Colonialism, dysfunction and disjuncture: Sarah Bartmann's resistance (remix)

Dr YVETTE ABRAHAMS

UWC Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape

Published online: 21 Apr 2011.

To cite this article: Dr YVETTE ABRAHAMS (2003) Colonialism, dysfunction and disjuncture: Sarah Bartmann's resistance (remix), Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity, 17:58, 12-26

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2003.9674488

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Colonialism, dysfunction and disjunction: Sarah Bartmann’s resistance (remix)

How do you survive, resist and revolute in a country not your own? How do you cope with displacement and alienation while creating a meaningful life for yourself and your children asks YVETTE ABRAHAMS? She responds to these questions through telling a story about Sarah Bartmann.

So what is this all about?

Racism does not only imply exclusion of one race by another – it always presupposes that the exclusion is for the purposes of subjugation. Blacks have had enough experience as objects of racism not to wish to turn the tables. While it may be relevant now to talk about blacks in relation to white, we must not make this our preoccupation, for it can be a negative exercise. As we proceed further towards the achievement of our goals let us talk more about ourselves and our struggle and less about whites (Biko, 1987:97-98).

I want to show my hand in this one. I want to show you where I cut and spliced, scratched and sampled, because the original story was much longer. This is the remix.

But first, let me say how happy I am to be writing in this issue! It gives me great pleasure to be here with a contribution from the Western Cape, the province where our Pan African Congress was founded in 1959. Transnationalism lies at the heart of African politics. The boundaries of the nation state, as set by the Berlin conference of 1884, originally bore little resemblance to African realities, and bore less and less as time went on. In fact, our history of the last 40 years has done more to lend meaning to the term ‘nation’ than any pre-existing, autonomous meaning. Within the ‘development’ paradigm we practise ‘nation-building’, while at the same time we seek to reach beyond the colonial boundaries we have inherited. We affirm the nation-state with the one hand, while we undermine it with the other. It all makes sense in African post- (or is it ‘neo’-?) colonial politics. Today, with formation of the African Union, women have a better chance of achieving a strong voice in transnational matters then ever before in our post-independence history. A gendered discussion of the politics and praxis of transnationalism has never been timelier.

This article discusses a particular transnational experience from a gendered perspective. It is a story about an exile told by an exile. It is based on the premise that exiles and refugees are as central to African revolutionary experience as the most rural struggle. As more and more of Africa’s population are displaced by war and poverty, women are daily practising transnational politics out of necessity. How do you survive, resist and revolute in a country not your own? How do you struggle for freedom when your shelter, your right to work and your very citizenship in the social
network of a nation is dependent on the goodwill of the government? How do you cope with displacement and alienation while creating a meaningful life for yourself and your children? Well, exile is a very old experience in Africa. These are not new issues, and since the beginning of the slave trade, African women have found ways to solve them. The exile experience in African history has much from which we can learn.

OK. This article approaches these questions by telling a story about Sarah Bartmann which places her as a historical subject at the centre of her life. So, do you need to know a little about Sarah Bartmann then? Sarah Bartmann was a Khoekhoe woman, who was born in present-day southeastern Cape, in the Gamtoos river valley, sometime between July 1788 and May 1789. She was taken into exile in November 1809 by an Englishman named Hendrik Cezar. Cezar first tried to sell her as a freak exhibit and later, when he could not find a willing buyer, exhibited her himself. The exhibition eventually led to a court case in 1810, where ostensibly Cezar was on trial for enslaving Sarah Bartmann but where, ultimately, Sarah Bartmann's character and veracity came to be put on trial, and was condemned. The trial was accompanied by a media furore in Britain, and Sarah Bartmann became the most famous Khoekhoe of her time. The trial put an end to her exhibition in London, although she was later exhibited in the British provinces and in 1814, transferred to a new master in Paris. She became a sensation in Paris, as she had in London, and amongst other things, inspired a new fashion and a play. She was also examined by three scientists in the spring of 1815. Sarah Bartmann died shortly thereafter, late at night on New Year's Eve, 1815, or in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1816, at the age of 28.

