara had an opportunity to leave a statement about the story of her life. The statement is a paraphrase of the interview and a translation from Dutch into English. Even here, we see Sara Baartman at a remove, through the lens of Europe. The context in which she produced this account, as well as the huge absences in the archival record, confound our ability to know her.⁹⁵

Among other things, Sara Baartman said that "she came by her own consent to England and was promised half of the money for exhibiting her person—She agreed to come to England for a period of six years; she went personally to the Government in company with Henrick Caesars to ask permission to go to England. Mr. Dunlop promised to send her back after that period at his own expence [*sic*] and to send the money belonging to her with her." She said that Dunlop and Cesars treated her "kindly" and that she had "everything she wants; has no complaints to make against her master or those who exhibit her; is perfectly happy in

⁹¹ Kirby, "More about the Hottentot Venus," 125. See "Statement regarding testimony of The Hottentot Venus 27 November 1810, signed affidavit of Messrs. Solly and Mooijen," 28 November 1810, TNA: PRO, KB 1/36/4.

⁹² "Hottentot Venus," *Morning Chronicle*, 29 November 1810, 3. Cesars had already left the stage. By this time he had lived in Minorities for at least a month.

⁹³ "Hottentot Venus," *Morning Chronicle*, 29 November 1810, 3.

⁹⁴ "Statement regarding testimony of The Hottentot Venus 27 November 1810, signed affidavit of Messrs. Solly and Mooijen," 28 November 1808 [*sic*], TNA: PRO, KB 1/36/4.

⁹⁵ Two subsequent apparent interviews in Paris seem to have been cobbled together by authors rather than being genuine interviews. Sara gave her statement in Dutch, her second language, not her natal tongue, although by this time she would have been fluent in Cape Dutch, having spoken the language since she was at least four. The Dutch of the Cape was more akin to Flemish but would have been understood, if imperfectly, by Solly and Mooijen.

her present situation; has no desire whatever of returning to her own country not even for the purpose of seeing her two Brothers and four sisters; wishes to stay here because she likes the Country and has money given her by her master of a Sunday when she rides about in a Coach for a couple of hours.” Baartman asserted that she was “to receive one half of the money received for exhibiting herself and Mr. Dunlop the other half—She is not desirous of changing her present situation—no personal violence or threats have been used by any individual against her; she has two Black Boys to wait upon her.”⁹⁶ An attorney asked her whether she wanted to go back to the Cape of Good Hope or stay in England. Sara replied: “Stay Here.”⁹⁷

Sara evaded answers that would bring her into conflict with Dunlop: she was unwilling to talk about whether she could choose to end her exhibition. She also seemed uncertain about what exactly the October contract with Dunlop entailed. Nonetheless, the legal representatives involved in the investigation for the King’s Bench took what appears now as a statement made in a context of power and probably coercion, as a transparent expression of Sara’s will. As Abrahams has suggested, the court did not reflect on the fact that Sara had grown up in conditions of slavery, a state that sought indeed to deny enslaved individuals the capacity to exercise free will. Would Sara indeed have considered, in 1810, just some six months after leaving the Cape, that it would be politically feasible for her to speak truth to power?⁹⁸

The court instead accepted that Sara Baartman was free to speak and to exercise her right to work. Lord Ellenborough of the King’s Bench stated in his conclusion that “the party supposed to be under restraint, had, in express terms declared the reverse. She had no desire of changing her present situation, or of returning to her native country.”⁹⁹ The court and the African Institution’s interest in Sara Baartman centered on the notion of free will. This concept assumed that every individual, regardless of social, economic, or political context had the capacity and the opportunity to act as an autonomous individual. They assumed either that Baartman had already freely entered into a contract, and this just needed to be confirmed, or that given the proper conditions, she could begin to exercise agency and refuse to contract herself as an object of display.¹⁰⁰ Paradoxically, their interest also accepted that Sara Baartman needed someone else to act for her: they felt that Baartman did not possess that agency, that property of the free individual, and this empowered their public discourse on her plight.

In this case, one sees the intertwining of different sets of knowledge about people of African descent that coexisted somewhat uneasily in humanitarian sentiments in the early nineteenth century. The attorney general’s submission, like Macaulay’s campaign, invoked England as a special nation, which took seriously liberty and morality. The attorney general stated “it is much to the credit of this Country and particularly to the credit of that Society who instruct me to make

⁹⁶ Note that the *Morning Post*’s summary of Gaselee’s statement to the King’s Bench said that she said she had “a black boy and girl to wait upon her,” 29 November 1810.

⁹⁷ “Copy from Mr. Gurney’s short hand notes of the proceedings in the court of Kings Bench 28th November 1810,” ZI/25 2431/12/1, CA.

⁹⁸ Abrahams, “Disempowered to Consent,” 89–114.

