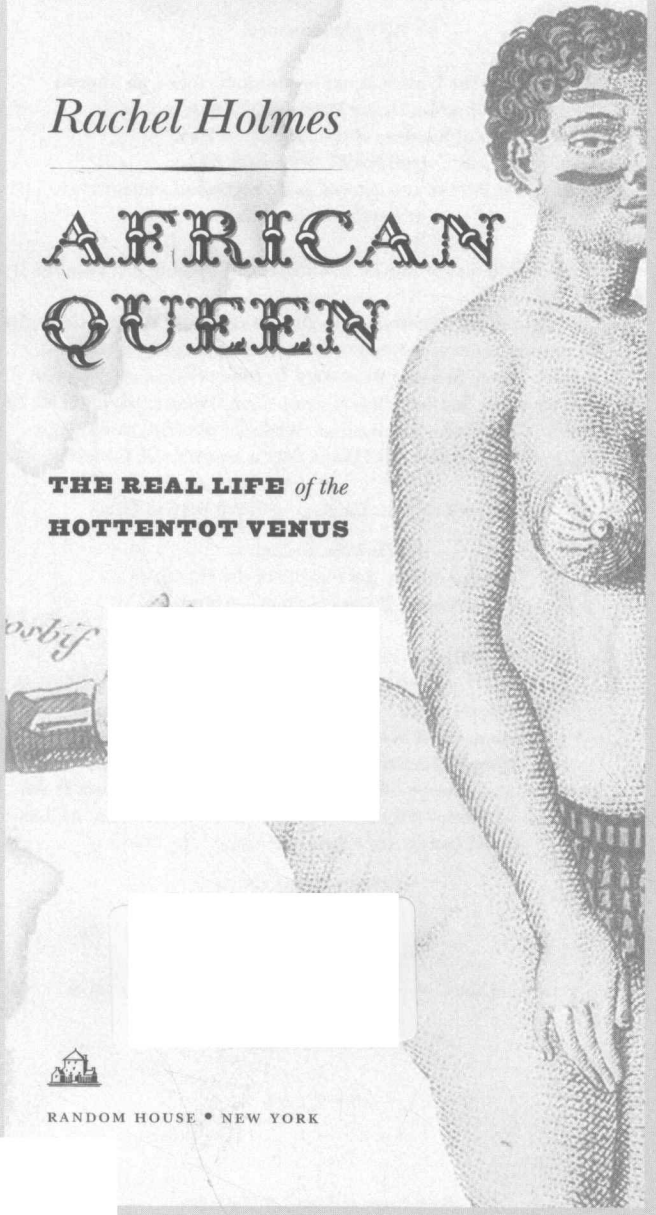
Rachel Holmes

AFRICAN QUEEN

THE REAL LIFE *of the* HOTTENTOT VENUS



RANDOM HOUSE • NEW YORK

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

RANDOM HOUSE and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Published in Great Britain by Bloomsbury Publishing plc, London.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Diana Ferrus and WEAVE Collective for permission to reprint eight lines from "I've come to take you home—a tribute to Sarah Baartman" by Diana Ferrus, published in *Ink@Boilingpoint: A Selection of 21st Century Black Women's Poetry from the Tip of Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: WEAVE Collective, 2002), 150. Reprinted by permission of Diana Ferrus and WEAVE Collective.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Holmes, Rachel.
African queen: the real life of the Hottentot Venus / Rachel Holmes.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-4000-6136-5
1. Baartman, Sarah. 2. Women, Khoikhoi—Biography. 3. Women, Khoikhoi—Europe—History—19th century. 4. Women, Khoikhoi—Europe—Social conditions. 5. Exploitation—Europe—History—19th century. 6. Racism in museum exhibits—Europe—History—19th century. 7. Museum exhibits—Moral and ethical aspects—Europe. I. Title.

DT1768.K56B34 2007
305.48'8961—dc22
[B] 2006045166

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

www.atrandom.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3

Book design by Simon M. Sullivan

And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live?
And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.
Ezekiel 37:3

The story of Sarah Baartman is the story of the
African people of our country in all their echelons.
President Thabo Mbeki

The rear end exists, I see no reason to be ashamed of it.
It's true that there are rear ends so stupid, so
pretentious, so insignificant, that they're
only good for sitting on.
Josephine Baker

I am a sex-o-matic Venus freak when I'm with you.
Macy Gray

A NOTE ON NAMING

SAARTJIE BAARTMAN was born in South Africa in 1789. Her name is pronounced "Saar-key," with a roll on the *r*. *Saartjie* is an Afrikaans name and, like her surname, pure creole, the indigenous flowering of a name cross-fertilized by diverse languages and cultures. She may have been given a Khoisan name at birth, but it never entered written historical records. Throughout her short life she referred to herself as Saartjie.

