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2 twist tomorrow is another day | 2017 | Mónica de Miranda (courtesy of the artist)

THE HOTTENTOT VENUS, HER AUDIENCES AND SCIENCE

Vasco Luís Curado

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In 2002, the remains of Sarah Baartman returned to South Africa, in order that she receive a funeral in her homeland. For more than 150 years, these remains – a skeleton and some organs preserved in formaldehyde – had been treated as zoological museum pieces, not as the remains of a person with rights defended by universal laws.

How did Sarah Baartman's political fate change between her death in 1815 and 2002? Colonial empires did not win their supremacy only because of their superior weapons, religious fanaticism, and greed for profit. They also had the endorsement of Science, which was an intellectual arm of the political power



that shaped the dominance of European civilization over all continents. For centuries, the general sciences and, more obviously, the natural sciences have done no more than reaffirm the prejudices of the prevailing mentality. *Whose gaze peers through my eyes?* asks the ever-disturbing Fernando Pessoa. We ask: whose was the gaze of the biologist peering through the microscope? In studying “races,” the biologist helped validate forms of power. Their gaze was that of the Marquis de Sá da Bandeira, driving force behind the colonization of southern Angola; of Bismark who hosted the Berlin Conference; of Cecil Rhodes tracing the road from the Cape to Cairo.

The human mind is not objective, not even the assumptions of the so-called “hard” sciences before the end of the colonial empires. Science changes, thanks to the seriousness of its own work; political systems change, as a result of historical processes, and both influence and validate each other.

Sarah Baartman was brought from Southern Africa in 1810, from the pastoral people then known as Hottentot, to be exhibited as *The Hottentot Venus* at a fair of curiosities and aberrations in London. Sarah Baartman qualified as an aberration on account of her prominent backside (steatopygia) and her small elongated labia (macronympha). Her owner Hendrick Cezar, an Afrikaner, pretended to be her business associate. Cezar showed Sarah Baartman to a paying audience chained and in a cage, as if she were a wild thing, born of an orangutan or gorilla, who he had to imprison under the threat of the whip. He claimed they shared the profits. An English court tried to find out if Sarah was Cezar’s slave. He asked, indignantly, why the Polish ‘giant’ and the Irish ‘dwarves’ in the next-door tent were not subject to the same judicial attention. A professional in the industry of spectacle, he offered the European public what they wanted to see: a wild African, half-human, half-animal.

In Paris, a new business partner put on increasingly lurid spectacles, exploring the sexual fantasies of a new audience. Cuvier, the great naturalist, examined the specimen, studied its morphological characteristics, and established a relationship between Sarah and the great primates. He considered her closer to these animals than to humans. Such conclusions reinforced the white supremacist idea that Caucasians had the right (and the duty) to colonize the ‘lower’ races.

Sarah fell into a downward spiral of alcoholism and sex work. There too she was the plaything of her audiences’ fantasies. After she died, her corpse was returned to Cuvier’s laboratory, who extracted her genitals and her brain, and joined them together with a skeleton and a life size plaster cast of her



body. Cuvier manufactured these scientific representations for the benefit of laboratory students and museum visitors.

Calling her 'Venus' was itself one of the many distortions that the world of show business and science had applied to Sarah Baartman. Adding *Hottentot* reflected how Europeans saw the rest of humanity as a function of themselves: the onomatopoeia of the word derives from the fact that the Africans seemed to the first settlers to be stutterers. Or perhaps the name crystallises common sounds of their language, that sounded like "hot on tot". Ever since Europe moved away from its position as the centre of the world, the ethnic group to which Sarah Baartman belonged has been recognised as the *Khoikhoi*, because this is what they call themselves, and their language *Khoisan*, because that is the name that the *Khoikhoi* give it. They are no longer stutterers, or rather they never were. In a post-colonial era, to call them *Khoikhoi* means starting to take these people on their own terms.

The *Museu do Homem* in Paris has not exhibited Sarah Baartman's remains since 1974 (the plaster cast came down in 1976). They put them in a cellar. How many objects are in the cellars and warehouses of museums, rejected by new laws and new science? The basement is the place of the Unconscious, the repressed, the censored, that must be removed from the view of the esteemed public. Sarah Baartman, returned home, no longer has an audience.

There are many more skeletons in museum cupboards. These other collections, shrouded in intrigue, are no longer, or never have been, seen by the public.

Translated by [Alexandra Reza](#)

[Vasco Luís Curado](#) is a writer and a psychologist. His novel, *O País Fantasma*, (Publicações Dom Quixote, 2015) deals with colonial society, the war, and Angolan Independence.



