

Libyan Sibyl, The Foremost of Noble Ladies, The Black Witch of Salem, The Venus Hottentot, The Specimen, The Libyan Sibyl, The Foremost of Noble Ladies, The Black Witch of Salem, The Venus Hottentot, The Specimen

**FORGOTTEN AND
MISREMEMBERED
BLACK WOMEN**
A Series of Critical
Biographies and Sonnets
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The Foremost of Noble Ladies, The Libyan Sibyl, The Black Witch of Salem, The Venus Hottentot, The Specimen, The Libyan Sibyl, The Foremost of Noble Ladies, The Black Witch of Salem, The Venus Hottentot, The Specimen

Foreword

“Now my heart turns this way and that, as I think what the people will say -- those who shall see my monuments in years to come and who shall speak of what I have done.”¹

These words were inscribed on an obelisk crafted by King Hatshepsut more than two thousand years ago. But after its inscription, almost no person would see much of the King’s statuary for millennia. Instead, they would lay buried and discarded at the bottom of a pit hidden in the great temple complex of Deir el-Bahri.² Why was this king neglected above all others? Historians still wonder, but many agree the most likely reason was her gender.

The American Psychological Association discussed Black women’s omission in social justice movements as an “intersection invisibility.”³ I would argue that intersectional invisibility progresses beyond social justice movements and into our shared history. This series of essays and sonnets is an exploration of five forgotten and misremembered Black women. Five starkly different Black women of different social classes, originating from different areas around the world-- all flattened by modern history’s narrative. This project is an attempt to unfold their stories, to think critically about what is known regarding the lives of these women, to re-remember them, and to honor them.

¹ Wilson, Elizabeth B. “The Queen Who Would Be King | History.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2006,

² Wilson, Elizabeth B. “The Queen Who Would Be King | History.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2006,

³ Coles, Stewart M., and Josh Pasek. “Black women often ignored by social justice movements.” *American Psychological Association*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/07/black-women-social-justice>. Accessed 5 December 2023.

King Hatshepsut



Photo Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

King Hatshepsut

Who was Hatshepsut? Daughter of King Thutmose I and Queen Ahmose, Hatshepsut lived in the beginning of the New Kingdom era of Egypt in the mid-1400s BCE (National Museum of Egyptian Civilization). When she was young she married her half-brother Thutmose II, who soon became King of Egypt for a short time. When he passed away early in his life, he had no children with Hatshepsut. Instead, the only legitimate heir to the Egyptian throne, Thutmose III, was with a minor wife, Iset. With Thutmose III being too young to rule, Hatshepsut served as his regent, ruling in his stead (NMEC).

A Queen taking over for her son while he grew of age was understood during the time (Wilson). Hatshepsut, however, soon proclaimed herself not just regent-- but Pharaoh (NMEC). Hatshepsut had arguably a purer connection to the royal bloodline, being born directly from a King and Great Queen. With none challenging her, she became King of Egypt (NMEC). To legitimize herself further, she commissioned works of art on the walls of her mortuary temple, Dier El-Bahari, which depicted her conception as the God Amun-Re sleeping with her mother Queen Ahmose one night (NMEC). These works also heralded her new name, Maatkare, Maat meaning truth, Ka referring to the soul, and Re referencing the sun God (Wilson).

Hatshepsut became arguably one of the most successful female pharaohs in Egypt's history. She commissioned building projects like the Red Chapel in Karnak, a series of obelisks (some over one hundred feet tall), along with statues and reliefs (Wilson). In her statues she depicted herself rarely as a woman. Instead, her depictions were symbolic, often featuring a fake beard, a masculine wrap, and a flat chest. Notably, her large eyes and slender nose featured in many statues may have served as a nod to her femininity, while those other aforementioned characteristics stood as an affirmation of her ability to don the masculine and serve as King (Hillard & Wurtzel).

On top of these building projects, through her reign, she re-established a relationship with the Land of Punt, making it a strong trading partner (NMEC). She ruled for about twenty-two years before passing away and making room for the now-adult Thutmose III (NMEC). Her death had previously been widely debated. Could foul play have a hand in her death, especially as the young Thutmose III grew quickly and eagerly of age (NMEC)? After some research, the most likely culprit to her death revealed itself to be her skin cream, crafted with materials now known to be carcinogenic when applied, like benzopyrene (Levitz).