Baartman, inherited from her father, means literally "bearded man." *Saartjie* translates into "Little Sara," but the intensity of meanings created by the *-tjie* suffix is lost in English. In Afrikaans, this suffix makes a diminutive of a noun. The construction derives from Dutch, in which the standard rule for creating a diminutive is to add *-tje* to a noun. Using the diminutive form of a name in Afrikaans has two different functions. It indicates smaller size, but it is also a powerful way of expressing sentiment. The key emotion expressed by the *-tjie* diminutive is endearment. Used between friends, family members, lovers, and equals of all classes and races, it is a verbal demonstration of affection and care.

However, because a diminutive reduces the size of what it names, the *-tjie* suffix has also been used to subordinate and enforce servitude. Deployed in historical contexts where one individual assumed power over another—white to black, master to servant, male to female—this verbal miniaturizing could express unequal power relations. During the colonial eras and apartheid, the *-tjie* suffix was often used by whites to indicate contempt, belittlement, and domi-

nation over black people. In the politically infused and blood-soaked history of language oppression in South Africa, to mark a person's name with a diminutive became, within this context, a racist speech act.

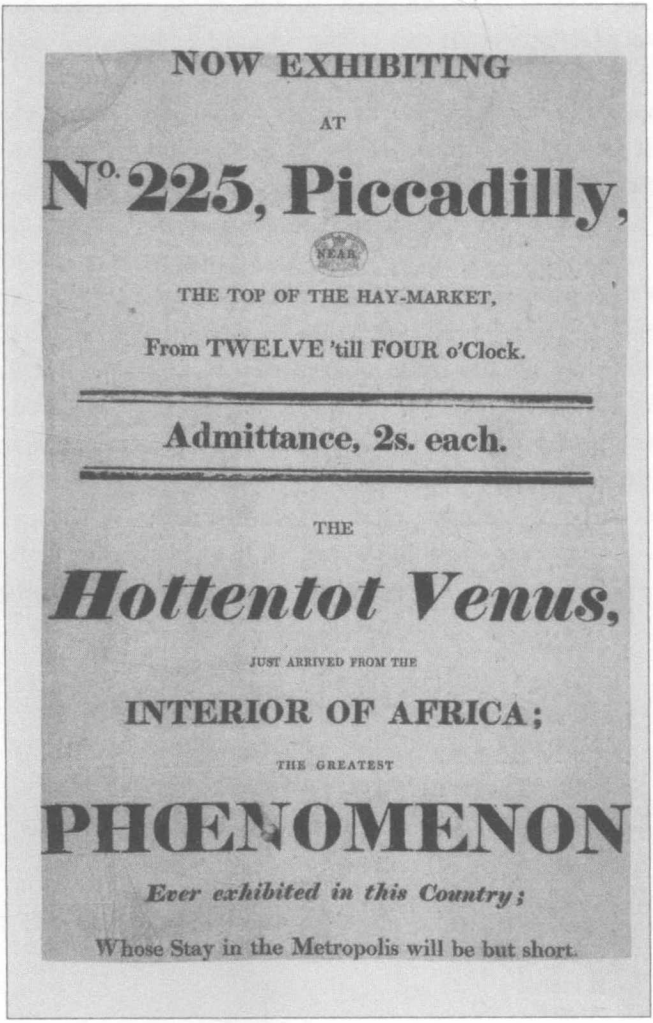
Saartjie Baartman is South Africa's most famous and revered national icon of the colonial era. As is usually the case with such iconic figures, there is some debate over her proper naming. Saartjie was known by several monikers during her lifetime, including the Christianized Sarah Bartmann.

Today the issue of her proper naming is divided between those who favor the Anglophone Sarah, or Sara, and those who think of her as Saartjie. To some, Sarah, or Sara, is a respectful honorific that distances her from the legacy of racism lingering in the diminutive applied to a tragic figure. For others, Saartjie is the fond evocation of her truest name, which emphasizes her South African heritage. Although sometimes bitterly debated, both positions share the recognition that naming is one of the profound forms of power.

Saartjie was her name in life as she lived it.

