

## Refiguring Black Venus

### *Preliminary Considerations*

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The early twenty-first century bears several marks indicating that it stands in the sign of Black Venus. Symbolically apt, the century started out with the 2002 repatriation and subsequent burial of perhaps the most famous Black Venus figure of all, South African Sara Baartman<sup>1</sup> – infamously exploited for her steatopygia and the so-called ‘Hottentot Apron’ in early nineteenth-century Europe. Although her story had originally been brought to the general public’s attention by Stephen Gould and Sander L. Gilman in 1985, it was the return of her remains to the newly-formed post-apartheid South Africa – after eight years of diplomatic squabbling with France – that revived it. The return was invested with high political stakes and surrounded by great publicity. “The story of Sarah Bartmann is the story of the African people,” the then South African president, Thabo Mbeki, said at Baartman’s funeral:

It is a story of the loss of our ancient freedom [...] a story of our reduction to the status of object that could be owned, used and disposed of by others, who claimed for themselves a manifest destiny “to run the empire of the globe” [...]. Our presence at her graveside demands that we act to ensure that what happened to her should never be repeated.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, an already resurgent interest in the Black Venus figure in popular, academic, and artistic culture has skyrocketed, making her a key symbol in current attempts to restore the abjected, racialized female body in feminist,

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1 Despite the fact that the historical person in question is known under different names and with various spellings (from Sara, or, its Dutch diminutive, Saartjie Baartman, but also as Sarah Bartmann, according to her baptismal certificate), we adopt Sara Baartman, a neutral version of her name that neither signifies on her tiny stature nor on a church document, whose authenticity is verifiable though not her reasons for taking the sacrament. See “Sarah Bartmann in Manchester: 200 Years on #BlackHistoryMonth” *Archives+* (11 October 201) <https://manchesterarchiveplus.wordpress.com/2011/10/11/sarah-bartmann-in-manchester-200-years-on-blackhistorymonth/> The page is no longer available.

2 Thabo Mbeki, “Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Bartmann, 9 August 2002,” <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/speech-funeral-sarah-bartmann-9-august-2002> (accessed 10 August 2017).

anti-racist and postcolonial terms. As such, the early twenty-first century can boast a series of high points, not only in relation to the re-figuring of Sara Baartman, but also in the refiguring of the Black Venus figure in general – and not only in its relation to Africa, but in its various manifestations on the global scene. 2010, for instance, saw the premiere of the French film *Vénus noire* by Abdellatif Kechiche and the South African mini opera *Sartjie* by Hendrick Hofmeyer, as well as the publication of Deborah Willis' anthology *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* in the US, one of the first comprehensive collections of articles on Black Venus as representation. Whereas the film and the opera re-imagine Baartman's life-story from different vantage points, the anthology presents a range of academic, literary and historical contributions written over the two preceding decades, as well as a catalogue of photographs of Baartman-inspired works of art. Willis notes that "Baartman has become a focal point of reference for contemporary black artists, particularly women,"<sup>3</sup> presenting works by, among others, Hank Willis Thomas, Roshini Kempadoo, Lorna Simpson, Carla Williams, Carrie Mae Weems, Penny Siopis, Renée Green, Kara Walker, Simone Leigh, Tracey Rose, and Petrushka A. Bazin.

The influence of Black Venus is not only noticeable in "high art" but can also be seen in the world of fashion, social media, and reality shows, perhaps in more disturbing terms. In September 2014, for example, thematizing the latest global trends and changing conceptions of female beauty and sex appeal, *Vogue* declared that "[w]e're officially in the Era of the big booty."<sup>4</sup> As examples of this trend, journalist Patricia Garcia refers to instances such as Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" rap-video – a feminist remix of Sir Mix-a-Lot's 1992 hit "Baby Got Back," which explicitly parodies and redeploys the white fascination with the posterior of Black Venus; images of Kim Kardashian's much discussed buttocks on Instagram, generating up to a million likes; and the CrossFit movement's recent obsession with squats, designed to enlarge and tone the butt muscles. While Garcia might have overlooked the racialized implications of her discussion, they were not lost on her readers, who comment online: "Get over yourself, *Vogue*. Black women are the reason why white women are suddenly obsessed with large asses. [...] You want our lips, our asses, our breasts, our music, OUR EVERYTHING."<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, on an internet message board,

3 Deborah Willis, Introduction, in *Black Venus 2010. They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010): 3.

4 Patricia Garcia, "We're officially in the era of the big booty" *Vogue* (9 September 2014) <http://www.vogue.com/1342927/booty-in-pop-culture-jennifer-lopez-iggy-azalea/> (This page is no longer available).

5 Emma Akberain, "*Vogue* under fire for 'Big Booty' article," *Independent* (15 September 2014) <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/news/vogue-under-fire-for-big-booty-article-9734218.html> (accessed 18 March 2016). Moreover, an article entitled "*Vogue*