How then did one of Egypt's most powerful women become nearly forgotten in history? Nearly twenty years after Hatshepsut's death, many of her statues, reliefs, and commissioned art were attacked, damaged, and destroyed, most likely by her stepson Thutmose III (Laporta). Damage to statues of Hatshepsut was specific: the Euraus cobra meant to protect the King from enemies was knocked off. Along with it, the striped nemes

headdress, the beard-- all symbols representing royal legitimacy were smashed. Finally, the nose of a statue, its face, or even its entire head would be destroyed. This iconoclasm didn't just seek to scrub away evidence of Hatshepsut's existence, it was also a way to destroy Hatshepsut's spiritual power and legitimacy. In the religion of Ancient Egypt, many believed that a statue or relief could be activated through ritual to host the spirit of the one depicted. The destruction of the head and face was an attempt to suffocate the spirit itself (Pulitzer Art Foundation). The name Hatshepsut, encased in ornamental cartouches, was also targeted, while her other name, Maatkare on the other hand was mostly spared seemingly because of the inclusion of a God's name in her own, which made destroying it a potential act of heresy (Laporta). Scholars like Virginia Laporta theorize that Hatshepsut may have been erased to strengthen Thutmose III's legitimacy as a capable King, as to Thutmose III, the time where Hatshepsut ruled may have come to symbolize a period of vulnerability when he was a child and therefore unable to rule. Without Hatshepsut, Thutmose III would be portrayed as the soul King of Egypt, never needing a regent or helper (Laporta). This attack on Hatshepsut's statues, her name, and her status, effectively erased her from modern history for over three thousand years.

In 1927, Herbert Winlock discovered a pit in the Deir el-Bahri mortuary temple which held the broken pieces of her statue (Wilson). Without this discovery, Hatshepsut may never have been known. Now, her pieces stand on display in museums like the Metropolitan of Art in New York City. There is a struggle, however, in how to depict the status of statues and reliefs featuring Hatshepsut. Should her statues be fully restored, or should they instead remain broken or incomplete as a stark reminder of the attempted erasure of this ancient King (Heywood & Serotta)?

To the Ancient Egyptians, pharaohs were like Gods, to be treated with the utmost reverence and respect (Wilson). Restoring that respect for Hatshepsut lies in telling her story. A middle ground must be struck between restoring some statues to their original glory and highlighting the wrong done to Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut was wronged, and her legacy was nearly erased from history. Her impact, however, on the people she ruled over during her time remains. Now in the present, Hatshepsut can be re-remembered as a fountain of strength, of strong leadership, of confidence in her gender and authority.

Dignity

Hatshepsut watches you pay for the cup of coffee
three dollars more than you had thought. Raises her eyebrows as you
wrestle with the tip. Balance the eight-ounce between your hands
and drink quickly before the cold cuts through.

When your lip curves from bitterness, the hot dark fantasy
slipping away, alone in your apartment, she'll think of waste.

Of your half-written message, short like vanilla splits,
of the mess you've made of your room, the overpiled laundry
Which, through carelessness, you could fall

Like a carved, dormant stone, into. Surrounded by pieces
Of yourself, a black dress, a red sweater, white panties, some
sheddings you've abandoned without your body to prop them up.

Get up and get to work. Go building. Use granite
Upon shattering, be the most stubborn grains of sand.

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Sojourner Truth



Photo courtesy of University Archives

Sojourner Truth

Who was Sojourner Truth? Born in the very late 1790s as Isabella Van Wagner, and reborn on June 1st, 1843 on the Pentecost— Sojourner Truth was a powerful speaker during the abolitionist period. Like many women of color of the time, she never learned to read or write (Painter). The only piece of written history she's left behind is her signature, recorded twice, once nearly illegible, the second time simply an "X". "Her mark" is jotted in between the two lines by some literate assistant who knew her at that time. In today's age, this signature, along with her photo, sold for \$20,000. (University Archives). Historians cling desperately to her signature as her singular self-published, self-transcribed proof of existence. Her lack of writing, however, did not mean she never existed. Truth moved across the United States and spoke. To a deeply religious woman being renamed Sojourner Truth on the Pentecost was important, as Christian doctrine marks this date as one where Jesus and his disciples received the Holy Spirit (Painter). Imbued with this symbolic power, Sojourner Truth preached as well. Broadly historians will say she spoke on "women's rights", or "abolitionists' causes." The topics of all of her sermons, however, may never be recovered.

The most steadfast abolitionists of the 1800s spoke of her influence, from Frederick Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe. "Tall," "wise," and "witty," all emerge as common descriptors. Stowe referred to her famously as "The Libyan Sibyl"— despite Sojourner Truth having been born in New York (Stowe).