I'm still fired up and I'm still talking about revolution' (‘Revolution’: sound track for Malcolm X, Various Artists, 1998). Revolutions must be measured against the circumstances in which they occur. So if I tell you that the post-apartheid struggle of the Khoekhoe has been to bury the bodies of our ancestors with respect, then it is possible that I need not tell you very much more about our history than this. Yes, we do have issues about land rights, sovereignty, constitutional recognition and our fair share of this country's wealth. But, the height and the depth, the breadth and the width of our oppression can be measured by the fact that we struggle to bury our dead. The remains of our ancestors have been stolen and dishonoured in museums, universities and medical schools all over the world. During the 19th and first half of the 20th century we were popular amongst white male scientists as examples of the earliest stages of human development. That this popularity deprived us of a right that those early human beings took for granted and which in fact became part of the very 'scientific' definition of humanity, namely that we buried our dead, was a wrong which is being righted only in this new millennium. And the first body which was returned to us was that of Auntie Sarah...
Bartmann. This was the first revolution. There shall be many more.

Now this article is originally a chapter out of a larger work. The original chapter was written before Sarah Bartmann’s body was returned to us and buried in her place of birth. So I have updated it a bit. In my original thesis I wrote (Abrahams, 2000:287):

...the very strong tradition of liberatory writing by the oppressed by its nature defies definition, because it strives to become other in the very moment of its being. It is always a work-in-progress. Word!

Still, before I get to it, some definitions. We’re not going to understand each other if we’re using words differently. So... colonialism. You know, my mother once said to me ‘a traumatic event is an act of violence done to you over which you have no control’. I said: ‘It sounds to me as if you have pretty much defined colonialism’. ‘Nuff said.

Dysfunction: a lack of function, an inability to form part of an organic whole, to be unable to relate lovingly to other parts and people of your world. Dysfunction is sometimes counter-functional: a pattern of behaviour which exacerbates rather than addresses the problem which caused it. Look: Bush going to war in Iraq is dysfunctional. Therapy would have been cheaper and of more benefit to him. And Iraqi children without food, arms or legs are not going to give a **** about being ‘liberated’.

Dysfunction is caused by dysjunctures. I use the plural advisedly: under colonialism, dysjunctures never come singly. In fact, another way to define colonialism is as a series of dysjunctures. First you are separated from your land. Then from your cattle. Then from your selves (as in slavery). Then from your language, your culture – well, you get it.

Revolution is here being defined as a qualitative change in structures and circumstances which cannot be undone. Auntie Sarah’s body is at one with the earth from which she was born and cannot be dug up. No scientist can ever again get a look at her body. This is a revolution.

Colonialism, dysjunctures and dysfunctions wear on the soul. So my contribution to the debate on transnationalism is that we need to accept that we are none of us, very sane. Once you’ve been colonised you are going to suffer from post-colonial stress disorder, caused by 1) the original violence of the dysjuncture; 2) the memory-triggered trauma of the violence; and 3) the fact that without healing tools we have developed dysfunctional responses to dysjunctures. For survival we mimic the emotional habits of the coloniser, embracing danger, risk, pain, anger, and the glorification of sorrow and loss. How does post-colonial stress disorder affect the way we approach the struggle? My answer is that it is not enough to be against oppression. We need to decide what we are for. What am I for? To tell this story.
The Story

Exile-Child

Blackhead, kruskop, exilechild
Like a plant growing roots
Only to be ripped up and moved
Roots torn each time
Until eventually I gave up trying to grow at all
except for the bare necessities
scarcely breathing I passed through life

I took on protective colours
Adjusting to whatever or whoever was around me
Scarcely breathing, yet I lived
Yet I love
Who is this ‘I’ who lives and loves?
It is me!
Exilechild!

