

find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings, and of sense? Where that nice expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance; and that general elegance of features and complexion? Where, except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermillion?

I don't mean to diminish the posthumous humor of this passage—"snowy white hemispheres tipped with vermillion" as the ultimate mark of human perfection, indeed! White's flowery style may render him more subject to ridicule than most of his contemporaries, but his argument is no worse or different from many of theirs. He was merely expressing a common opinion of his time in admittedly overblown rhetoric. The static chain of being, as Lovejoy argues, had formed a cornerstone of Western interpretations of nature for centuries, despite its evident difficulties in application to a recalcitrant world full of gaps and copious variation not easily ordered into single sequences.

So have a good chuckle at the appropriate parts, but then ponder the larger and serious issue for a moment. Evolution drove the static chain of being into obsolescence—therefore, we may easily, in retrospect, identify its evident flaws and analyze the falseness and inconsistency of argument used to defend it. But how many of our own cherished beliefs, the ones that we never doubt because we think that they map nature in an obvious way, will seem centuries hence just as foolish and ideologically bound as the static chain of being? Should we not examine the logic and verisimilitude of our own deepest convictions? At least we may avoid the ridicule of future generations by steering clear of sexual anatomy and leaving to the great biblical poets of the Song of Songs any metaphorical description of the human breast.

19 | The Hottentot Venus

I HAD A LITTLE FRIEND in nursery school. I don't even remember her name. But I do recall some secret advice that I offered her one day at the playground. I told her that the enormous surrounding creatures known as adults always looked up when they walked, and that we little folk would therefore find all manner of valuable things on the ground if only we kept our gazes down. Were my paleontological predispositions already in evidence?

Carl Sagan and I both grew up in New York, both interested in biology and astronomy. Since Carl is tall and chose astronomy, while I'm short and chose paleontology, I always figured that he'd be looking up (as he did with some regularity in hosting his TV series *Cosmos*), while I'd be sticking to my old but good advice and staring at the ground. But I one-upped him (literally) last month in Paris. A few years back, Yves Coppens, professor at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, took Carl on a tour of the museum's innards. There, on a shelf in storage, they found the brain of Paul Broca floating in Formalin in a bell jar. Carl wrote a fine essay about this visit, the title piece of his book *Broca's Brain*. A few months ago, Yves took me on a similar tour. I held the skull of Descartes and of our mutual ancestor, the old man of Cro-Magnon. I also found Broca's brain, resting on its shelf and surrounded by other bell jars holding the brains of his illustrious scientific contemporaries—all white and all male. Yet I found the most interesting items on the

shelf just above. Perhaps Carl never looked up.

This area of the museum's "back wards" holds Broca's collection of anatomical parts, including his own generous and posthumous contribution. Broca, a great medical anatomist and anthropologist, embodied the great nineteenth-century faith in quantification as a key to objective science. If he could collect enough human parts from enough human races, the resultant measurements would surely define the great scale of human progress, from chimp to Caucasian. Broca was not more virulently racist than his scientific contemporaries (nearly all successful white males, of course); he was simply more assiduous in accumulating irrelevant data, selectively presented to support an a priori viewpoint.

These shelves contain a ghoulish poppourri: severed heads from New Caledonia; an illustration of foot binding as practiced upon Chinese women—yes, a bound foot and lower leg, severed between knee and ankle. And, on a shelf just above the brains, I saw a little exhibit that provided an immediate and chilling insight into nineteenth-century *mentalité* and the history of racism: in three smaller jars, I saw the dissected genitalia of three Third-World women. I found no brains of women, and neither Broca's penis nor any male genitalia grace the collection.

The three jars are labeled *une nègresse, une péruvienne*, and *la Venus Hottentotte*, or the Hottentot Venus. Georges Cuvier himself, France's greatest anatomist, had dissected the Hottentot Venus upon her death in Paris late in 1815. He went right to the genitalia for a particular and interesting reason, to which I will return after recounting the tale of this unfortunate woman.

