RETURNING REMAINS: SAARTJIE BAARTMAN, OR THE “HOTTENTOT VENUS” AS TRANSCONTINENTAL POSTCOLONIAL ICON

ABSTRACT

Contemporary African fiction and film have become increasingly concerned with the (re)construction of a “pantheon” of postcolonial icons. Against the background of a colonial past which keeps on haunting both France and African countries alike, the case of Saartjie Baartman (or the “Hottentot Venus”) in the context of France’s debates on memory and histories at the end of the 1990s offers a charged site of transnational diasporic memory and appropriation. Through a focus on Bessora’s novel 53 cm, this article will highlight the ways in which the fictive and real “return” of the colonial remains of the “Hottentot Venus” serve to articulate a critique of the postcolonial present but also to memorialise a gendered, African, and transnational icon whose trajectory is ultimately reclaimed as a prototypical migratory experience across continents and linguistic traditions.

Keywords: Baartman, Saartjie; Hottentot Venus; postcolonial francophone fiction; Bessora; colonial memory

PIERRE NORA’S REALMS OF MEMORY has taught us to pay attention to the constitutive ways in which memory and history are fabricated against the background of national consciousness and collective identity.1 “Sites of memory”, whether understood topographically (monuments, museums) or in other more symbolic forms (flags, or commemoration rituals), all participate, as Nora has shown, in a nation’s effort to engage with the past in ways that both signal and compensate for the distance that exists between the past and the present, between presence and absence, and between reality and what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard would call the “simulacrum”.

A lot has happened since the 1990s when Nora finished his seven-volume project, a work that is now internationally renowned for having triggered a revival of “memory studies”. In some circles, Nora’s project has become infamous for its glaring omission of colonial history. In Perry Anderson’s book La pensée tiède, Nora came under virulent attack for treating the colonial past as “babioles”, referring to the token essay devoted to the French empire, namely the one on the 1931 Exposition coloniale.2 In the field of postcolonial studies, it has now become commonplace to attack Nora for his strictly hexagonal survey of
“sites” of memory. Indicative of this is Alec Hargreaves’ introduction to Memory, Empire and Postcolonialism, in which he stated that

[...] the marginalization of French colonialism in institutionalized forms of historical knowledge [...] was exemplified in the almost complete absence of any discussion of the overseas empire in Pierre Nora’s highly influential exploration.³

But, again, a lot has changed since the 1990s. A number of socio-political and cultural events have since made it impossible for French institutions to conceive of an exhaustive French history that excludes colonial history. The “affaire du foulard” (“headscarf affair”) and the “affaire du voile” (“veil affair”) which started with an incident in 1989, alongside events such as the 1998 commemoration of the 150th anniversary of France’s abolition of slavery, have continued to inform public debates in France and in French overseas départements well into the 21st century, triggering a multiplicity of memory claims.

Writing years later, in 2002, Nora acknowledged what he called an “explosion of minority memories” in the last twenty years. For him, this explosion or “upsurge” comes from the combined effect of the “acceleration of history” and “democratization of history”, a double process which has translated into the “revenge of the underdog or injured party, the outcast, the history of those denied the right to history”.⁴ Others, however, have proposed different interpretations of this “upsurge”; postcolonial scholars have adopted terms such as “haunting” to account for the process through which spectres of the colonial past – understood in terms of an unresolved history – have returned to force a re-examination of the present. The authors of La fracture coloniale, for example, drawing on Freudian vocabulary in order to explain a national identity crisis and the specificity of France’s relation to its colonial past, evoke a “return of the repressed” whose histories and traumas have been consistently denied or marginalised by the French Republic.⁵ For them, twentieth-century social issues such as the “veil affair”, the treatment of the sans-papiers (people without official residence or work permits), or the more recent violence in the French banlieues (deprived suburbs) stem from and signal a failed “politics of forgetting” concerning colonial violence. The idea of a “return of the repressed” serves to explain how in spite of selective cultural amnesia, colonial memories nevertheless find their way back into the postcolonial quotidian in the form of symptomatic moments of crisis. In the past twenty years or so, France has indeed had to deal with a number of such “returning” histories. These have mainly focused on the issue of slavery and Algerian decolonisation. In addition to academic research, political activity, popular mobilisation and legal reforms, writers and artists have widely participated in what Benjamin Stora has called the end of collective amnesia and the “acclération des mémoires” concerning Algeria.⁶