Sarah Bartmann’s birth and childhood was located in a time and place characterised by violence both on the colonial frontier, and behind the frontier where bonded Khoekhoe labour was the foundation of the settler economy (Penn, 1992). It is a genocide which is horrifyingly easy to track. During this period, reports from local white military leaders in the eastern Cape of South Africa abound, detailing the number of Khoekhoe killed and taken as slaves (Moodie, 1960). The people, culture and economy which would have given rise to a free Sarah Bartmann was devastated by the onslaught of the settlers against indigenous people. As Susan Newton-King cautiously observes (1992:113):

Whether or not this slide...into a position of dependence was ‘traumatic’ is difficult to ascertain in the absence of adequate testimony, but given the intimate connection between land, people and animals in the world-view of the Khoisan, it seems likely that changes which adversely affected any one of these elements and threw them into imbalance would be experienced as stressful.

Between 1770 and 1800, everything that Auntie Sarah’s family knew and understood in the world was fundamentally changed. Her people and her culture were dysjunctured.

She survived long enough to give testimony about her experiences. Auntie Sarah’s account of her early life, as translated by a court interpreter, is as follows (interview with notary, 1810, cited in Lindfors, 1985:142):
Her father was in the habit of going with cattle from the interior to the Cape, and was killed in one of those journeys by [hunters], her mother died twenty years ago. She has a child by a Drummer in the Cape with whom she lived for about two years, being all the time in the employ of Henrick Caesar ...the child is since dead.

Three deaths in one paragraph – that is the effect of genocide on the individual life. The death of a loved one by violence is a traumatic event from which it may take years, even decades, to fully recover. The death of Auntie Sarah's father by cattle raiders must have been very difficult for her. We do not know how old she would have been at the time, but the sequence of the narrative seems to suggest a causal connection. In other words, that her father's death was followed by her mother's death, by which time Auntie Sarah, who was 22 at the time she told this story, must have been two years old. The loss of a mother at such an early age must have been deeply traumatic. We do not know who then functioned as a surrogate mother, although the same account tells of brothers and sisters, who must presumably have been older than she. It is reasonable to assume that Auntie Sarah would have been the youngest of her family. In an age when not only the settler's guns, but the settler's diseases, were busy committing genocide against the Khoekhoe, it must have taken special care to bring a girl-child to adulthood.

The death of a child is arguably the single most traumatic incident which can happen to anybody. How the child died is not told, but this death cannot have been more than two or three years before Auntie Sarah’s embarkation to Britain. How long does it take to overcome the death of a child? The answer must depend on the individual. What we do know is that in 1810, the wife of an actor observed her grieve her lost child in the midst of a performance. This was not evident to the eyewitness, who wrote (‘Diary of Mrs Charles Mathews’, cited in Altick, 1978:269):

I had observed that at the time Mr Mathews entered and found her surrounded by some of our own barbarians, the countenance of the 'Venus' exhibited the most sullen and occasionally ferocious expression; but the moment she looked into Mr Kemble's face, her own became placid and mild, – nay, she was obviously pleased; and putting her hands together, and holding them up in evident admiration, she uttered the unintelligible words 'Oh ma babba, oh ma babba'.

In 1810 then, Auntie Sarah was still grieving for her lost child. She expressed this grief in the only way she could, in the nexus of human relations available to her, during a performance for people who may have seemed sympathetic, compared to her other viewers. The geographical separation from the child’s grave, and from the family with whom she shared this deeply-felt grief, must have made it much more difficult to heal.
With regard to the collective dysjuncture of Sarah Bartmann’s people, institutionalised sexual violence against black women was so much part of the culture of the colonial Cape, that it could be considered normative. As Mentzel remarked of Cape Town in 1785 (1925:109-110):

*Boys, who through force of circumstances have to remain at home during those impressionable years between 16 and 21 more often than not commit some folly, and get entangled with a handsome slave girl belonging to the household. These affairs are not regarded as very serious... . It does not hurt the boy’s prospects, his escapade is regarded as a source of amusement, and he is dubbed a young fellow who has shown the stuff he is made of.*

Sexual violence which almost functioned as a rite of passage for young settler men, says something about the extent to which institutionalised rape was embedded in settler culture. By the 19th century, this perception was so pervasive that a court reversed a death sentence for rape passed on a white man, upon evidence being brought that the victim was not white, but in fact Khoekhoe (Scully, 1993). I cannot speak to the experience of Auntie Sarah and her family in this regard, but I can say with certainty that if this was the norm in white culture, there must have been a culture of resistance within Khoekhoe culture. Auntie Sarah would have had need of it, to confront the abuse she would experience in exile.