In an age before television and movies made virtually nothing on earth exotic, and when anthropological theory assessed as subhuman both malformed Caucasians and the normal representatives of other races, the exhibition of unusual humans became a profitable business both in upper-class salons and in street-side stalls (see Richard D. Altick's *The Shows of London*, in the bibliography, or the book, stage, and screen treatments of the "Elephant Man").

Supposed savages from faraway lands were a mainstay of these exhibitions, and the Hottentot Venus surpassed them all in renown. (The Hottentots and Bushmen are closely related, small-statured people of southern Africa. Traditional Bushmen, when first encountered by Europeans, were hunter-gatherers, while Hottentots were pastoralists who raised cattle. Anthropologists now tend to forgo these European, somewhat derogatory terms and to designate both groups collectively as the Khoi-San peoples, a composite word constructed from each group's own name for itself.) The Hottentot Venus was a servant of Dutch farmers near Capetown, and we do not know her actual group membership. She had a name, though her exploiters never used it. She was baptized Saartjie Baartman (Saartjie, or "little Sarah" in Afrikaans, is pronounced Sar-key).

Hendrick Cezar, brother of Saartjie's "employer," suggested a trip to England for exhibition and promised to make Saartjie a wealthy woman thereby. Lord Caledon, governor of the Cape, granted permission for the trip but later regretted his decision when he understood its purposes more fully. (Saartjie's exhibition aroused much debate and she always had supporters, disgusted with the display of humans as animals; the show went on, but not to universal approbation.) She arrived in London in 1810 and immediately went on exhibition in Piccadilly, where she caused a sensation, for reasons soon to be discussed. A member of the African Association, a benevolent society that petitioned for her "release," described the show. He first encountered Saartjie in a cage on a platform raised a few feet above the floor:

On being ordered by her keeper, she came out. . . . The Hottentot was produced like a wild beast, and ordered to move backwards and forwards and come out and go into her cage, more like a bear in a chain than a human being.

Yet Saartjie, interrogated in Dutch before a court, insisted that she was not under restraint and understood perfectly

well that she had been guaranteed half the profits. The show went on.

After a long tour of the English provinces, Saartjie went to Paris where an animal trainer exhibited her for fifteen months, causing a great sensation as in England. Cuvier and all the great naturalists of France visited her and she posed in the nude for scientific paintings at the Jardin du Roi. But she died of an inflammatory ailment on December 29, 1815, and ended up on Cuvier's dissecting table, rather than wealthy in Capetown.

Why, in an age deluged with human exhibitions, was Saartjie such a sensation? We may offer two answers, each troubling and each associated with one of her official titles—Hottentot and Venus.

On the racist ladder of human progress, Bushmen and Hottentots vied with Australian aborigines for the lowest rung, just above chimps and orangs. (Some scholars have argued that the earliest designation applied by seventeenth-century Dutch settlers—*Bosmannek*, or "Bushman"—was a literal translation of a Malay word well known to them—*Orang Outan*, or "man of the forest.") In this system, Saartjie exerted a grim fascination, not as a missing link in a later evolutionary sense, but as a creature who straddled that dreaded boundary between human and animal and thereby taught us something about a self still present, although submerged, in "higher" creatures (see essays 17 and 18).

Contemporary commentators emphasized both the simian appearance and the brutal habits of Bushmen and Hottentots. In 1839, the leading American anthropologist S.G. Morton labeled Hottentots as "the nearest approximation to the lower animals. . . . Their complexion is a yellowish brown, compared by travellers to the peculiar hue of Europeans in the last stage of jaundice. . . . The women are represented as even more repulsive in appearance than the men." Mathias Guenther (see bibliography) cites an 1847 newspaper account of a Bushman family displayed at the Egyptian Hall in London:

✓ In appearance they are little above the monkey tribe. They are continually crouching, warming themselves

by the fire, chatting or growling. . . . They are sullen, silent and savage—mere animals in propensity, and worse than animals in appearance.