Mistellings lay at the heart of what is now Sojourner Truth's story. Being written down is one of the clearest ways one could prove their existence and legitimacy in the Western world. Any idea worth sharing was documented in books and pamphlets. Sojourner Truth preached, and took no record of what she spoke, as she was illiterate. Despite this, the life and times of Sojourner Truth were dutifully— desperately written about. Her biographical narrative, aptly named *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, Northern Slave*, was recorded by a troop of white authors and included a section titled "Certificates of Character.", in which the authors and editors swear on their close connection to Truth. Attempts to record these speeches were made. Her most famous speech, delivered on May 29th, 1851 for the Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, "Ain't I a Woman", was recorded twice. The first was by Marius Robinson, who published his transcription in June of 1851, and then again months later by Francis Gage. Of the two contrasting speeches, the most inaccurate Gage version became the most popularized (The Sojourner Truth Project).

The difference is clearest in the first line of her recorded speech.

In the Robinson version, it reads, "May I say a few words? I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights." Gage's counterpart of the same first line reads, "Well, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o'kilter. I tink dat, 'twixt

de niggers of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon.”

To compare these versions to night and day would be an understatement. In Gage’s words, Truth’s speech— and the heart of her message— was co-opted by racist phoneticism, and fantasies about Truth as an uneducated, unpolished, Negro woman. This misremembrance works to excuse a larger stereotype that puts black people and black voices in the backseat of the abolitionist movement, painting them as spirited but unrefined. Sojourner Truth’s written voice was colonized, and *Ain’t I A Woman* (or in Gage’s version, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*) was published for decades afterward.

How do we honor the voice and legacy of someone who we’ll never hear from directly? The truth is that even the supposedly most accurate *Ain’t I A Woman* speech is currently unverifiable. Sojourner Truth spoke, and her words impacted the ears of those who heard her— great minds and ordinary people alike. Her impact was both profound and firm within her present. Truth wove herself and her ideas into the abolitionist-era conversation without ever having to write a letter about her ideas. She was among the first to bring an intersectional perspective into the abolitionist conversation.

After his trip to the Northampton Association, Frederick Douglass wrote of Sojourner Truth, “She did not need to read in order to know,”(Painter). Her first-hand knowledge of life as an enslaved person, her unique voice and personality, and above all her wisdom, propelled her ideas forward in the abolitionist movement. That, above all else, must be remembered. There are some, like the Sojourner Truth project, who work to draw the contradictions in both versions of Sojourner Truth’s famous “*Ain’t I A Woman?*” speech into the public eye. Supporting organizations like the Sojourner Truth Project, and countering the Gage narrative when presented with it are ways that we can shape our present when considering Truth. Most of all, when thinking of Sojourner Truth, we can think of the effect her words had on the people with the privilege to hear them ripple. We can think of the way the consequences of her words ripple to this day, and are felt in permeating and unquantifiable ways.

Speak This:

When you think of Sojourner, think only of air.
Of its ability to free space. Think of molecules squeezed
Together to make room for her voice. Each syllable temporary,
In Akron, each syllable history slipping away.
See those scribbled approximations and picture her power
Passing through curled fingers like cupping water.
The headiness of a voice and a tone unbound
Between lines become stuttered with apostrophes
Do you really think Truth ever stuttered? Mythful Sojourner?
The sibyl sitting somewhere far away like that memory
You have of a childhood friend moved cross-country, leaving
Only echoes, a little photo, a faded signature. Savor these. Speak this:
When your mother's uncle passes unexpectedly listen and find
Truth flowing through Black ears bent to Black bibles.

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Tituba



Photo Courtesy of Smithsonian Magazine

Tituba

Who was Tituba? Born in the late 1600s, Tituba was an enslaved person best known for the infamous Salem Witch Trials, where she served as the first accused woman to admit to the practice of witchcraft (Smithsonian Magazine). The majority of found records documenting Tituba's existence are linked with the story of Salem, making it nearly impossible to detach the truth of her life from fantasy and fiction.

The first major misunderstanding of Tituba lies in her identity. Most people associate Tituba with an older black woman (Rosenthal). This association stems from stories inspired by the events in Salem. One of the earliest creative adaptations of the Salem Witch Trials came from the film *The Maid of Salem*, where Madame Sul-Te-Wan, a Black woman, played Tituba in one of the few credited roles of her career (Shields). In arguably the most famous creative adaptation of the historical events of the Salem Witch Trials, Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, describes Tituba in the first act,

“The door opens, and his Negro slave enters. Tituba is in her forties. Parris brought her with him from Barbados, where he spent some years as a merchant before entering the ministry. She enters as one does who can no longer bear to be barred from the sight of her beloved, but she is also very frightened because her slave sense has warned her that, as always, trouble in this house eventually lands on her back. (Miller, 8).