In her study of female slave resistance, Barbara Bush argues that, though resistance was a constant, its form varied depending on the circumstances of the slave. She demolishes the myth that domestic servants, so often assumed to be more amenable to slavery, did not resist their conditions of labour (Bush, 1995:151):

*Whip or no whip, a significant proportion of women slaves continued to risk the wrath of their white masters, most commonly by refusing to work, or by engaging in verbal abuse and insolence. ... domestic servants, who, in theory at least, led an easier and more privileged life, seldom proved contented and obedient slaves either. They too, refused to acquiesce gracefully to white authority, though the methods they used to frustrate their masters and mistresses may have been more subtle and devious.*

The subtlety and deviousness of domestic slave resistance is readily understood in the context of their circumstances. They were more likely to be women, and therefore more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Their proximity to the slave master and family meant that they were under more constant surveillance, and generally had less freedom of movement than field workers. They were also more likely to be isolated from other slaves by the nature of their work. Their weapons were the weapons of the weak, a resistance often so devious that even the nature of their actions as resistance could remain hidden. Their very survival depended on their acceptance by the slave master as passive, and survival was the prerequisite to living to resist another day. The contours of domestic slave resistance were determined by the objective conditions under which these women lived. It had to
be subversive, challenging domination but, in the event of failure to achieve change, easily
disguised as ‘laziness’, ‘stupidity’ or an excess of docility. Domestic slave resistance can be seen as
a very female form of resistance.

In order to understand Auntie Sarah’s resistance, we need to understand the choices open to her in
exile. She could have chosen to be sweetly submissive, or passionately sensual. She could have
chosen to play off her beautiful Blackness, for the material advantage she could gain. She chose
none of these things. Instead, all accounts indicate that she was a stubborn and recalcitrant slave.

Auntie Sarah was a dancer. She was almost two centuries closer than we are to the Khoekhoe
tradition of dance as vision, as ritual, and as art of the most enduring kind. Unfortunately, the
writings and illustrations of her we have available were over-determined by perceptions of her race
and gender. Nowhere have I found a reference to her art from an aesthetic point of view. Yet, as an
artist she must have been a story-teller. Her art was to communicate.

The story she told was one of resistance. Like other domestic slaves, she slacked when
she could, and protested when she could. As one spectator wrote of a performance:

*She was extremely ill, and the man insisted on her dancing, this being one of the
tricks she is forced to display. The poor creature pointed to her throat and knees
as if she felt pain in both, pleading with tears that he would not force her
compliance. He declared that she was sulky, produced a long piece of bamboo,
and shook it at her; she saw it, knew its power, and, though ill, delayed no longer
(A Constant Reader’ cited in Lindfors, 1985:136).*

As with her grief over her lost child, Auntie Sarah chose a public performance for her
testimony. The drama she enacted was one of slavery: the woman resisting, forcing the
violence which underpinned her labour to become explicit. The effort made her tired, however. She
showed her anger openly. The spectator continued (‘A Constant Reader’ cited in Lindfors, 1985:136):

*While she was playing on a rude kind of guitar, a gentleman in the room chanced to laugh:
the unhappy woman, ignorant of the cause, imagined herself the object of it, and as though
the slightest addition to the woes of sickness, servitude, and involuntary banishment from
her native land was more than she could bear; her broken spirit was aroused for a moment,
and she endeavoured to strike him with the musical instrument which she held: but the sight
of the long bamboo, the knowledge of its pain, and the fear of incurring it again, calmed her.
The master declared that she was wild as a beast.*

Auntie Sarah had made her point. If there were people walking around London fully convinced that
she was a slave, it was because she told them so. She spoke as eloquently as she could, using every
art known to her. The tactic of provoking Cezar in public, of forcing him to show his violence and making her coercion explicit, was extremely effective.