It is in this context of France’s symptomatic returning memories and haunting histories at the end of the 1990s that I would like to examine the fictional appearance, in francophone literature, of the famous Hottentot Venus. I will
focus on one particular text published in 1999, namely Bessora’s novel *53 cm*.\(^7\) Originally from Switzerland and Gabon, Bessora is among a select group of writers (including Alain Mabanckou, Abdourahman A. Waberi, Fatou Diome, Florent Couao-Zotti, Daniel Biyaoula and Leonora Miano) credited with the renewal of francophone letters in the 1990s.\(^8\)

Bessora’s *53 cm* is in many ways exemplary of the efforts that have been made to participate in the recuperation of colonial memory, featuring the re-appearance or “return” of the story of the “Hottentot Venus” as a mechanism for articulating a critique of postcolonial France, while simultaneously memorialising a gendered, African, transnational icon whose trajectory ultimately functions as a prototypical (?) diasporic experience across linguistic traditions. The analysis will begin with a brief genealogy of the Hottentot Venus in academia, the arts and the political world, and then shift to Bessora’s original appropriation of the subject in francophone literature.

The Hottentot Venus,\(^9\) now more correctly identified as Sara or Saartjie Baartman, has known two distinct moments of popularity in the West. The first occurred in nineteenth-century Europe at the height of colonialism when the Hottentot Venus was exhibited as a “freak” in London and then Paris on account of her African origin and the presumed particularities of her body. Her most exciting features were her alleged “steatopygia” (a condition resulting from the accumulation of fat in the buttocks) and the presence of the (mythical) “Hottentot apron” (the elongation of the genital labia). The fascination with her anatomy continued post-mortem when her corpse was given over to the French scientist Georges Cuvier for scientific observation. Cuvier performed two very symbolically charged procedures, producing a plaster cast of her entire body and then removing her brain and genitalia in order to preserve them for display at his own private Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, and later at the Musée de l’Homme (these remained on display until 1974, after which they were put in storage). The 1980s witnessed a revival of interest in what could be described as a “feminist, post-structuralist moment”. As Clifton Crais explains,

Feminism helped [Baartman’s] resurrection. In the 1980s the Hottentot Venus returned, as a symbol not of sexual excess and racial inferiority but of all the terrible things the West has done to others, [...] as the moniker of everything wrong with Western civilization: Enlightenment science, racism, the abuse and exploitation of women, the travesties of colonialism, and the exoticization of non-Western peoples – the so-called “Other.” (p. 148)

Following paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould’s critique, in his 1981 *The Mismeasure of Man*, of anthropometric methods dating back to Cuvier, the 1985 publication of Sander Gilman’s famous essay “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature” was a key event in the resurrection of Baartman as the figure of alterity *par excellence*.\(^10\) As several scholars have since remarked, Gilman’s essay was “instrumental in transforming Baartman into a late-century
icon for violence done to women of African descent”. The critic Zine Magubane, observing that “Sander Gilman’s [essay] is quoted by virtually every scholar concerned with analyzing gender, science, race, colonialism and/or their intersections” (p. 816), concludes that Saartjie Baartman had become an “academic and popular icon […] the genesis for a veritable theoretical industry” (p. 817).

In the arts, the figure of the Hottentot has been appropriated mainly by women artists. But by the end of the 1990s, Sara Baartman’s story had been represented in the United States in all artistic genres, from hip-hop to theatre, poetry and the visual arts. Janell Hobson has noted that “the persistence of this Hottentot Venus icon led to a recovery of the woman behind the myth, as Saartjie Baartman emerged in late twentieth-century academic discourses of racial and sexual difference” (p. 93), adding that “This reclaiming of Baartman also paralleled South African politics when the post-apartheid South African government began agitating around 1995 for the return of her remains to her place of origin” (p. 93). Rather than seeing it as a “parallel” development, as Hobson did, I would like to suggest that the end of Apartheid in South Africa was a key event in the trajectory and popularity of Baartman, since this historical moment opens up the possibility of the return. The end of the Apartheid regime was one of the most significant events in African and world history, and the “return” of Nelson Mandela as a free man in South Africa one of the most symbolically charged events at the end of the twentieth-century. This geopolitical turning point allows Baartman’s case to be re-opened, since up until that point her symbolic value belonged to a tragic but remote colonial past whose connection with the present was nonexistent.