The Crucible casts the now popular visage of Tituba as a black woman in her forties, who is in many ways pitiable. His mention of her “slave sense” typecast the character as little more than an enslaved person, frightened and ignorant to any consequences that span outside of her realm—the home. The 1996 film adaptation of the same name followed suit in Tituba's physical description, casting Charlayne Woodard, a Black woman in her mid-forties at the time. On-stage plays from the high-school level to professional acts from the National Theater all perpetuated this idea of Tituba being an African-American. The truth is less simple.

In the late 1600s, Reverend Samuel Parris purchased Tituba from Barbados. During this time, Barbados was a hub for the slave trade. Many enslaved people bought in this area originated from the Arawak community in South America. In the few documents featuring Tituba during the Salem Witch Trials, many refer to her as “an Indian.” Although it is likely Tituba was originally an indigenous Arawak woman, it's also possible that she was born in Barbados, or had mixed ancestry, being both indigenous South American and Caribbean. (Breslaw). Tituba's racial makeup isn't the only point of contention surrounding her identity. Tituba's age is debated throughout the scholarly community, as researchers at the University of Missouri-Kansas City posit Tituba was most likely between twelve and seventeen years old when being purchased, nowhere near her forties as *The Crucible* often portrays her. Her cultural background might speak to someone raised in both indigenous

South American, Afro-Caribbean, and white spaces. The University of Wisconsin furthers this idea, suggesting that Tituba could have been seen as dually African and Indigenous in Salem, as her cultural background may have spoken to someone raised in both indigenous South American, Afro-Caribbean, and white spaces (Curley, et al.).

If historical documents point to Tituba being a native Arawak girl, why was Tituba changed from Indian to Negro in Miller's play? Some scholars blame cultural fears based on racism regarding magic and witches, the stereotype for which shifted over time from native religions to hoodoo and vodou—from Indians to Negroes. Her appearance in Miller's *Crucible*, as a black woman solidified this fundamental misunderstanding of Tituba in modern media (Rosenthal).

The story of the Salem Witch Trials goes that after Betty Parris fell ill, Tituba created a "witch cake" made of Betty's urine and rye, feeding it to the family's dog as a counter-spell to locate the person who bewitched Betty. Tituba is accused of witchcraft along with Sarah Good and Sarah Osbourne. Of the three women, she is the only one who "admits" her guilt. Her admission did not come easily, however, as Samuel Parris reportedly beat her until she confessed. Her words are documented in a legal examination on March 1st, 1691 (Mintz). In them she speaks of the Devil, who "...came to me and bid me serve him." (Records Of Salem Witchcraft). She spoke of animals in the night, of rats with red eyes, of a man with a yellow bird, and a woman with wings. All these animals were the Devil in different forms, or people in a contract with him. She ends her testimony with blindness overtaking her. (Records Of Salem Witchcraft).

Most stories of Salem shift from Tituba at this point and focus on the next accused, and the panic which spreads across the town. Tituba was thrown in prison and remained there for fifteen months, through the course of the Trials. In 1693, she was put back on trial for witchcraft. The jury, however, declined to indict her. Her bail was paid, but no record remains as to by whom. Where Tituba went and what became of her is currently lost to time (Smithsonian Magazine). Her role in history is confined to her role in the trials when madness took over the streets of Salem.

Tituba was the first woman to come forward as a witch. Her admission, though forced, still had an impact that spread throughout Salem and neighboring towns. More than two hundred people were accused of witchcraft, and twenty died for their supposed crimes (Blumberg). Tituba's forced confession was arguably the beginning of the true frenzy—she made the magic and the witchcraft real. In *The Crucible*, Tituba is often seen as a victim. At this moment, however, Tituba had the power to cast a spell over a town. White citizens, both women and men died from this madness. But there are no records that Tituba was ever hanged.

Tituba is more than just a player in the Salem Witch Trials. Her story has become synonymous with the American idea of witches. It was Tituba who referenced the idea of

witches “riding on stickes”, of black animals with red and yellow eyes like those we might associate with witches, and of devil worship (Records Of Salem Witchcraft). How can a person fundamentally influence the way we as a society think of a concept as broad as witches and, at the same time, be so poorly documented that few scholars can with one hundred percent confidence declare her racial make-up, let alone her age or beliefs.