At times, she made even her silence speak for her. In a deposition before the court, Thomas Babington and Peter van Wageninge said that he put many questions to her after a performance, he being Dutch speaking, but she would not answer. Instead:

they had heard her utter several deep sighs such as would be given by someone whose mind was distressed, and they related the incident in which the curtain was drawn for a moment and the woman threatened with a beating by Cezar for not responding to his commands (TG Babington, P van Wageninge, Affidavit filed on November 26, 1810, cited in Lindfors, 1985:140).

Auntie Sarah was anything but a willing worker. It is, of course, possible that there were performances of hers where she worked willingly, of which evidence has not been preserved. Certainly the descriptions we do have make it very clear that she was pursuing an effective strategy of showing what kind of man her master was. We can see that she was a woman with self-love and considerable mental resources. Without the support of fellow slaves, in the absence of any possibility of collective resistance, she nevertheless made sure that she got her recalcitrant message across.

The very props used to stage her appearances spoke eloquently of slavery. Mr McCartney spoke of an early performance where he had found her enclosed in a cage, on a platform raised about three feet above the floor. He:

was confident, from every appearance, that she was under total restraint; but from his not being able to speak with her, could only judge from appearance. These appearances, however, were convincing. She frequently heaved deep sighs; seemed anxious and uneasy; grew sullen when ordered to play on some rude instrument of music (Deposition of the Secretary of the African Association, November 24, 1810, cited in Altick, 1978:270).

Cezar, no doubt, was trying to play on British sentiments about the African as beast, as uncontrollable, through the contrivance of the cage. Auntie Sarah challenged his control, because she took the props and subverted them into a narrative about being forced against her will to perform.

I must make the point here that I would not like my story to be confused with ‘performance’ theory. In my vernacular, ‘to perform’, means to front, to play a part not in accordance with the feelings of the heart. In speaking of Auntie Sarah the artist, and the story she has told for us, I am by no means suggesting that the feelings – the sighs, the tears and the anger – were not real. Auntie Sarah acted as she felt, and felt her story as she told it. Her life and art were one. This was the culture in which she was born, and tried to hold on to, in the midst of multiple dysjunctures. What she disguised was the spirit of this culture as resistance.
When we consider the colonial settler culture in which she had grown up, we can appreciate fully the magnitude of her strategy. For if violence against black women was institutionalised in colonial culture, it was also rendered socially invisible. Apart from the odd comment such as Mentzel’s, colonial sources have little to say on everyday violence against black women. It was a taken-for-granted part of colonial life. So if the drama that Auntie Sarah played out with Cezar forced him to lift a stick, to utter threats, or to close her cage door, it made a very strong statement about violence against black women, which British observers could not ignore. It formed an answer to the silence back home in the colonial Cape.

This was a point not missed by contemporary observers. As one ‘Humanitas’ wrote (‘Humanitas’ in The Examiner, October 28, 1810):

To prove that the slave was not brought here by force, he [Cezar] merely thinks it necessary that she should not appear in chains, or have been dragged to her present abode, uttering frantic yells of despair and horror. Was she or was she not a slave in her own country? Has she not been purchased by some mercenary and avaricious speculator to make a profit on her person? And therefore, has not a long servitude moulded and terrified her mind into an unlimited obedience to her proprietor’s commands? In a late trial, where the decision rested on the fear and restraint supposed to influence a testator in making a will, the learned judge very judiciously, and with a sound knowledge of our nature, said it was not necessary to prove fear or restraint at the precise moment of signing, but that if the testator had been generally awed and subdued by the conduct of those around him, that would sufficiently establish the fact of a biased and controlled judgement.