⁹⁹ “Hottentot Venus,” *Morning Chronicle*, 29 November 1810, 3.

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of this issue, see Abrahams, “Disempowered to Consent,” 89–114.

this application that a person in the condition in which this unfortunate woman is placed is not without friends here . . . these Gentlemen . . . will receive her under their protection and will restore her to that Country from which she has been brought.”¹⁰¹ Yet, his statement that Sara Baartman would be “properly disposed of” carries with it uneasy associations with the parceling out of property.

The African Institution and the court made very narrow options available to Sara Baartman: she either could return to the Cape (which meant a sure return to drudgery in the Cesars household) or stay in London as an exhibit. Either Baartman had to express happiness with her lot or she would be put on a boat to the Cape. No one asked if she would like to remain in London as a free woman with a future she could try to determine on her own terms. The abolitionists and the court agents perceived Baartman as a woman who needed men to make decisions for her, a view consistent with English women’s status at that time. They also saw her as a Hottentot, who belonged in particular kinds of spaces: either the space of the colony, her indigenous space, or the space of performance. Her identity as a “Hottentot” erased her own histories of being a washerwoman and of living in Cape Town and London. This identity erased also the independence and, indeed, servitude involved in living in the Cesars household. These histories did not fit easily into the narrative constructed by Macaulay.¹⁰²

On 28 November, Sara Baartman returned to her life as the Hottentot Venus. Into 1811, she achieved renewed success in that role. As the years unfolded, the Hottentot Venus seems to have overtaken Sara Baartman. In England, that icon became a shoddy pleasure fair exhibit far removed from visits to princes and the highest common court of the land. Sara Baartman reemerged as the Hottentot Venus in Paris in September 1814 as a new ethnographic spectacle.¹⁰³



What we have sought to do is to narrate Baartman’s life both within the Hottentot Venus and without, and to suggest those moments when she began to have to negotiate the identity of the Venus. The Hottentot Venus was an act, and to an extent Sara Baartman was an interpreter.

European texts and histories recognize Malintzin, Pocahontas, Krotoa, or Eva of the Cape as translators and diplomats. Some in their native lands regard them also as women who sold out indigenous societies to the demands of Europe. Sara Baartman also is pulled by different expectations and renderings. Might we understand Sara Baartman in some ways as a descendant of those earlier women made to serve as cultural interpreters for European expansion by European men?

Sara Baartman, living in the nineteenth century, was situated in a very different

¹⁰¹ “Copy from Mr. Guerney’s Short Hand Notes of the Proceedings in the Court of King’s Bench, 24 November 1810,” Z1/25 2431/12/1, CA.

¹⁰² Macaulay, we argue, took up the case in the first place as a means of defending himself against accusations by the governor of Sierra Leone, Thompson, that Macaulay and others had been complicit in slavery in that colony. See Scully, “Sara Baartman, Zachary Macaulay and Sierra Leone.”

¹⁰³ For a discussion of Baartman’s self-fashioning in Paris, see Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, chap. 6. Magubane and Strother argue also that Baartman was racialized in France in a different way than in England (Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter?”; Strother, “Display of Body Hottentot.”)

relationship to Europe than the indigenous women of the early modern period.¹⁰⁴ Baartman lived in a world that increasingly commodified identity and race. The London public of 1810 did not see Sara Baartman as an individual who could, on the one hand, self-consciously serve as a guide to culture or, on the other hand, parody European understandings of her natal culture. Rather, in England, and even more so in France, Sara Baartman's body literally became the site of ethnography. Sara Baartman performed the Hottentot Venus in a world that did not want to see what she presented as an act but rather as an ethnographic truth.

Finally, at a time when biography has made a powerful resurgence inside and outside the academy, the stories of Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus raise vexing questions about how we write about transnational lives during a moment when Europe's imagining of the self was undergoing such profound transformation. The Khoekhoe originally had no conception of the autonomous individual, indeed no clearly possessive subject, no "me," "myself," or "I." How do we incorporate that into the story of a life lived so profoundly at the nexus of different cultural and historical currents? Throughout her life, as others created her in the image of their own prejudices and desires, Sara Baartman negotiated multiple understandings of personhood in a world that acknowledged neither her history nor the multiple meanings of her present.

¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, these indigenous women shared in many ways the same fate. For a consideration, see Pamela Scully, "Malintzin, Pocahontas, and Krotoa: Indigenous Women and Myth Models of the Atlantic World," in "Special Issue on Indigenous Women and European Men," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 6, no. 3 (December 2005). On Pocahontas and Malintzin, see Camilla Townsend's two important books: *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, and *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM, 2006). On Krotoa, see especially Vertrees C. Malherbe, *Krotoa, Called "Eva": A Woman Between* (Cape Town, 1990). See also Julia Wells, "Eva's Men: Gender and Power in the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–74," *Journal of African History* 39, no. 3 (1998): 417–37.