CONTENTS

AFRICAN QUEEN



Chapter 1

PHOENOMENON

Saartjie Baartman, stage name the Hottentot Venus, emerged from behind a crimson velvet curtain, stepped out onto the three-foot-high stage in pointed green ribboned slippers, and surveyed her audience with a bold stare. Her high cheekbones and dramatic greasepaint and soot makeup gave her a prophetic, enigmatic look. Smoke coiled upwards from the pipe firmly gripped in the corner of her perfect Cupid's-bow mouth, drawing attention to her dimpled cheeks and heart-shaped face. It was a damp autumnal afternoon in London, 1810, and Saartjie was a long, long way from home.

Less than four feet, seven inches in height, she was a diminutive goddess. The springy pelt of her voluminous fur cloak draped from her shoulders to her feet, an African version of the corn gold tresses of Sandro Botticelli's Venus, and every inch of its luxuriant, labial, curled hair was equally suggestive.

Light and dark faces peered back up at her. Saartjie saw their eyes dilate with wonder, then narrow again speculatively, as if uncertain of how to evaluate the vision of an African Venus arising before them, out of the gleaming candlelight and fug of eye-watering smoke from the oil lamps that illuminated the auditorium. Framing Saartjie, the audience could see a small grass hut and painted boards depicting pastoral African scenery and verdant, exotic plants. According to the posters that advertised the recent arrival of the Hottentot Venus in blazing colors and huge printed letters all over central London, these settings depicted the mysterious interior of Africa—although where exactly that might be, many in the crowd were not sure.

To the audience that gazed up curiously at Saartjie, *Venus* was simply a synonym for sex; to behold the figure of Venus, or to hear her name, was to be prompted to think about lust, or love. At the same time, the word *Hottentot* signified all that was strange, disturbing, alien, and possibly, sexually deviant. Some, especially the elite viewers, had heard travelers' tales of mysterious Hottentot women, reputed to have enormous buttocks and strangely elongated labia, and to smoke a great deal. And here she was, a fantasy made flesh, tinted gold by the stage light, elevated above them, uniting the full imaginary force of these two powerful words: *Hottentot* and *Venus*. Her skin-tight, skin-colored body stocking clung to her so snugly that it was plain for all to see that she wore no corset, stockings, or drawers beneath. Most shockingly, the luminous ropes of ivory-colored ostrich eggshell beads that cascaded from her neck to her waist failed entirely to conceal her nipples, visible through the thin silken fabric.

The illuminated auditorium enabled Saartjie to see her audience almost as well as they could see her. She observed with great interest two men of distinctive appearance who entered the theater together and gazed up at her in rapt fascination. One was statuesque, hawk nosed, and haughty looking. The other was stocky, with curly hair and twisted features. Though Saartjie did not as yet know who they were, most of England did, and a murmur of recognition rippled through the crowd. The tall, grave-countenanced man was John Kemble, the nation's most famous actor, and the short man was comedian Charles Mathews, celebrated as the best stand-up comic and impersonator in the land.

Kemble stared fixedly at Saartjie, in a manner described in the folk stories of her childhood as being like a lion looking at the moon. He was just on the point of approaching the stage to address her, when suddenly a white woman elbowed forward, reached up, and coolly pinched her, very hard. Shocked, Saartjie stooped down to push her assailant away, but as she did so, another fashionable female in a high-waisted Empire topcoat (so beloved of Jane Austen heroines) clambered up onto the stage and poked her sharply in the buttocks with her furled parasol, drawling that "she wished to ascer-

tain that all was . . . 'nattral.' " Before Saartjie had the opportunity to defend herself, a smartly dressed gentleman joined forces with her ungentle genteel aggressors, and prodded her with his walking cane.

The manager of the African Venus, Hendrik Cesars, jumped up onto the stage and declared the show over for the afternoon. As the crowd dispersed, Kemble, muttering "Poor, poor creature!" stalked up to Cesars and protested at the assaults on Saartjie, firing questions at him about her state of mind, comfort, and well-being. The actor vehemently declined the manager's wheedling, pacifying encouragements to touch her, objecting, "No, no, poor creature, no!"

Charles Mathews, who wrote up these events later in his diary, observed that Saartjie watched the exchange between Kemble and Cesars attentively. "She was," he said, "obviously very pleased; and, patting her hands together, and holding them up in evident admiration, uttered the unintelligible words, 'O ma Babba! O ma Babba!,' gazing at the tragedian with unequivocal delight." For a well-built woman, she had an unexpected daintiness and lightness in her gestures.