Auntie Sarah was making at least one Englishman think, not only about her state of slavery in the metropolis, but also about the state of Khoekhoe slavery in the colony. The longer she was allowed to perform, the more severe the danger she posed to the orderly conduct of British administration in the Cape. Her message was powerful.

If her exile weakened Auntie Sarah by separating her from the collective of blood and culture which formed the source of her strength, she nevertheless chose the strategy of resistance open to her. In London, she found a stage and an audience. She used this, to the best of her ability, to speak about the social relations she knew. Her art, and her resistance, was to make the violence embedded in these social relations visible. It was a strange dance she danced with Cezar and the stick. It was one which sought to change the circumstances of her life and times.

When we understand her life as art, and her art as a strategy of resistance, her emotions as a human being become central to my story. Did they gossip about the abolition of the slave trade in the servant’s quarters of number 225, Piccadilly? Would she have understood them, if they did? Was she aware of
the intricacies of the court case? Did her heart leap when the notaries came to speak to her, and did it fall when the question whether: 'she was an object capable of making an election; that she feels pain under the constraint from which she is at present held' didn’t come? (Justice Lord Ellenborough, cited in Morning Post, 'Law Intelligence', November 28, 1810). These are things we cannot know because the sources from Britain have a hard time seeing her as a human being with human emotions. But we can ask, or at least acknowledge, by these questions that she was human. Through communication, by telling the story of the violence in her life, she found her true humanity.

Her search for freedom did not cease after the disappointment of the court case. It is in the context of her resistance that we must see her baptism in Manchester on the seventh of December, 1811 (Kirby, 1952). It may have been Auntie Sarah's way of demonstrating that she was capable of election, that is, that she possessed the intelligence and the ability to make a choice. As Elizabeth Elbourne remarks (1996:16):

*Khoi people were rarely admitted to baptism in southern Africa, since Christianity was widely identified with a white skin, and baptism posed legal problems, theoretically compelling judges to give equal weight to Khoi and white testimony in court, and removing an informal bar to Khoi land ownership.*

Baptism in a Christian church, then, was an act of profound political significance. It was a claim to racial equality and an assertion of humanity on the part of the Khoekhoe. As Reverend Witbooi explains, baptism also could provide a spiritual answer for dispossessed Khoekhoe, seeking a firm basis of faith in a changed world. The idea of a rite of passage through water was by no means foreign to Khoekhoe culture, but on the contrary a familiar way of coping with changes in their state of being (Witbooi, 1983:107):

*Separated as they were and uprooted from their places of abode ... the whole fabric of their lives had to undergo change. ... Thus the first steps of the rites of passage occurred – separation from the known, the traditional. In the traditional understanding they had become !nau. In order to be aggregated into the new society, an officiating person was needed to help in the process of transition. None of the former officiating persons was able to help in the process of transition, because all those separated were !nau.*

Baptism by a Christian was then understood by some Khoekhoe, conceiving of their new society in traditional terms, as a way of moving into the future with rites appropriate to the past. The passage through water offered healing for the soul and spirit to deal with the challenges of an unknown world. Auntie Sarah's baptism, seen through the lens of her culture of birth, can be read as seeking peace with the past, and independence in the present.

Indeed, this would not have been the first time a Khoekhoe woman in London had used the church...
as a platform for resistance. Mary van Rooy, who visited London in 1803 together with two Khoekhoe men, preached as follows:

*She trust there be many here, who have pity for themselves, and for others, compassion for own soul, and soul of others; but wish it was all, but perhaps it was not all; perhaps some here have not compassion on own soul. O that they would take counsel of this poor Hottentot ... . Tell to them that no people go to Christ! But Christ save them, when they like to be saved. That Christ never say 'I won't save them'!* (cited in Elbourne, 1996:10).

That Mary van Rooy did not use the opportunity to thank the listeners for their missionary efforts in Africa, but instead besought them to take care of their own souls, was certainly subversive. What I understand to be her text – that only by grace through faith are we saved – must have been calculated to disturb the tranquillity of a missionary society dedicated to doing good works in heathen lands. As Elbourne remarks (1996:10):

>This certainly constituted unconventional preaching, even if Mary van Rooy was not in a position of authority. For a Khoi person to suggest to a white audience that they might not be saved was a considerable inversion of southern African racial and religious politics. In a period in which female preaching was controversial, if not unheard of among the more radical dissenting sects, it was also unusual for a woman to testify.