And the jaundiced account of a failed missionary in 1804:

The Bushmen will kill their children without remorse, on various occasions; as when they are ill shaped, or when they are in want of food, or when obliged to flee from the farmers or others; in which case they will strangle them, smother them, cast them away in the desert or bury them alive. There are instances of parents throwing their tender offspring to the hungry lion, who stands roaring before their cavern, refusing to depart before some peace offering be made to him.

Guenther reports that this equation of Bushman and animal became so ingrained that one party of Dutch settlers, out on a hunting expedition, shot and ate a Bushman, assuming that he was the African equivalent of the Malay orang.

Cuvier's monograph of Saartjie's dissection, published in the *Mémoires du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle* for 1817, followed this traditional view. After discussing and dismissing various ill-founded legends, Cuvier promised to present only "positive facts"—including this description of a Bushman's life:

Since they are unable to engage in agriculture, or even in a pastoral life, they subsist entirely on hunting and pilfering. They live in caves and cover themselves only with the skins of animals they have killed. Their only industry involves the poisoning of their arrows and the manufacture of nets for fishing.

His description of Saartjie herself emphasizes all points of superficial similarity with any ape or monkey. (I need hardly mention that since people vary so much, each group must be closer than others to some feature of some other primate, without implying anything about genealogy or ap-

titude.) Cuvier, for example, discusses the flatness of Saartjie's nasal bones: "In this respect, I have never seen a human head more similar to that of monkeys." He emphasizes various proportions of the femur (upper leg bone) as embodying "characters of animality." He speaks of Saartjie's small skull (no surprise for a woman four and a half feet tall), and relegates her to stupidity according to "that cruel law, which seems to have condemned to an eternal inferiority those races with small and compressed skulls." He even abstracted a set of supposedly simian responses from her behavior: "Her movements had something brusque and capricious about them, which recall those of monkeys. She had, above all, a way of pouting her lips, in the same manner as we have observed in orang utans."

Yet a careful reading of the entire monograph belies these interpretations, since Cuvier states again and again (although he explicitly draws neither moral nor message) that Saartjie was an intelligent woman with general proportions that would not lead connoisseurs to frown. He mentions, in an offhand sort of way, that Saartjie possessed an excellent memory, spoke Dutch rather well, had some command of English, and was learning a bit of French when she died. (Not bad for a caged brute; I only wish that more Americans could do one-third so well in their command of languages.) He admitted that her shoulders, back, and chest "had grace"; and with the gentillesse of his own race, spoke of *sa main charmante* ("her charming hand").

Yet Saartjie's hold over well-bred Europe did not arise from her racial status alone. She was not simply the Hottentot or the Hottentot woman, but the Hottentot *Venus*. Under all official words lay the great and largely unsaid reason for her popularity. Khoi-San women do exaggerate two features of their sexual anatomy (or at least of body parts that excite sexual feelings in most men). The Hottentot Venus won her fame as a sexual object, and her combination of supposed bestiality and lascivious fascination focused the attention of men who could thus obtain both vicarious pleasure and a smug reassurance of superiority. Primarily—for, as they say, you can't miss it—Saartjie

was, in Allick's words, "steatopygous to a fault." Khoi-San women accumulate large amounts of fat in their buttocks, a condition called steatopygia. The buttocks protrude far back, often coming to a point at their upper extremity and sloping down toward the genitalia. Saartjie was especially well endowed, the probable cause of Cezar's decision to convert her from servant to siren. Saartjie covered her genitalia during exhibitions, but her rear end *was* the show, and she submitted to endless gaze and poke for five long years. Since European women did not wear bustles at the time, but indicated by their clothing only what nature had provided, Saartjie seemed all the more incredible.

Cuvier well understood the mixed bestial and sexual nature of Saartjie's fascination when he wrote that "everyone was able to see her during her eighteen-month stay in our capital, and to verify the enormous protrusion of her buttocks and the brutal appearance of her face." In his dissection, Cuvier focused on an unsolved mystery surrounding each of her unusual features. Europeans had long wondered whether the large buttocks were fatty, muscular, or perhaps even supported by a previously unknown bone. The problem had already been solved—in favor of fat—by external observation, the primary reason for her disrobing before scientists at the Jardin du Roi. Still, Cuvier dissected her buttocks and reported:

We could verify that the protuberance of her buttocks had nothing muscular about it, but arose from a [fatty] mass of a trembling and elastic consistency, situated immediately under her skin. It vibrated with all movements that the woman made.