Baartman’s history, body and trajectory acquire new symbolic valence as her case is re-opened with the end of apartheid, and as negotiations begin between the South African government and France to authorise the repatriation of her remains, inaugurating what I conceive of as a third instance of “popularity”. In this postcolonial phase, the body is metamorphosed from a site of colonial temporality in a purely European space to a haunting remain, rejoining a Pantheon of postcolonial (male) icons, alongside displaced and ultimately re-membered figures such as Toussaint Louverture or Patrice Lumumba. The negotiations between the South African government and French authorities basically started with Mandela’s liberation (1990) and culminated in 2002 with the actual return and national burial ceremony in Cape Town. This event underscored the dynamic nature of memory processes, a transformative process one can further elucidate by considering Bessora’s 53 cm.

Bessora was acclaimed for the originality of her style upon publication of 53 cm, and comparisons were made by reviewers to the work of Alfred Jarry, Raymond Queneau and even Voltaire. A kind of absurdist use of parody lies at the heart of the novel’s project, concerned with a young half-African and half-European mother seeking asylum in France for herself and her five-year-old daughter. The novel’s parodic register functions at different levels, placing the
narrator in the role of an “alien” African ethnographer in France (an interesting reversal of the tradition of Montesquieu’s *Lettres persannes* and Bernard Dadié’s *Un nègre à Paris*), while also playing on a whole tradition of Western exotic and ethnographic literature. Zara, the main protagonist, presents herself as a “gaugologue”, that is, an observer of French manners and customs, declaring:

J’ai vingt et un ans et j’entends bien me consacrer à l’ethnologie des peuples primitifs, inventoirier leurs talismans. Je m’assigne donc un terrain, la Gaule [...]. L’accès à la Gaule, vous le savez, exige un long et pénible détour: l’escalade du mont préfectoral. Un temple se dresse sur son sommet, centre des étudiants étrangers. Mon premier dessein sera d’y pénétrer pour dérober un talisman appelé *ca’t de séjou*. (p. 26)

[I’m twenty-one years old and I intend to dedicate myself to the ethnography of primitive peoples and to the inventory of their sacred objects. I am therefore choosing a specific terrain, Gaul [...]. Access to Gaul, as you know, demands a long and arduous detour: conquering Mount Administration. At its peak stands a sacred place called the Centre for Foreign Students. My first goal will be to penetrate this temple in order to come away with a talisman named “residency papers”].

This sort of reversal allows Bessora – herself a student of anthropology in Paris at the time she wrote the novel – to engage more specifically with travel literature, but also less predictably with scientific disciplines such as anatomy, biology or zoology. This practice reminds the reader of the work of Alfred Jarry and pataphysics (that which can be found beyond metaphysics); in Bessora’s world, every being and object is constantly submitted to classification, observation, commentary and taxonomy, from the fruit on restaurant plates to insects in Parisian apartments to human beings. More precisely, the structure of the novel suggests a parody of Cuvier’s magnum opus *Règne animal distribué d’après son organisation* (1817), since the titles of all of 53 cm’s chapters follow the same pattern:

- De l’altérité dans le règne gymnasial
- De la cerisété dans le règne végétal
- De l’universalité dans le règne colonial
- De l’authenticité dans le règne nasal
- De la fraternité dans le règne SOS racial

Explicit references to Sara Baartman appear in various forms, beginning with the novel’s dedication “to Saartjie Baartman”. The novel opens with the arrival of the protagonist at the Gymnase Club, a space not without symbolic significance. As Julie Nack-Ngue has shown, Bessora’s presentation of the Gymnase Club highlights its “normative” function as a space devoted to the standardisation, beautifying and normativity of bodies, and the protagonist’s arrival at the gym serves to characterise both the migrant’s need to be “let in” and to belong, and the nation’s efforts at regulating difference:

Given her illegal status, bodily inspections are a much more frequent occurrence and the theme of immigration becomes intimately connected to issues of disciplining the body to be beautiful, normal, and “fit” – that is, healthy and in (the right) shape. It is therefore
significant that the novel opens in a gym, where perfect physical form is the “order” of the day.17