When the madness of Salem subsided, documentation of Tituba disappeared. Her person was documented only when it was relevant to the white people around her. Years later, the stories we have that speak of Tituba describe her so inaccurately the only thing the character Tituba and the real person shared is a name. The real Tituba and the one created through stories are now separate beings. Many of the stories inspired by the Salem Witch Trials do make clear that Tituba, like most people during the trials, was under extreme duress. She more than anyone was at risk of corporal punishment and even death. Moving forward, how can one think about Tituba historically, and without a white-centric focus? Novels like *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé are on the right track. They seek to offer the story of Salem from what could've been her perspective and understand the story from a Black point of view (Mudimbé-Boyi). While previous constructions of Tituba, Miller's in particular, frame her as a frightened, passive enslaved woman, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* embraces Tituba's power. One can see this even in the way the novel's title is written, with an exclamatory, “I!” at the beginning. Tituba was an enslaved person forced to confess to witchcraft—and at the same time she was a person whose confession marked the beginning of one of the most famous witch trials in history. In this way, Tituba can be a victim and at the same time incredibly powerful.

It is worth wondering whether or not Tituba belongs in a book dedicated to documenting and clarifying the lives and legacies of black women. After all, it's incredibly likely Tituba simply wasn't racially black. Her experience as a woman throughout history fits snugly, however, with those discussed through the course of these essays. Here is a person who was enslaved, an experience often linked with black struggle. Tituba's historical documentation begins and ends as it is relevant to the dealings of white people. The experiences of the black women portrayed within these pages are marked by an inability to control their own story, a disconnection from their true selves and the way history portrayed them, and a fundamental misunderstanding by white history of what made these women important and worthy of respect. Although Tituba likely is not black, her struggles are uniquely so, and she is in good company.

When we remember the story of the Salem Witch Trials, remember Tituba's role in a historical context. Remember her status as an enslaved person, remember her young age. Remember the careless way she was documented, think of the things we may never learn. But also remember her power. Remember how her words sent Salem into a frenzy. Challenge stories that feature black people as tools, servants, and scapegoats.

Tituba Curse

Cast darkness and decay. Cast great raging fires,
invisible gas, which leaks and kills, breaks
from ovens and the bubbling excess of labor: supper.
Steam billowing out from lumped stew: poison.
Tituba, pull belladonna! Plagues and pockmarks: power.
Like the winged woman, the dog, the devil
with a yellow bird she saw perched on his shoulder.
Her fingers are fit for dirty work.

Her fingers? Fit for dirty work? Born from
The Andes, blessed by Barbados, student-aged,
enslaved. Speaking only to survive. Stole into the night
Unhanged. Caught like an ache in a new continent.

When casting, define Tituba first. The Black Witch, the
Indian, the missing, the gone.