But Saartjie's second peculiarity provided even greater wonder and speculation among scientists; and Saartjie heightened the intrigue by keeping this feature scrupulously hidden, even refusing a display at the Jardin. Only after her death could the curiosity of science be slaked.

Reports had circulated for two centuries of a wondrous structure attached directly to the female genitalia of Khoi-

San women and covering their private parts with a veil of skin, the so-called *sinus pudoris*, or "curtain of shame." (If I may be permitted a short excursion into the realm of scholarly minutiae—the footnotes of more conventional academic publication—I would like to correct a standard mistranslation of Linnaeus, one that I have made myself. In his original description of *Homo sapiens*, Linnaeus provided a most unflattering account of African blacks, including the line: *feminae sinus pudoris*. This phrase has usually been translated, "women are without shame"—a slur quite consistent with Linnaeus's general description. In Latin, "without shame" should be *sine pudore*, not *sinus pudoris*. But eighteenth-century scientific Latin was written so indifferently that misspellings and wrong cases are no bar to actual intent, and the reading "without shame" has held. But Linnaeus was only stating that African women have a genital flap, or *sinus pudoris*. He was also wrong, because only the Khoi-San and a few related peoples develop this feature.)

The nature of the *sinus pudoris* had generated a lively debate, with partisans on both sides claiming eyewitness support. One party held that the *sinus* was simply an enlarged part of the ordinary genitalia; others called it a novel structure found in no other race. Some even described the so-called "Hottentot apron" as a large fold of skin hanging down from the lower abdomen itself.

Cuvier was determined to resolve this old argument; the status of Saartjie's *sinus pudoris* would be the primary goal of his dissection. Cuvier began his monograph by noting: "There is nothing more famous in natural history than the *tablier* (the French rendering of *sinus pudoris*) of Hottentots, and, at the same time, no feature has been the object of so many arguments." Cuvier resolved the debate with his usual elegance: the *labia minora*, or inner lips, of the ordinary female genitalia are greatly enlarged in Khoi-San women, and may hang down three or four inches below the vagina when women stand, thus giving the impression of a separate and enveloping curtain of skin. Cuvier preserved his skillful dissection of Saartjie's genitalia and wrote with a flourish: "I have the honor to present to the Academy the genital organs of this woman prepared in a manner that

leaves no doubt about the nature of her *tablier*." And Cuvier's gift still rests in its jar, forgotten on a shelf at the Musée de l'Homme—right above Broca's brain.

Yet while Cuvier correctly identified the nature of Saartjie's *tablier*, he fell into an interesting error, arising from the same false association that had inspired public fascination with Saartjie—sexuality with animality. Since Cuvier regarded Hottentots as the most bestial of people, and since they had a large *tablier*, he assumed that the *tablier* of other Africans must become progressively smaller as the darkness of southern Africa ceded to the light of Egypt. (In the last part of his monograph, Cuvier argues that the ancient Egyptians must have been fully Caucasian; who else could have built the pyramids?)

Cuvier knew that female circumcision was widely practiced in Ethiopia. He assumed that the *tablier* must be at least half-sized among these people of intermediate hue and geography; and he further conjectured that Ethiopians excised the *tablier* to improve sexual access, not that circumcision represented a custom sustained by power and imposed upon girls with genitalia not noticeably different from those of European women. "The negroes of Abyssinia," he wrote, "are inconvenienced to the point of being obliged to destroy these parts by knife and cauterization" (*par le fer et par le feu*, as he wrote in more euphonious French).