"What does she say, sir?" Kemble asked Cesars. "Does she call me her *papa*?"

"No, sir," the manager answered, "she says, you are a very fine man."

Saartjie's dignified response to Kemble was a classic expression of *ubuntu,* the African philosophy of humanity, fellow feeling, social decorum, and kindness. Her words signified respect and thanks, and clapping her hands was a courteous gesture of humility. Saartjie was offering appreciation to Kemble for his admiration and concern, and showing esteem for a man who, in her eyes, was a fatherly, and rather handsome, figure.

"Upon my word," Kemble retorted, emphatically inhaling a pinch of snuff, "the lady does me an infinite honour!"

The two entertainers left together. "Now Mathews, my good fellow, do you know this is a sight which makes me *mel*ancholy. I dare say, now, they ill-use that poor creature! Good God—how very shock-

ing!" Kemble and Mathews sauntered off down Piccadilly in search of afternoon tea, speculating about Saartjie and her circumstances. However, just like all the rest of the audience who had paid two shillings to gape at the Hottentot Venus that afternoon, they knew almost nothing about her.

Saartjie was twenty-two years old. Six months previously, she had arrived in England on a ship from the Cape Colony, with a British military doctor named Alexander Dunlop, his South African manservant, Hendrik Cesars, and a former black slave now apprenticed as Dunlop's servant. Saartjie lived with them in York Street, a short thoroughfare to the south of Piccadilly connecting Jermyn Street with St. James's Square, and named in compliment to King James II. Saartjie's new home was at the heart of London's most fashionable district, and a world away from her previous life.

A MONTH PRIOR TO the visit that Mathews and Kemble paid to Saartjie's show, on Wednesday September 12, Sir Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society, received an invitation to attend an exclusive preview of the Hottentot Venus on the following Monday. This private viewing was to be held nearby in "the house of exhibition" at 225 Piccadilly, and the invitation was from a man named Hendrik Cesars. Banks discovered that similar invitations had been sent to scientists, naturalists, and fashionable members of high society, as well as a variety of impresarios, including Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the now-elderly playwright and politician, and William Bullock, famed manager of the Liverpool Museum, London's bestselling attraction. On Thursday September 20, three days after the preview, an advertisement using the same wording as the invitation appeared in the *Morning Herald* and the *Morning Post,* announcing the opening of London's latest curiosity to the public:

> The Hottentot Venus.—Just arrived, and may be seen between the hours of one and five o'clock in the afternoon, at No 225, Piccadilly, from the banks of the river Gamtoos, on the borders of Kaffraria, in the interior of South Africa, a most cor-

rect and perfect specimen of that race of people. From this extraordinary phenomenon of nature, the Public will have an opportunity of judging how far she exceeds any description given by historians of that tribe of the human race. She is habited in the dress of her country, with all the rude ornaments usually worn by those people. She has been seen by the principal Literati in this Metropolis, who were all greatly astonished, as well as highly gratified, with the sight of so wonderful a specimen of the human race. She has been brought to this country at a considerable expense by Hendrik Cesars, a native of the Cape, and their stay will be but short. To commence on Monday, the 24th instant.—Admittance 2s each.

This hyperbolical advertisement, promising so much, in fact told very little. Yet it heralded the opening of London's most famous and controversial theatrical phenomenon of the winter of 1810. Almost overnight, the Hottentot Venus became the sensation of the metropolis, both onstage and off. Who was she, and where did she come from? And how did this young black woman who sang, danced, and played the guitar come to be upon the London stage, got up like a fetish and performing like a showgirl?

Chapter 2

M TAI !NUERRE—
"MY MOTHER'S COUNTRY"

Saartjie Baartman was born in 1789 in the Gamtoos River Valley, a lushly forested, semitropical estuary on the bitterly contested eastern frontier of the Cape Colony. Although Africa and Europe were worlds apart, the repercussions of that revolutionary year in Europe had a definitive impact on Saartjie's childhood.

She did not remember her mother, who died before Saartjie had reached her first birthday. Lastborn, she had four brothers and two sisters, who probably became responsible for her care. If she had substitute mothers—grandmother, stepmother, or aunt—she never mentioned them. Saartjie's father, the dominant influence on her childhood, was a cattle drover and hunter, a late-eighteenth-century South African frontier cowboy.

