

# I AM NOT AN ANIMAL.

By Jamelia Hashi

For centuries Black people and ethnic minorities have been categorised as animals, savages and uncivilised. These adjectives lay the foundations for centuries of ill-treatment and oppression concealed with a façade of extending the ‘helping hand’ and providing a better life for them. Black people were subjected to cruel treatments in order to enforce racist ideologies that were allegedly based on science. They were exploited, manipulated, and disregarded to suit the interests of white people and to affirm their racial superiority.

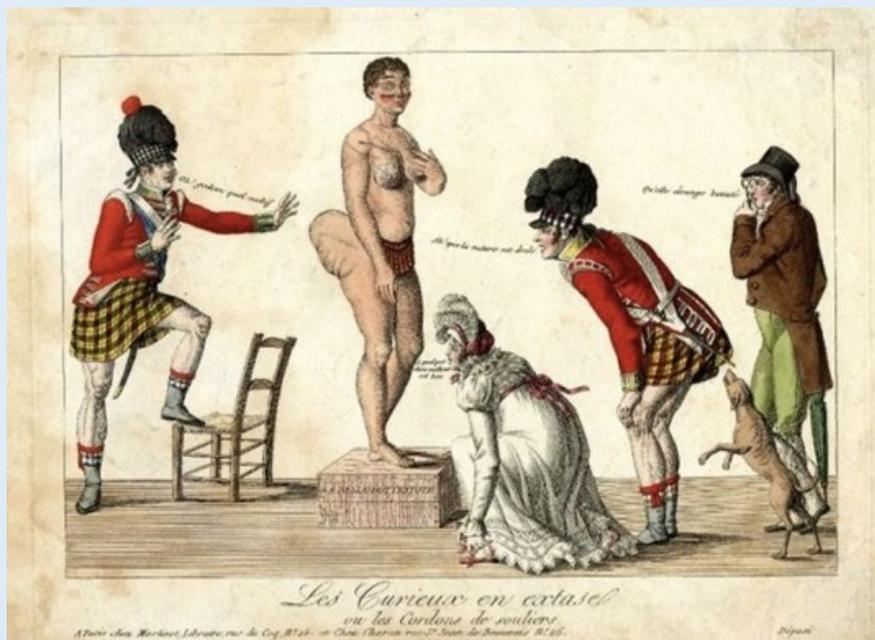
The dictionary defines a zoo as an ‘establishment which maintains a collection of wild animals, for study, conservation or display to the public’. In the past, zoos have not exclusively been used for the exhibition of animals, **but humans too. Black humans to be specific.**

A surge in ‘exploration’ travels around the globe led to Europeans to encounter other races. Physical differences between white Europeans and black people sparked what some refer to as ‘curiosity’ and thus triggered the creation of human exhibitions and zoos in which other Europeans could view, mock and satisfy their intrigue around these differences.

The term ‘curiosity’ often implies innocent interest. But human zoos were in no way innocent. They were a mechanism to enforce racial superiority and enforce ludicrous ‘scientific’ claims. Those exhibited were typically hurled with vulgar and dehumanizing remarks, exploited physically and for financial gain and were treated as sub-human. So no, I do not think the word ‘curiosity’ should be deployed as an explanation for why people were exhibited and treated as less than, I prefer to use the term evil.

A story that struck me was the story of **Sarah Baartman**. It is a story of exploitation and injustice- one of many injustices that should never have taken place. **Sarah** belonged to the Khoikhoi tribe in South Africa. She was born

in 1789 and was exhibited in several ‘freak shows’ across Europe, including Paris and Piccadilly Circus. Alexander Dunlop, the man who exhibited **Sarah** thought he could make money because of Londoners' lack of familiarity with Africans and because of **Sarah's** pejoratively perceived large buttocks and genitalia. As recorded in Jackie Kay's poem “Hottentot Venus”, people (particularly white men and women from the upper classes) poked and prodded **Sarah** with their canes at her genitals, her buttocks, and her body parts as if she were a statue, incapable of pain. **Sarah** was exhibited in zoos and circuses with



the stage name ‘Hottentot Venus’: a derogatory name for the Khoi people of South Africa- thus making her the icon for primitive sexuality and ugliness.

Her remains were kept on display until 1974, which is relatively recent. The fact she was still exhibited after her death is an atrocity and a disservice to her life. Despite Nelson Mandela requesting the repatriation of **Sarah's** remains and Cuvier's plaster cast in 1994, it was only in 2002 that the French government eventually agreed to send **Sarah** back to her homeland (South Africa). In August of that year, her remains were buried in Hankey, in Eastern Cape Province, 192 years after **Sarah** had left for Europe.

Even in her death, **Sarah** was failed and oppressed. The fact that people like her were exploited, manipulated, and oppressed in these ways stem from ideologies which used western science as a basis to advocate racial superiority.



What's worse is **Sarah** Baartman remains a worldwide symbol of racism, colonisation and the objectification of the black female body, but such 'ugliness' when occupied by white women becomes beautiful and worthy of 'breaking the internet'. In a 2014 photoshoot, Kim Kardashian exploited, fetishised and capitalised on the black female body, making millions by representing an image previously lauded in black culture, but now celebrated because it's painted in white skin. When will we start to realise: No physical feature is superior, and no physical feature is inferior,

our differences are the beauty of humanity and rather than ridiculing this. We must learn to embrace this.

James Marion Sims is regarded as the 'father of gynaecology' for pioneering modern gynaecology. However, the means in which he achieved this success was immoral and inhumane. **Anarcha Westcott** was an enslaved woman who developed vesicovaginal fistula as a result of complications in childbirth. She was one of the many African American enslaved women to have been subjected to barbaric surgical trials at the hands of Sims. In the space of four years, between 1845-1849, Sims performed approximately 30 operations until he perfected his technique and tools. These women were not given anaesthesia in order to deal with the pain of surgery but left to brave the pain of being repeatedly mutilated, prodded at, and watched by several other male doctors. Sims even acknowledged the amount of pain he had been subjecting these women with but gave no anaesthesia. One can assume that the choice to forbid the women any anaesthesia was related to the notion that Black people feel less pain than their white counterparts, which is a theory that persists today. A textbook for nursing by Pearson containing a series of racial stereotypes and how ethnic minorities 'deal with pain' was published in 2017! This is an example of how racist notions have been, and remain to be reinforced in every aspect of society including healthcare. Regarding Sims as the 'father of gynaecology' is indicative of how some people completely disregard the moral strain that a person, like Sims, causes them because of his achievements. We can no longer allow individuals such as Sims to be pillars of society, he should be condemned and not celebrated because to celebrate him is to be complicit in the atrocities he caused.

The stories of women like **Anarcha Westcott** and **Sarah Baartman** are among many cruel moments of history. They were not animals. They were humans. They felt pain and emotions. Black women have suffered the brunt of racial oppression, their stories should fuel our conquest for justice and complete racial equality. We need to stop celebrating those who do not deserve our recognition and commemorate the untold figures of our history. I urge every reader to broaden their knowledge because to be ignorant right now is a disservice to yourself, our society and those who came before us. Sign petitions, protest and consume every reading recommendation you are given, because we are fighting for **Sarah** and **Anarcha** who are unrecognised heroes that were treated like animals for the colour of their skin.