Cuvier also told an interesting tale, requiring no comment in repetition:

The Portuguese Jesuits, who converted the King of Abyssinia and part of his people during the 16th century, felt that they were obliged to proscribe this practice [of female circumcision] since they thought that it was a holdover from the ancient Judaism of that nation. But it happened that Catholic girls could no longer find husbands, because the men could not reconcile themselves to such a disgusting deformity. The College of Propaganda sent a surgeon to verify the fact and, on his report, the reestablishment of the ancient custom was authorized by the Pope.

I needn't burden you with any detailed refutation of the general arguments that made the Hottentot Venus such a sensation. I do, however, find it amusing that she and her people are, by modern convictions, so singularly and especially unsuited for the role she was forced to play.

If earlier scientists cast the Khoi-San peoples as approximations to the lower primates, they now rank among the heroes of modern social movements. Their languages, with complex clicks, were once dismissed as a guttural farrago of beastly sounds. They are now widely admired for their complexity and subtle expression. Cuvier had stigmatized the hunter-gatherer life styles of the traditional San (Bushmen) as the ultimate degradation of a people too stupid and indolent to farm or raise cattle. The same people have become models of righteousness to modern ecoactivists for their understanding, nonexploitive, and balanced approach to natural resources. Of course, as Guenther argues in his article on the Bushman's changing image, our modern accolades may also be unrealistic. Still, if people must be exploited rather than understood, attributions of kindness and heroism sure beat accusations of animality.

Furthermore, while Cuvier's contemporaries sought physical signs of bestiality in Khoi-San anatomy, anthropologists now identify these people as perhaps the most paedomorphic of human groups. Humans have evolved by a general retardation (or slowing down) of developmental rates, leaving our adult bodies quite similar in many respects to the juvenile, but not to the adult, form of our primate ancestors—an evolutionary result called paedomorphosis, or "child shaping." On this criterion, the greater the extent of paedomorphosis, the further away from a simian past (although minor differences among human races do not translate into variations in mental or moral worth). Although Cuvier searched hard to find signs of animality in Saartjie's lip movements or in the form of her leg bone, her people are, in general, perhaps the least simian of all humans.

Finally, the major rationale for Saartjie's popularity rested on a false premise. She fascinated Europeans because she

had big buttocks and genitalia and because she supposedly belonged to the most backward of human groups. Everything fit together for Cuvier's contemporaries. Advanced humans (read modern Europeans) are refined, modest, and sexually restrained (not to mention hypocritical for advancing such a claim). Animals are overtly and actively sexual, and so betray their primitive character. Thus, Saartjie's exaggerated sexual organs record her animality. But the argument is, as our English friends say (and quite literally in this case), "arse about face." Humans are the most sexually active of primates, and humans have the largest sexual organs of our order. If we must pursue this dubious line of argument, a person with larger than average endowment is, if anything, more human.

On all accounts—mode of life, physical appearance, and sexual anatomy—London and Paris should have stood in a giant cage while Saartjie watched. Still, Saartjie gained her posthumous triumph. Broca inherited not only Cuvier's preparation of Saartjie's *tablier*, but her skeleton as well. In 1862, he thought he had found a criterion for arranging human races by physical merit. He measured the ratio of radius (lower arm bone) to humerus (upper arm bone), reasoning that higher ratios indicate longer forearms—a traditional feature of apes. He began to hope that objective measurement had confirmed his foregone conclusion when blacks averaged .794 and whites .739. But Saartjie's skeleton yielded .703 and Broca promptly abandoned his criterion. Had not Cuvier praised the arm of the Hottentot Venus?