If, on a metonymic level, the Gym is representative of French territory, where foreign bodies necessarily appear suspicious if not threatening, then the club physionomist’s opening question “Do you have steatopygia?” must be highly significant. A clear echo of Cuvier’s lexicon, the term “steatopygia” established a connection between the immigrant woman’s body and that of Baartman. Soon after, the reference to Cuvier is made even more explicit, as the club owner explains:

Tu es de race ste´atopyge si, et seulement si, le périmètre horizontal de ton postérieur dépasse 791 millimètres. La ste´atopygie est un caractère racial révélé par Cuvier et Montandon, des naturalistes célèbres et réputés; il faut connaıˆtre ses classiques. (p. 9)

[You suffer from steatopygia if, and only if, the perimeter of your buttocks is more than 791 millimeters. Steatopygia is a racial characteristic revealed by Cuvier and Montandon, two famous and renowned naturalists. You need to know your classics.]

Naturally, the novel’s comic effect is achieved through such scenes, as is the use of numbers in the enigmatic title. Later in the text, the reader learns that the “53 cm” measurement corresponds to the protagonist’s behind, a figure that exceeds the requisite standards of “white, French” and that is considered below the criteria of “absolute blackness”. To the repeated question “Connais-tu la race ste´atopyge?” (“Do you know the steatopygic race?”), the young woman has little choice but to submit herself to a measurement test:

530 mm. Es-tu bien suˆre d’eˆtre d’ascendance ne´groı¨de? […] 53 cm, c’est peu. Cuvier n’en croirait pas son me`tre de couturier: dans quelle race classer un individu de si faible périmètre fessier? Car la fesse fait la race, non? (pp. 156–7)

[530 mm. Are you sure you are of Negroid descent? […] 53 cm isn’t much. Cuvier himself wouldn’t believe his measuring tape: in what race would you situate an individual with such a small posterior perimeter? For the rear makes the race, doesn’t it?]

Whereas steatopygia made Sara Baartman “monstrous”, the reversal proposed by Bessora unsettles the French, since even in its absence of buttocks, the black, hybrid woman’s body still appears disruptive in the economy of categorisation established in the narrative.18

Bessora’s fictional treatment of a black immigrant woman having to submit, on French national soil, to anthropometric testing establishes a continuity between racialist science and French immigration laws or, as Didier Fassin puts it, French “lois d’inhospitalité”.19 Throughout the narrative, Bessora juxtaposes nineteenth-century France with the contemporary period, the “freak” and the immigrant, scientific normativity with the Fifth Republic’s idea of “Frenchness”, and finally the bureaucratic ordeal of a sans-papiers with the humiliation experienced by Sara Baartman in a “human zoo”.20 This history, compounded by the homophony between the two first names, Zara (the protagonist) and Sara (the
historical figure), serves to establish a privileged connection between the fate of the two women. 

In its criticism of French rationalism and bureaucracy, Bessora’s writing uses all the resources of parody to denounce France’s various efforts at categorisation. For example, the systematic and hyperbolic insistence on order, species, taxonomy and difference not only challenges categorisation, but ultimately deflates/exhausts the operational power of categories such as “Frenchness” and “race”. Beyond the burlesque, however, the narrative also endeavours to reclaim Baartman’s dignity. Right in the middle of the book, six full pages are devoted to a scene featuring a dialogue between the central protagonist and her French friends, during which she tries to convince them of the “humanity” of the Hottentot Venus. One man – a fervent admirer of Cuvier – even supports the idea that the Hottentot was an animal:

Les hottentots n’ont pas besoin de sépulture: ils sont sans âme, sans histoire et sans destin. Ils ne sont pas des hommes. (p. 168)

[Hottentots don’t need graves: they don’t have souls, they don’t have a history, and they don’t have a destiny. They are not human beings.]

The whole exchange provides the opportunity to engage in a lengthy rehabilitation of the Hottentot: “She has a story!” says the narrator. “She was a circus freak. She was deported to Europe to be shown to little French kids... She was a human being. She had a name. She was called Saartjie” (p. 166).

In the process, Bessora’s fiction performs an important recontextualisation of Baartman’s story, transforming it from the exclusive narrative of an exhibition into a story of migration. In this process, the body becomes less of an icon of radical difference, as Gilman conceived of it, than an archetypal transnational/transcontinental migrant body travelling from Africa to Europe and back. Thus, as a novel which provides closure to a trajectory of homelessness, loss and wandering, 53 cm emerges as a memorialising gesture which stages a transfer from the European museum to a diasporic space that transcends national affiliations. Ultimately the dismembered, exiled colonial ghost of the Hottentot Venus is re-historicised, re-named and re-patriated into a collective imaginary.