The missionary churches in South Africa set out to enslave the minds of the Khoekhoe. And like all slaves, the Khoekhoe set out to subvert the dominant narrative. I wonder if Auntie Sarah knew, or had heard of Mary van Rooy who, like herself, came from the eastern Cape.

I must hope that she found peace of the soul, because the baptism certainly did nothing to remove Auntie Sarah from Cezar’s power. Indeed, the next few years must have been hard for her, as she went from provincial parlour to provincial parlour. At last the seemingly insatiable British curiosity about her ceased to make Cezar money, and she was able to get away from him. In September 1814, she was taken to France. In France, however, her chances of resistance were smaller. She now had to learn a new language and a new culture. In all her misery, Cezar was her last surviving link with home, now severed. Auntie Sarah experienced a new dysjuncture added over the old. The land to which she was going was engulfed in the Napoleonic post-revolution backlash which included, amongst other things, a complete reversal of ideas on the universal rights of humans to freedom and equality. The political climate she was to find around slavery was far more conservative than in Britain. Auntie Sarah was sold to her new master Reaux for an undisclosed sum, and the French did not scruple to call him her ‘keeper’. The fact that he was a showman of wild animals merely added to the irony (Kirby, 1949).
It was in Paris that Auntie Sarah was to meet, and overcome, her greatest challenge, for it was there that three French scientists made an arrangement with Reaux to examine her body in the spring of 1815. They had also arranged for an illustrator to be there. Did Auntie Sarah know that this was to be more than a casual performance? How soon after their demands became clear to her did she feel threatened? What we do know is that her actions demonstrated the strongest possible objections to being undressed and examined. Londa Schiebinger gives a description from one of the men who was present (1993:170):

According to de Blainville, the men...had great difficulty convincing Sarah (de Blainville adopted this familiar address) to let herself be seen nude. It was only with 'great sorrow' that she let drop for a moment the handkerchief with which she had been covering her genitals. She took a particular dislike to de Blainville because, he supposed, he came too near her, 'tormenting' her to get material for his description. At one point, he offered her money, knowing how much she liked it, hoping in this way to render her more docile, but she refused to take it. In the end, despite their efforts, no man of science managed to get a good look at Bartmann's genitalia.

What should we read from Auntie Sarah's actions? An expectation of respect. Auntie Sarah stated, with the greatest possible clarity, that she did not wish her bodily parts to be the subject of public scrutiny, not for money, for enjoyment, or for the 'logic' of science. If she had ceased to try for freedom, she had not ceased the struggle to set limits to her conditions of servitude. We can appreciate the immensity of her demand, both then and now, for not one of the men who have observed her seems to have heard her message. Her struggle was 185 years before its time.

Auntie Sarah said what she had to say. It is for us to listen. Each artist requires an audience, and each work of art is a conversation. Auntie Sarah was successful in getting her message out, even through the pen of one of her antagonists. Yet I shall not call her resistance successful until she has been listened to.

It must have required enormous spiritual resources to keep up the fight during the three days for which the examination lasted. How did she eat or sleep during the days she fought off these men, each larger and more well-fed than she? It was well that Auntie Sarah had taken the time to walk the passage under water, to finally make peace with herself and accept that the life she had had at home was gone forever. It was well that she had taken the time, alone under the water with her Spirit, to dedicate herself fully to the new life she had to lead. De Blainville surely underplays the violence which took place. What brought on her 'great sorrow'? I suspect that there is more to be told than meets the eye, for if de Blainville chose to underplay the incident, Cuvier chose to pretend it did not happen (Cuvier, 1817:264):
In the spring of 1815, having been driven to the Jardin du Roi, she agreed to undress and be painted naked.