Saartjie continues her mastery of Mr. Broca today. His brain decomposes in a leaky jar. Her *tablier* stands above, while her well-prepared skeleton gazes up from below. Death, as the good book says, is swallowed up in victory.

those high school trig proofs really work). In his *Narration of an Explorer in Tropical South Africa*, he writes (my thanks to Raymond B. Huey of the University of Washington for sending this passage to me):

Postscript

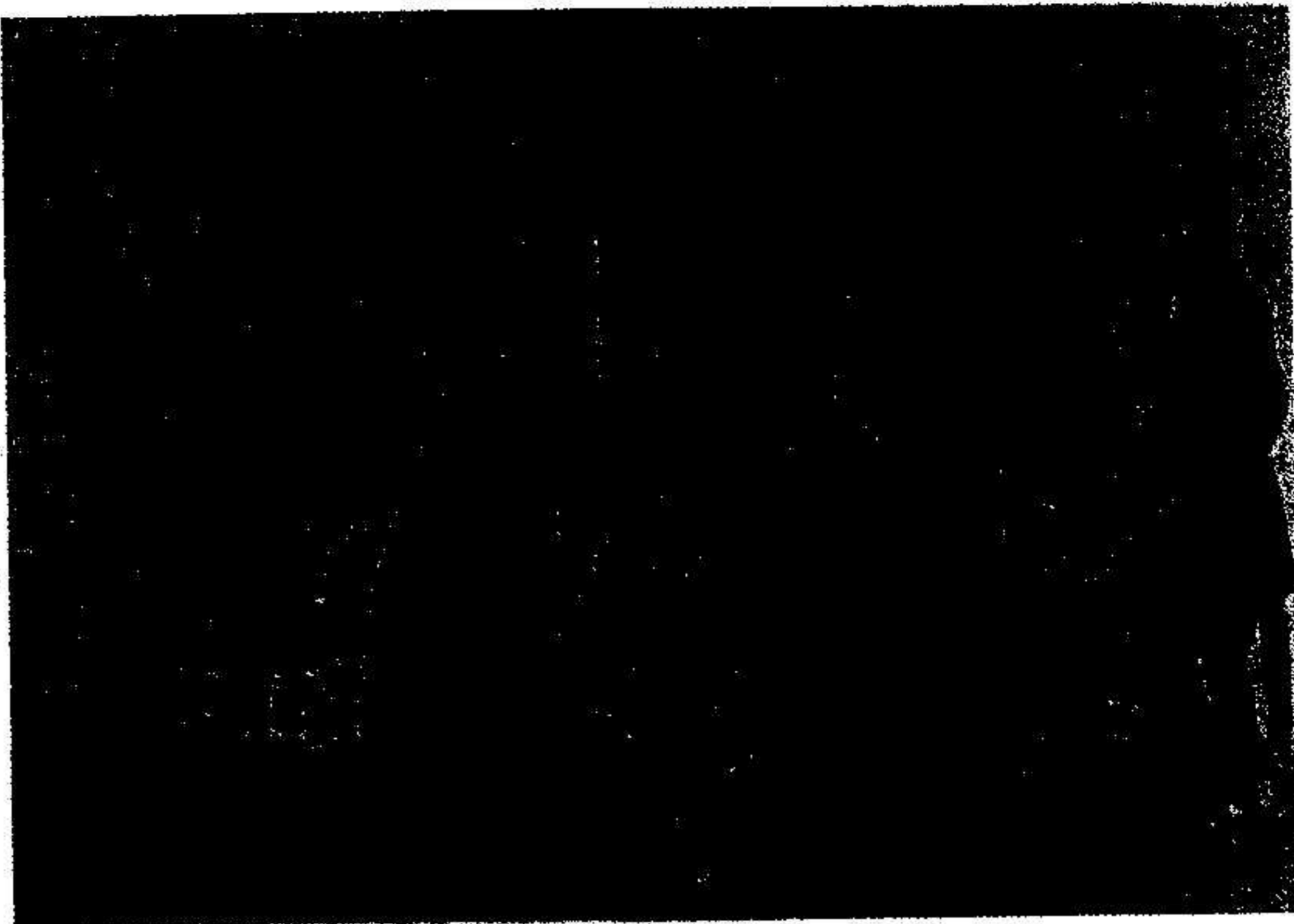
Since biological determinism won its prestige in spurious claims to objectivity via quantification (see my book, *The Mismeasure of Man*), and since Saartjie Baartman owed her oppression to this sociopolitical doctrine masquerading as science, I was amused to find that Francis Galton himself, the chief apostle of quantification (and hereditarianism), once used an ingenious technique to measure the extent of steatopygia on a Khoi-San woman. Galton, Darwin's brilliant and eccentric cousin, believed that he could put anything into numbers. He once tried to quantify the geographic distribution of female beauty by the following dubious method (as described in his autobiography, *Memoires of My Life*, 1909, pp. 315-316):