In South Africa, of course, since the beginning of the negotiations to bring her remains back from France, Baartman had emerged as very much a national icon, a “reminder of the injustices black South Africans have endured over the past three and a half centuries” (Crais, p. 3), a key to understanding the nation’s present. By contrast to these South African works, the imaginary Baartman in 53 cm is less a national than a global figure, made available to all subjects of the African Diaspora. These links between minority experiences and histories gain proximity to what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih have called a “minor transnationalism”, whereby the transnational is “not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local or global spaces across multiple spatialities and temporalities”.
The strategic detour through South Africa to produce a critique of contemporary France allows Bessora to steer away from a vertical relationship to the Métropole, privileging instead a more transversal connection to distinct colonised histories. As such, Bessora’s transnational rehabilitation shares points of commonality with the projects of artists who have gone outside and beyond their national tradition in order to keep alive the memory of African historical figures, groups or events. I am thinking here of two filmmakers whose works are devoted to postcolonial memory, namely the Cameroonian Jean-Marie Teno, whose *The Colonial Misunderstanding* is on the 1904 genocide of the Herreros in Namibia, and the Haitian Raul Peck, who made a film on the Congolese revolutionary Patrice Lumumba. The act of giving a textual or poetic burial or sepulture to the lost bodies of the colonial era is familiar to the literature and arts of the Diaspora. In the Caribbean, Césaire’s “géométrie de mon sang répandu” and his description of Toussaint Louverture’s grave in the French Alps as a “cellule dans le Jura” are well-known examples, as indeed is Edouard Glissant’s call for a “Poétique de la Relation” which would allow the poet to reclaim those bodies lost to the “expérience du gouffre”. More recently, such commemorative projects have been in evidence, for example the 1998 “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire” initiative in which ten writers set out to explore the potential of fiction as a way of documenting, exploring and ultimately healing the wounds of the Rwandan genocide.

Thus, in 2002, the French Senate was asked to approve a proposition that would authorise the return of Baartman’s remains to South Africa. Saturated with lyrical allusions to notions of French grandeur, the official appeals to French Republican values:

[France] intends to give full dignity back to Saartjie Baartman, who for such a long time has been humiliated as a woman and exploited as an African. It is high time that her remains rest peacefully in a grave, in this South African land now free of Apartheid. True to its traditions, to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and to the preamble to the Constitution of 1946, the French Republic salutes her memory. After so many outrages, Saartjie Baartman is finally going to leave the long night of slavery, of colonialism and racism, and to regain the dignity of her origins and the land of her people [...] [This is] an important moment of unity around an essential principle, that of the dignity of any human being, whatever her origin, her faith, her condition. These principles are among those upon which is built the France of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the France of Hugo, the France of Schoelcher and Emile Zola.

Thus, the return of Baartman’s remains comes to symbolise an act of true French Republican generosity, analogous to the abolition of slavery (as the reference to Schoelcher suggests), to the defence by Zola of Dreyfus (the French Jewish soldier falsely accused and convicted of treason in 1894), and even to the
Revolution itself, all within a broader framework structured around a longer history of Enlightenment and the defence of Human Rights.32

The issue of returning Baartman’s remains is all the more interesting because both South Africa and France were deeply engaged in their own respective struggles with questions of national identity, colonial history and the postcolonial present during the 1990s. Like many novels published during this period, Bessora’s 53 cm is a story about the vicissitudes of integration into the French Republic. As such, however, it is a story of failed integration. If we go back to the end of the novel, the parallel between Baartman’s trajectory and that of the young protagonist reveals a problematic discrepancy given that the parallel that I have insisted upon is not, in fact, sustained to the end of the novel. If, thanks to its twentieth-century double, the colonial ghost finally finds a place to rest, the status of the “real” migrant is ultimately far less satisfying. Indeed, at the end of 53 cm, the young sans-papier has failed in her quest to obtain “papers” including the precious “ca’t de séjou’” (residency papers). In the last scene of the novel we observe her being arrested by the French police and deported, or “ramené à la frontiére” as the new French lexicon relating to illegal immigration qualifies the practice.