Yet de Blainville's description does not sound like agreement. It sounds like Khoekhoe resistance.

If Auntie Sarah could resist, there are none of us so alone, so isolated, or so traumatised that we cannot resist. Her story teaches us to keep trying, even when we fail at first, at second and even at third try. That she succeeded in getting her message across, through time and space and by the hands of strangers, was surely a great achievement. The artist who is silenced cannot live. By living, Auntie Sarah created the story I have to tell. Given the constraints under which she had to practise her art, the negation and silencing of her self-hood which she overcame, her speech deserves due honour, love and respect.

The survival wisdom I draw from her story is that for resistance to be successful – for resistance to become revolution – it has to be collective. Auntie Sarah was determined to assert her sense of self. She could not be stopped. Probably she spoke much more than is recorded here, and as research continues into her life and times we shall no doubt be able to piece together much more of her message. But her speaking was only half of her art. It is for us who have ears with which to hear to fulfill her story, to find our voices and speak of her out loud. Only when Auntie Sarah's message has been heard over mountain, land and sea, only when no one can ignore what I understand to be her cry: 'RESPECT ME, BLACK WOMAN!', will her story be complete.

Conclusion: So where to from here?

For what it is worth, my theory about what those observers saw in Auntie Sarah was her pride. Like the ostrich it came behind her as she walked, her pride, indomitable. And the white men looked and they looked, but their eyes could not recognise pride in a Black woman, so all they decided to see was a body. Still, for three days in the garden of kings the white men tasted of her spirit: indomitable.

She is home now, and buried on August 9, 2002, with due honours and respect. We heard her. All we have got to do now is make sure the world gets the message.

I promised to sample. Here's some of what the sisters wrote:

**Respect**

*I fought so hard
I'm still not free
this time I'm fighting for me* (Vanessa Ludwig).
I have come to take you home

I have come to take you home
Where the ancient mountains shout your name
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill
Your blankets are covered in buchu and mint
The proteas stand in yellow and white –
I have come to take you home
Where I will sing for you
For you have brought me peace (Dianna Ferrus)

Revolution (3)

The exile is ons (home)
She who was violated is at škhib (peace)
She who was broken is reunited with the whole
AROAS! (coming home)
The circle is turning (Yvette Abrahams)

Ubuntu

We all are the messengers
of God.
We all are the bringers of
light.

Find the message within.
Find the light within (Thandisa Nkonyeni)

References

Article

Mentzel O (1925) A Complete and Authentic Geographical and Topographical Description of the Famous and (All Things Considered) Remarkable African Cape of Good Hope, II, Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.

Notes
1. You can find the full original version in Abrahams Y (2000) or at: http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/yvette.html
3. Lindfors’ translation gives ‘Bosmen’ as the people who killed Sarah Bartmann’s father, while the same word is translated in the Morning Post, ‘Law Intelligence’, November 29, 1810, as ‘Jagay’ ie ‘jager’ (hunter). It was a well-known habit of the settlers to blame everything, from murder to stock theft, on the Khoekhoe guerrillas who referred to themselves as Soanqua. I have accordingly translated the word as ‘hunter’, since this is the literal truth. Whoever shot the father was a hunter of cattle, and obviously of men.
4. ‘Baba’ is Afrikaans for ‘baby’.
5. Mary van Rooy was a Khoekhoe woman who was one of the earliest converts to Christianity. She was brought to London by the London Missionary Society to demonstrate their work in the Cape Colony.
7. Dianna Ferrus, extract from I Have Come to Take You Home, dedicated to Sarah Bartmann, Holland, 1998. Buchu is an indigenous medicinal plant. Mint, likewise. Protea is a local flower.

Dr Yvette Abrahams is project manager for the “Herstory”: The Return of Sarah Bartmann project at the UWC Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape. She has been active in the Black Consciousness Movement of Azaria since 1984, working in community development with a specific focus on arts and culture. As an academic she researches and writes on indigenous women’s studies. Personally, she practices zero tolerance for racism, sexism and homophobia.