Whenever I have occasion to classify the persons I meet into three classes, "good, medium, bad," I use a needle mounted as a prickler, wherewith to prick holes, unseen, in a piece of paper, torn rudely into a cross with a long leg. I use its upper end for "good," the cross arm for "medium," the lower end for "bad." The prick holes keep distinct, and are easily read off at leisure. The object, place, and date are written on the paper. I used this plan for my beauty data, classifying the girls I passed in streets or elsewhere as attractive, indifferent, or repellent. Of course this was a purely individual estimate, but it was consistent, judging from the conformity of different attempts in the same population. I found London to rank highest for beauty; Aberdeen lowest.

His discreet method for steatopygia was, in my view, even more clever (and probably a good deal more accurate if all

The sub-interpreter was married to a charming person, not only a Hottentot in figure, but in that respect a Venus among Hottentots. I was perfectly aghast at her development, and made inquiries upon that delicate point as far as I dared among my missionary friends . . . I profess to be a scientific man, and was exceedingly anxious to obtain accurate measurements of her shape; but there was a difficulty in doing this. I did not know a word of Hottentot, and could never therefore have explained to the lady what the object of my foot-rule could be; and I really dared not ask my worthy missionary host to interpret for me. I therefore felt in a dilemma as I gazed at her form, that gift of bounteous nature to this favoured race, which no mantua-maker, with all her crinoline and stuffing, can do otherwise than humbly imitate. The object of my admiration stood under a tree, and was turning herself about to all points of the compass, as ladies who wish to be admired usually do. Of a sudden my eye fell upon my sextant; the bright thought struck me, and I took a series of observations upon her figure in every direction, up and down, crossways, diagonally, and so forth, and I registered them carefully upon an outline drawing for fear of any mistake; this being done, I boldly pulled out my measuring-tape, and measured the distance from where I was to the place she stood, and having thus obtained both base and angles, I worked out the results by trigonometry and logarithms.

Saartjie Baartman herself continues to fascinate us across the ages; her exploitation has never really ended. In an antiquarian bookstore in Johannesburg (see essay 12), I found and bought the following remarkable print (I still cannot view it without a shudder despite its intended



A satiric French print of 1812 commenting on English fascination with the Hottentot Venus. The soldier behind her examines her steatopygia, while the lady in front pretends to tie her shoelace in order to get a peek at Saartjie's tablier.

humor, and I reproduce it here as a comment upon history and current reality that we dare not ignore). The print is a satirical French commentary (published in Paris in 1812) on English fascination with Saartjie's display. It is titled: *Les curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers* (The curious in ecstasy, or the shoelaces). Spectators concentrate entirely upon sexual features of the Hottentot Venus. One military gentleman observes her steatopygia from behind and comments, "Oh! *godem quel rasbif*." The second man in uniform and the elegantly attired lady are both trying to sneak a peak at Saartjie's tablier. (This is the subtle point that an uninformed observer would miss. Saartjie displayed her buttocks but, following the customs of her people, would never uncover her tablier). The man exclaims "how odd nature is," while the woman, hoping to get a better look from below, crouches under pretense of tying her shoes (hence the title). Meanwhile, the dog reminds us that we are all the same biological object under our various attires.

To bring the exploitation up to date, W.B. Deatrick sent me the cover of the French magazine *Photo* for May, 1982. It shows, naked, a woman who calls herself "Carolina, la Venus hottentote de Saint-Domingue." She holds an uncorked champagne bottle in front. The fizz flies up, over her head, through the letter O of the magazine's title, down behind her back and directly into the glass, which rests, as she crouches (to mimic Saartjie's endowment), upon her outstretched buttocks.