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Harriet Cole

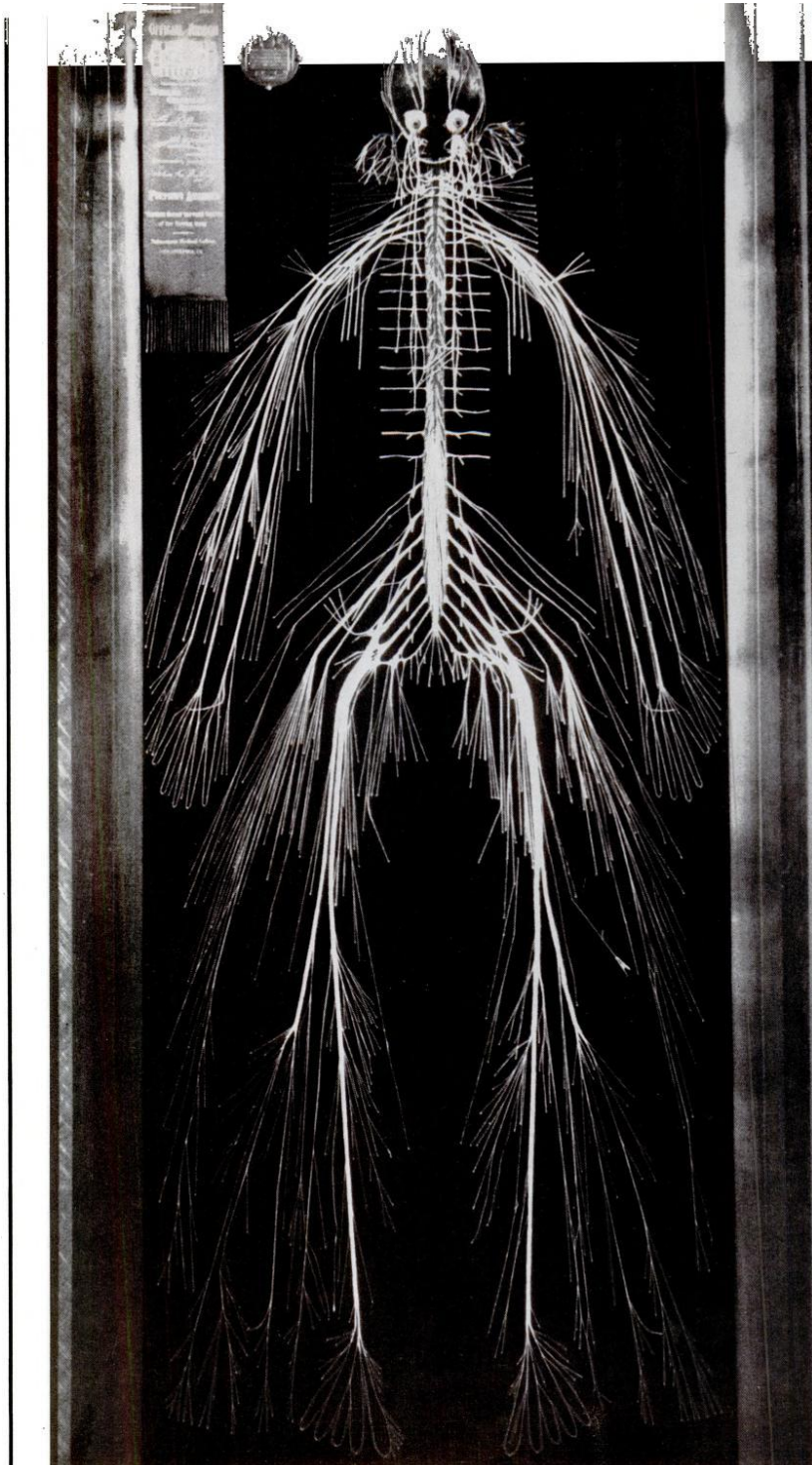


Image courtesy of LIFE Magazine, February 8th, 1960 Edition, "Harriet's Celebrated Show of Nerves."

Harriet Cole

Who was Harriet Cole? Like many working-class people alive in the United States in the mid-to-late 1800's, few records remain of their existence. We know a woman named Harriet Cole lived in Philadelphia, and that compelling evidence points to her being a janitor at Hahnemann Medical College at Drexel University. There's no record of parents, partners, or children (McNaughton). Harriet Cole would have been a normal black woman of her time if not for the scientific study and display of her body.

Stories of how Harriet Cole's body came to hang at Hahnemann Medical College differ from source to source. The story Dr. Rufus Weaver, her operator, eagerly told is one of a curious, working-class colored woman who gave her body to science after succumbing to tuberculosis (LIFE Magazine). The date of her death and collection was March 2nd, 1888, a date more well-documented than her birth. Her date of "burial" was recorded as September 19, 1888, at Hahnemann Medical College. In that month, Dr. Rufus Weaver succeeded in completely dissecting Harriet Cole's nervous system, painting each delicate nerve white and pinning them individually onto a blackboard. Dr. Weaver stuffed Cole's brain with hair and administered a hardening agent to her eyeballs to keep them presentable (Lawrence and Lederer). The work took five months— 900 hours— reported Dr. Rufus Weaver (Drexel University Legacy Center).

"The specimen", Harriet, amazed scientists. Her new form was shared across the country (LIFE Magazine). The February edition of the 1889 Hahnemannian Monthly marked one of Harriet's first published appearances. There she was referred to only as "Cerebro-Spinal Nervous System." "Harriet" was later featured in the February 8th, 1960 edition of LIFE, eyes un-lidded and staring through the full-page splash. In July 2012, she was dubbed in an essay by a Drexel University professor, "Drexel's Longest Serving Employee." "As she swept the floors in the medical labs after hours," Professor Clark wrote, "it's unlikely Harriet Cole knew she'd one day be an icon." Harriet Cole's body is still on display to this day.

There are no pictures of Harriet Cole as she was before her death, before the operation— before exploitation. Doctors attempted to detach Harriet Cole's identity as a woman and as a black person to make her a better scientific specimen. Now, Harriet Cole's story is used to inform conversations at Drexel University revolving "ethical stewardship and responsible public display of human remains." (Drexel University Legacy Center). The continued display of Harriet Cole is anything but ethical. Her name is now linked with her corpse. As long as she remains on display, it is impossible to respectfully and accurately remember Harriet Cole outside of tragedy.