This kind of denouement is in fact quite typical of many migrant narratives in francophone literature. Literature from all traditions, of course, offers stories of migration, exile and various attempts at returning, and francophone literature is no exception. In the case of Negro-African literature in French, as it was once called, one could even argue that migration and the struggle for integration constitute foundational themes. Works such as Mirages de Paris, Chemin d’Europe, L’aventure ambiguë, Le docker noir and Le baobab fou, to name but a few, can all be read as bildungsromans of the colonised subject, and where all sorts of negotiations highlight the existential quest of the protagonists.33 But with very few exceptions, those narratives which now make up the canon of francophone letters, while reworking the topos of the voyage à la métropole, all end with the protagonist’s failure to find a modus vivendi. Marked by suicide, murder, abandonment or madness, migrant colonial and postcolonial narratives almost invariably refuse any kind of plenitude to their subject, in a way that casts cultural and biological hybridity not as a potentiality, as Homi Bhabha would have it, but as a fundamental curse.

In the case of 53 cm, the demonstration is even more explicit: while the story appears to provide a happy resolution to Baartman’s biography (having gained a degree of dignity and a new status as postcolonial icon), we are nevertheless left with Zara, the African migrant, at the threshold of histories and national territories.34 The textual return home has indeed delivered the ghost from its wandering “revenant” condition and substituted stability and post-mortem plenitude. But what about the modern subject? Aimlessly wandering the streets of Paris in search of dignity or deported back to a home she has never seen, the protagonist in 53 cm remains an embarrassing body and presence for French laws and Republican ideals, an awkward reminder that the historical
circumstances of today’s global immigration continue, in fact, to produce tomorrow’s ghosts.

So, the question remains: Can the migrant return? Baartman’s case confirms that the answers are far from simple, particularly when one considers that her own return was far from straightforward, requiring as it did lengthy negotiations not only with French officials but also with her Khoisan descendants who had filed the original claim. Similarly, Cape Town was selected for the burial site, not therefore her birthplace but rather the place from where she initially departed. Her grave, then, as a site of memory, also proves to be the site of conflicting memories.

Ultimately, 53 cm will continue to raise complex questions pertaining to modalities of return. As far of the imaginary of the Diaspora is concerned, one can also wonder what happens to Baartman’s status once she has come to rest. If Baartman’s symbolic power lies precisely in her fragmentation and constant wandering, then the return of her remains could very well herald the end of her status as a transnational, diasporic icon, in favour of a national, or even ethnic/indigenous identity. Today, however, one final element can be added to what Gérard Badou calls “the enigma of the Hottentot”, that is the enigma of her remains.35 For what is being returned is not a body but rather merely her remains, those “items” listed in the legal document: a plaster cast, preserved organs, a skeleton and waxed moulds of genital parts. Her burial and grave therefore memorialise a mix of “real” body parts and “copies” of the original body (plaster and wax). The grave itself is half-cenotaph, a memorial site dedicated precisely to a body that is partly absent. What is more, the French museum directors, the South African government, or the Khoisan descendants cannot confirm that the body parts contained in the jars are indeed Baartman’s. One obvious way to find out would be to use DNA testing. However, South African groups representing Baartman’s ancestors will not allow her body (or rather her remains) to be submitted to such experiments. Clifton Crais’s detailed account of the debates around genetic testing provide the unequivocal conclusion that, although some have contended that “Genetic information could cast important light on this complicated and rich history, as if biology might tell us who, in fact, Sara Baartman was and how she stood in relation to South Africa’s complicated racial histories” (p. 159), the final consensus was to leave the remains alone, because

Performing any tests immediately violated a body some two centuries old, a body quite literally in pieces, and would “disrespect” Baartman yet again. The issues the Reference Group confronted were “not in the past.” The desires of the French scientists to understand the minutiae of Sara Baartman’s body, the centuries-old display of her body in a Paris museum, the seemingly infinite crimes of the West, this long, infamous history continued unbroken in the scientific claims to do DNA testing on the remains. (p. 160)

Saartjie Baartman’s body and trajectory from the time of her birth to the time of her burial in South Africa have been used, constructed and recuperated on
multiple occasions at different historical periods and by different groups according to varying ideological agendas. What her trajectory tells us is that at each stage, a physical body and fictional narrative have been systematically re-assembled and disassembled, abandoned and reclaimed. As an icon now bearing on the postcolonial, multicultural histories of Africa and Europe, she has gained new symbolic value in aesthetic projects such as Bessora’s 53 cm. As I hope to have illustrated, we may not have come to the end of the story.