The hills and forests of Saartjie's homeland were filled with elephants, hunters' guns, and Christian missionaries. Lions were a constant threat. Saartjie grew up much exposed to the elements. Summers were hot and humid; winters slightly milder. Rains dampened the firewood that Saartjie and her sisters carried home on their heads. Burning winds intensified the summer heat, blew cold in the winter, but never seemed to blow away the all-pervasive dust that got into everything: nostrils, ears, cooking pots of maize porridge and meat stew, and the straw thatching of the one-room shack in which all the Baartman family lived.

The Gamtoos flows from the confluence of the Kouga and Groot rivers through green lagoons to the ocean. In Saartjie's day, tall bush fringed the riverbanks and coastline. Lowland plains shelved towards

the interior, deep valleys of thorn trees and open bushveld stretched between rocky escarpments and gorges. Visible for miles, the high hills were covered so densely with thickets of flame red and orange aloes that when they flowered, the landscape looked ablaze.

Although palm fringed and fertile, Saartjie's homeland was no Edenic pastoral idyll: it was a war zone. Until the arrival of the European colonists at the Cape in the seventeenth century, the Gamtoos region was untroubled by Christian God or European law. However, by the time of Saartjie's infancy the eastern frontier had become a scene of bloody contest between indigenous and colonial groups. Saartjie's people, the Khoisan, were at the epicenter of this bitter struggle.

Saartjie was descended from the Eastern Cape Khoisan, the long-intermingled society of herding, pastoralist Khoekhoen (Khoi) and hunter-gatherer, nomadic San, native to South Africa since prehistoric times. Saartjie's ancestors named the Gamtoos; many rivers, mountains, deserts, animals, and plants in the region today still bear Khoisan names.

In the seventeenth century, the Cape Khoisan clans were numerous, cattle-rich, and autonomous, but by the last decades of the eighteenth century, their wealth was all but annihilated. When the Europeans arrived, they had Bibles and the Khoisan had land. By the time of Saartjie's birth, the Khoisan had the Bibles, and the Europeans had most of the land. For more than a hundred and fifty years the Western Cape Khoisan prevented seafaring European invaders from establishing a foothold in South Africa. From the first Portuguese landing, in 1488, they held off the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French. Finally, in 1652, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established the first permanent settlement, a refreshment station in Table Bay, with Governor Jan van Riebeeck at the helm.

The Europeans forging a trading seaway to the east struggled, and failed, to master the Khoisan languages, particularly their complex phonology of implosive consonants, or "clicks." The tongue-tied Europeans dubbed the Khoekhoen "Hottentots," and the San "Bushmen." Europeans initially regarded the cattle-propertied Hottentots

as trading partners, diplomatic and cultural go-betweens, and potential employees. The Bushmen, on the other hand, with their ability to live from the "bush" and their lack of livestock, seemed elusive, unassimilable, and insubordinate to a European value system of private property ownership and fixed settlement. But in the end any distinctive cultural identity was construed as negative and inferior, and thus as a justification for conquest. Van Riebeeck's opinion that Hottentots were "a dull, stupid, lazy, stinking nation," who were "bold thievish and not to be trusted," was long representative of the dominant European view of Khoisan people.

In the racial thinking of the nineteenth century, the economic and social differences between the Khoi and the San were transposed into differences of ethnic origin. Over time, colonizers forced an association between "Hottentots" and servility; "Bushmen" and resistance. These divisions allowed the invading Europeans to make distinctions between "good" (tractable) and "bad" (resistant) natives, in order to subordinate the Khoisan and repress their long history of armed struggle.

During the eighteenth century the Eastern Cape Khoisan were squeezed into an ever-narrowing corridor of their ancestral lands by advancing settler-colonists. From the west came Europeans: traders, hunters, travelers, missionaries, and cattle farmers. Also from the west came the Western Cape Khoisan, poor trekboers, and colonial dissidents driven away from the Dutch settlements due to intermarriage or illegitimacy. These latter groups were people of diverse ethnic origins, whose ancestry bonded together slaves from Africa and Malaysia with white Europeans of all classes. From the east came the Xhosa, pushing westwards along the coast in search of new grazing and farm lands. Many of the Eastern Cape Khoisan lived among the Xhosa, a legacy of the ancient trading routes that looped through the region.

A semiautonomous community of Eastern Cape Khoisan, Saartjie's family among them, continued to live on their traditional grazing lands at the mouth of the Gamtoos. However, as their cattle stocks dwindled, they became increasingly dependent on wage labor,