It's difficult to think of Harriet Cole without thinking of Sara Baartman. They were similarly dehumanized and presented for scientific study and general display. Genuine mourning, burial, and remembrance is the key to putting the spirit and story of Harriet

Cole to rest. To put the spirit to rest, however, the body must be buried first. True remembrance is impossible without scientists parting from “the specimen”, all 900 hours of work and decades of study focused on one woman, sometimes named, poorly documented in life, and dubiously ‘obtained’ in death. Harriet Cole’s continued display is a clear violation of her memory, and a breach of the dignity all people deserve in death. In this age of technology, high quality photographs can be taken of Cole’s body for research purposes. Why not give her the privacy of a funeral and burial?

The government of France released Sara Baartman’s body in 2002 (Maseko, 2002). Drexel University is capable of the same. To proceed forward, to remember, and to mourn, Harriet Cole’s body must be buried.

I Met Harriet Cole at the Park This Weekend

After: I Saw Emmett Till This Week at the Grocery Store

On a Saturday, by chance, before work,
Pressing a free finger down on the water fountain
I saw her reflection sparkle in the gush
Morphed naturally, her eyes closed as she leaned to drink
Cool clean water. Her purse was filled with pink apples and chapstick
And money. And each round bite was crisp and worth sharing.
I said to her, *I wish we hadn't met. I wish you earth instead.*
Wish you silence, wish you soil, wish your soul gone elsewhere,
Upward. And wish we, both of us, learned nothing of
lead paint, of embalming techniques, of keeping wet specimen.
But since we have. Since you're here, bite hard into the fullness of fruit
And tell me again about that job you quit decades ago.
How you took your last wages in your fist and walked the whole
Hidden path home. Fading like sugar in a full dark cup.

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Sara Baartman



Photo courtesy of UNESCO

Sara Baartman

Who was Sara Baartman? Sara Baartman was born in the late 1790s near the Gamtoos River to the nomadic Khoikhoi community of South Africa. The Khoikhoi faced near-constant conflict with Dutch colonialists, and Sara Baartman was eventually sold into slavery when she was sixteen years old. Bought by brothers Hendrick and Peter Cesare, she was supposedly offered a bright future abroad in Europe (South African History Online).

Sara Baartman's autonomy at this moment is historically debated. The Cesares claimed that Baartman went to Europe willingly, with full knowledge of her contract. It is difficult to ignore, however, how her servitude to the men, along with potential language barriers may have affected her understanding of the trip. In June of 1810, Sara Baartman landed with Peter Cesare in England (Sara Baartman Centre). The nation had abolished the slave trade just four years before her arrival (Maseko, 1998).

Scholars have claimed that Sara Baartman "suffered" from a condition known as steatopygia, which is characterized by an excess of fat in the buttocks (Ersek). How Sara Baartman's body stored fat was, however, normal when compared to the Khoikhoi women she lived with before (Maseko, 1998). Sara Baartman's body type can be seen today in Africans and African Americans. The "abnormality" became present only when comparing Sara Baartman's body to that of a white one. Despite these modern insights, Sara Baartman still became one of the most popular freak show "exhibitions" in Britain (Maseko, 1998).

Zola Maseko's documentary, *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* noted the many injustices Sara Baartman endured while performing in Britain. Customers paid to gawk at Sara Baartman and poke her with sticks. Along with her buttocks, people sought to view her vagina. Sara Baartman had an elongated labia, which refers to a labia that hangs outside of the vulva, another aspect of the body that can be common in Khoikhoi women, among other African women. reported that she wore little to nothing, even in the winter. Other accounts noted her hesitancy to "perform", to expose herself, or dance (Maseko, 1998).

White allies wrote to condemn the "show". They expressed concerns over Sara Baartman, the nature of her contract, her true freedom, and her autonomy. The Anti-Slavery League and the African Institute in London opened a case to investigate Baartman's free will. The case, however, made no headway, and she stayed with Hendric Cesare for the rest of her life. She died in Britain at the age of 25 (Maseko, 1998).

Her body was donated by Hendrick Cesare to Muséum d' Histoire Naturelle in Paris, France. There, curators created a plastic mold of her body and stored her skeleton. Her brain and genitals were removed and placed into jars. Her remains and her mold stood on display in the museum for over two hundred years (Maseko, 1998).