YES, BLACK AND EUROPEAN

Mónica V. Silva

*When you say “Black”, people think “African”.
When you say “European”, people think, “White”.*
(Rokhaya Diallo) (1)

In 2018, for the first time, the European Parliament devoted a week to increasing awareness of the approximately 15 million Europeans of African descent living in Europe. The first [EU week dedicated to People of African Descent Week](#) (PAD Week) was organized jointly by several EU institutions. Academics, activists, artists and journalists, among others, attended to discuss issues that were fundamental for black Europeans. The event was in line with the [International Decade for People of African Descent](#) (2015 to 2024), and opened up new ways of discussing these questions within EU institutions and in member states.

Except for some pioneering exceptions, the prefix “afro” has only in recent years taken on positive connotations in many European arena, from the arts to the academy, from collective organising and activism to the media and social networks, from local community associations to European policies. Does this indicate that Europe is trying to re-imagine itself and its memories – its history – from a more democratic perspective? Fifty years ago, the UN began a concerted programme of conferences and actions against racism, but it nevertheless took 20 years for it to recognize (at the [Durban Conference](#)) people of African descent as contemporary victims of savage histories of slavery and colonialism.

The concept of a ‘person of African descent’ can sometimes be jumbled, based on ideas that are either historically amorphous or stuck in the past. According to Garcia (2015), and in line with the Durban Conference definition, people of African descent are people who have left or were born outside the African continent, but who in other geographies inherit the oppression, violence and vulnerability that



racialist ideologies imposed on their ancestors. Seen from this perspective, the concept of a person of African descent is intertwined with colonial histories. Garcia argues that the concept emerges from the diaspora produced by global empires, and that this diaspora registers a “cross-border similarity”, “common core”, and “the feeling of having a political and economic experience and cultural identity that transcends individuals and generations.” This approach allows us to move from a sense of the heterogeneity of black Europeans towards an idea of Afro-Europeans as a historical and collective subject. Black Lisbonite, Afro-Portuguese, Afro-European, person of African descent all have their own particularities. People of African descent, then, are a heterogeneous group with a political and politically situated identity. The category demands an epistemological change in way history is read and how national memories are narrated. These memories need to recognize the presence of Africa outside Africa. They need to recognize the heritage of slavery and colonialism, broadly defined, as a constitutive part of Europe, including the history of anti-colonial wars, of resistance, pan-Africanism, negritude and Afrofeminism, among many other social, political and cultural movements. This recognition reveals how much European history happened outside Europe, in the so-called overseas / ultramar / outre-mer. The history of relations between Europe and Africa urgently needs to be rewritten by new generations of Europeans.

These new generations, as Amzat Boukari-Yabara (2018) points out, no longer think of [returning](#). Rokhaya Diallo’s words in the epigraph to this article, however, also point to the difficulty Europe has in dealing with its past. The actions of activist movements, PAD Week, the International Decade for People of African Descent, among other movements and events, are bringing these questions to privileged spaces at the heart of the grand European centres. They demand that Europe decolonize its colonial fantasies, its fantasies of origin, “otherness” and belonging. Yes: Europe, European and black.



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- (1) Rokhaya Diallo is a French writer, journalist and activist who was present at the “Black Lives Europe” roundtable during People of African Descent Week.
- (2) This is the figure used by the European Network Against Racism. ENAR is a European network founded in 1998 which brings together various anti-racist associations from different European countries. It is a network that gives voice to anti-racist movements in Europe and whose mission is to lobby and advise member states of the European Union on their policies on racial (in)equality. This organization is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union, the Open Society Foundations, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Sigrid Rausing Trust. For more information see: <https://www.enar-eu.org/>.
- (3) European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI), Transatlantic Minority Political Leadership Conference (TMPLC), Each One Teach One (EOTO), and European Network Against Racism (ENAR).
- (4) The first two World Conferences against Racism were held in Geneva in 1978 and 1983 and the third in Durban in 2001. The last conference made a request to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to create a working group or other UN mechanism dedicated to racial discrimination issues specific to people of African descent. In 2002, the Commission created the [Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent](#) (resolution 2002/68).
- (5) García, Alejandro Campos (2015), “Introducción”, in Silvia Valero, Alejandro Campos García, *Identidades políticas en tiempos de la afrodescendencia: auto-identificación, ancestralidad, visibilidad y derechos*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 20.
- (6) Mata, Inocência (2006), “Estranhos em Permanência: A Negociação da Identidade Portuguesa na Pós-Colonialidade”, in Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, *Portugal não é um País Pequeno. Contar o “Império” na Pós-colonialidade*. Lisboa: Livros Cotovia: 293-294.
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