LYDIE MOUDILENO

Department of Romance Languages
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104–6305
USA
moudilen@sas.upenn.edu

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NOTES

5 N. Bancel et al. (eds.), La fracture coloniale (Paris, 2005).
8 Bessora is the author of five other novels: Taches d’encre (Paris, 2000); Deux bébés et l’addition (Paris, 2002); Petroleum (Paris, 2004); Caucillez-moi jolis messieurs (Paris, 2007); and Et si Dieu me demande, dites-lui que je dors (Paris, 2008).
9 C. Crais and P. Scully’s recent book on Sara Baartman, Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and Biography (Princeton, 2008), is a crucial reference work in the scholarship on Baartman. It is the most exhaustive and thoroughly researched biographical account to date, spanning three centuries, from Baartman’s birth to contemporary South Africa. Crais’s insistence on
documenting Baartman’s early life before she left for Europe – thus rehumanising the woman behind the icon – and the care with which he brings out the complexities of Baartman’s trajectory make his study stand out particularly in the mass of scholarly articles on Baartman. I am grateful to the author and to Princeton University Press for having made the manuscript available to me before its release in November 2008. Further references will be given in the text.


12 This late twentieth-century popularity is attested by a number of critical projects. See T. D. Sharples-Whiting, Black Venus (Durham & London, 1999).


16 All translations from 53 cm are my own.


21 In a previous essay entitled “Femme nue, femme noire: tribulations d’une Vénus”, Présence francophone 66 (2006), 147–61, I provided a comparative study of Bessora’s and Calixthe Beyala’s representations of the black woman’s body, and dealt in more detail with the gendered aspect of Bessora’s literary appropriation.


23 This is reminiscent of Césaire’s work, especially in the famous moment in the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal when the poet faces his haunting double with the spectacle of a “nègre comique et laid”, whose body is rendered ugly by centuries of shame, abuse and dispossession. See Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry, trans. C. Eschelman & A. Smith (Los Angeles, 1984), p. 62.

24 Craig’s study mentions another interesting turn in Baartman’s career given that the “The Case of the Hottentot” has been invoked in court cases involving aliens in the United States (2004) and in the United Kingdom (2006).

25 South African artists have played a significant role in the emergence during the 1990s of Baartman as a national symbol. Filmmaker Zola Maseko is perhaps the most well-known internationally, having directed two documentaries on Baartman: The Life and Times of Sara Baartman, First
Run Icarus Films (New York, 1998) and The Return of Sara Baartman, First Run Icarus Films (New York, 2003). The former is a biographical account focusing on her life in Europe and ending with the mention of attempts by the South African government to achieve the restitution of her remains; the latter documents the actual repatriation of Baartman’s body to Cape Town in 2002, and includes images of her coffin wrapped in the South African flag as a symbol of post-apartheid national consciousness. Similar examples have been recorded in literature. See D. Ferrus, I’ve Come to Take you Home: An Anthology (Cape Town, 2008); Z. Wicomb, You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town (New York, 2000).

28 The first scene in Lamumba is, significantly, of two Belgian officials unearthing and burning Lamumba’s body, making sure all evidence disappears.
32 Of course the history of France’s release of Baartman’s remains is not that simple, and France was, for a long time, resistant to South Africa’s requests. See for example F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar, L’invention du Hottentot: histoire du regard occidental sur les Khoisan (XVe–XIXe siècle) (Paris, 2000).
34 Naturally, the question of “race” is also crucial, for it is also as a mixed-race or hybrid body that Zara constitutes a disturbing presence (see Ireland, “Bessora’s Literary Ludics”). In the narrative, however, Baartman’s hybridity is not raised. For further discussion of the limits of Bessora’s racial iconisation, see my essay “Femme nue, femme noire: tribulations d’une Vénus”.
36 In her essay “Defending the Race: The Italian Reinvention of the Hottentot Venus during Fascism”, Journal of Modern Italian Studies 1:3 (2003), 411–24, B. Sorgoni shows that while Italian fascists had numerous portraits of Black people available for the purposes of racist propaganda, they too privileged the iconography of the Hottentot. This is a further example of the manner in which Baartman’s imaginary has travelled to another national space and linguistic tradition.