The display of Sara Baartman's body was an active misremembering. She was misremembered as a scientific artifact, as an object to observe and wonder about, as an exhibit. Sara Baartman was not a scientific marvel or a perfect specimen of her race. She was a woman.

Over the years, frequent unified pushes made by historians, scholars, poets, and people across the world called for the return of Sara Baartman to South Africa (Maseko, 2002). Diana Ferrus famously wrote to Baartman, "I've come to take you home." Nearly thirty years later, with embassies from France and South Africa, she would. Scholars took care in her return. They gathered to discuss how best to transport her back and where would be the most respectful place for her burial. Others raised concerns over her brain and genitalia— now missing after years of sitting idly in a jar in the bowels of a French museum. In 2002, she was released from Paris and flown into South Africa. Funerals were both boisterous and solemn (Maseko, 2002). In May, she was buried near the Gamtoos River where she was born (Roux).

Great pains were taken to right the misremembering of Sara Baartman. Scholarly essays and opinions were written for her, along with poetry, and public and political unrest. Stories were re-told in a new context centering Sara Baartman not as a freak or as an abnormality, but as a woman taken far from her home (Dunton) There is peace when thinking of the story of Sara Baartman coming to an end. There is peace in her finally being buried in red South African soil, near where she grew up, on a peaceful hill overlooking South African country.

To remember properly, remembrance must take place in a historical context. Remembrance must have integrity, and it must come from a genuine need to right wrongs. It must provide peace without forgetting what wrongs took place. The burial of Sara Baartman was an example of emotional reparations, where European nations needed to apologize and take steps to right the wrongs from their imperialist pasts. Although emotional reparations are not enough to reverse the economic impacts suffered by African nations across history, they are important. They can work to heal spiritual wounds, restore dignity, and sow peace.

Now That You Are Home

The land has changed since you last saw it.
A road curves along the path of the hills
Long and grey like a flat snake it paves its way up
And down the expanse of Africa and connects everything.
An infrequent iron hum fazes little. Not even the inconsolable
Southern shrubs and trees, who have not stopped growing since you left
Their greenness toppling over the land, thick as tears, and now
Joyful cries heave out. We have worried over your welcome.
Does it feel the same? How was the flight? The change?
To shed yourself of gray European feathers for the familiar burst
Of African blue. The sun burned at the thrill of it. Night
Was long. But finally, it is morning. When you are rested,
Go to Gamtoos and wash your feet of dirt and roam.
Soothe the tall aches away after your long walk home.

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Afterword

Throughout this project, I found myself collecting the titles of these women. I was astounded that each woman, regardless of status or place, acquired some other name beside herself. Sojourner Truth, “The Libyan Sibyl”¹, Hatshepsut “The Foremost of Noble Ladies”², Tituba “The Black Witch of Salem”³, Sara Baartman “The Venus Hottentot”⁴, and Harriet Cole “The Specimen.”⁵ These names show the vast breadth of experience these women have lived. From kings to enslaved people, from janitors to orators. Names have become a way for history to digest these women and their stories, to flatten their dimensions. This project is a rejection of all attempts to make these women any less than they were. These women deserve to have their stories told in as full a nature as possible.

The stories of these women are examples of historical traumas, many unhealed and festering today. They can speak to our modern problems. How do we reckon with the abuse medical science has committed on Black women’s bodies? How do we honor the legacies of women who have died, and whose voices have been silenced, stolen, or changed? Reading these essays and sonnets and sharing these stories may be the first step. Cherish Black women, and when it is apparent, question their absence and their silence.

¹ Stowe, Harriet Beecher. “Harriet Beecher Stowe Meets Sojourner Truth.” *The Atlantic*, April 1863, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1863/04/sojourner-truth-the-libyan-sibyl/308775/>. Accessed 13 September 2023.

² The Metropolitan Museum of Art. “The Female Pharaoh Hatshepsut | New Kingdom.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544849>. Accessed 6 December 2023.

³ Mudimbé-Boyi, Elisabeth. “Giving a Voice to Tituba: The Death of the Author?” *World Literature Today*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1993, pp. 751–56. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40149574>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

⁴ Maseko, Zola, director. *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*. Icarus Films, 1998, <https://icarusfilms.com/if-sara>.

⁵ The College of Physicians of Philadelphia Historical Medical Library. *The Hahnemannian Monthly, Vol. 24: January to December, 1889 (Classic Reprint)*. Fb&c Limited, 2018. Accessed 7 November 2023.