

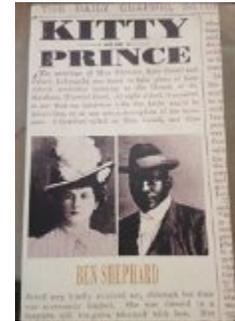
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roslyn Poignant. *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 302 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10247-5.

Ben Shephard. *Kitty and the Prince.* Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2003. 278 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-1-86842-146-6.

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Mock Savage Entertainers

In pioneering publications since 1981, the literary critic and historian Bernth Lindfors at the University of Texas has drawn the attention of the scholarly world to the phenomenon of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnological show business—alternatively dubbed *zoos humains* in French and *volkerschauen* in German. William Shakespeare had noted the displays of dead Native Americans at English fairs in *The Tempest* (1610-11). The fairground tradition continued with both genuine and “gaffed” (faked) performers from exotic climes. But it was the exhibition of Sara Baartman, in London and particularly in Paris as La Venus Hottentote in 1814-15, which ethnologized or racialized such displays with the high-class gloss of pandering to scientific interest and inquiry—as well as, in this case, sexual titillation.

The Return of Sara Baartman is a fifty-two-minute documentary film by Zola Maseko that overlaps with and picks up the story of his *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* made five years earlier. The film begins by summarizing her life up to her death in Paris in December 1815, and the public exhibition of her body parts in Paris up to 1974. Whereas the first film argued that as the “Hottentot Venus” she was the key figure in the development of scientific racism, the theme of the second film is that Sara Baartman was a universal symbol of the degradation of African or black women and their sexuality. In the first film we saw her whole body plaster-cast stark naked; in the second film we see it coyly draped in a sheet.

The film follows the arrival of a delegation of South African women arriving in Paris in 2002, led by Brigitte Mabandla (Minister of Arts, Science and Technology) and including Diane Ferrus, a poet of Khoekhoe descent who had written a poem about Sara Baartman while attending a course on colonial sexuality at the University of Utrecht in 1998. The poem tells of Sara’s longing to return home to Africa before she died. We hear that the prime mover in the French Senate behind the repatriation of the body parts to South Africa, Senator Nicholas About, had been motivated when he was a child by the sight of the poor “femme Bosheman” as exhibit No.1 in the Muse de l’Homme. Senator About had read out Diane Ferrus’s poem in the Senate Chamber, where in the film we see it being declaimed by its author. The senator also appealed to French patriotic sentiment by pointing out the irony of Sara Baartman being born in 1789, the year of the revolution, and yet having been in bondage ever since.

The skeleton and the body plaster-cast are packed for air-travel and handed over to the delegation; they duly arrive in Cape Town—which Sara Baartman had last seen 192 years earlier. The coffin is received at city hall draped in a New South African flag, and is then taken to the burial spot agreed upon by a reference group including Khoekhoe community representatives, who—after a long interview with Namibian academic Yvette Abraham—now begin to feature as the main characters in

the film. Among the mothers of the Khoe nation who receive Sara Baartman, Chief Jean Burgers of the Ghonaqua House delivers a remarkable speech about the need to restore our ancestors now that we are restoring ourselves.

The coffin is then transported to Port Elizabeth and is buried with ceremony, after President Mbeki arrives by helicopter, on a hillock outside Hankey facing the Gamtoos mountains from which we know Sara Baartman originated. The date chosen is August 9, South African Women's Day and the International Day of Indigenous Peoples. Little girls from various communities dance in honor of Sara. The commentary over-voice tells us that there is now "reconciliation between black and white and brown South Africans wrenched apart by colonialism." President Mbeki echoes speeches made by the late Julius Nyerere and Seretse Khama: "We ended up being defined as people without a past except a past of barbarism. We had no culture, no value system to speak of... People with no names and no identity."

The film ends with shots of the hilltop grave against the sunset, covered with flowers and stones piled there in traditional tribute. An effective end to an interesting film which is, however, probably twice as long as it needed to be. We see Sara Baartman as a feminist icon, offering no significant challenge to the South African state. But we are given no insight into the contentious rise of Khoe and San identities in South Africa, and their competition for ownership of heritage symbols such as Sara Baartman.

Roslyn Poignant's *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* is essentially a book about the exhibition of aboriginal Australians in Europe and America, but it spreads its ambit much wider to put them in the context of other exotic ethnographic exhibits. Two chapters cover displays of living humans in the sideshows of zoological gardens and circuses; another three chapters cover displays of the dead in museums and scientific institutions—leading into discussion of the repatriation of human remains from imperial metropolises to the descendants of aboriginal peoples for burial, etc.

Systematic zoological exhibition of groups of "savages" or aboriginal people, rather than just individuals, began in the 1850s with the anatomist Robert Knox in London, and took off in the 1870s with Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire at the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation in Paris and the wild animal importer and trainer Carl Hagenbeck in Hamburg—who imported whole villages of Scandinavian Laplanders (Sami) in 1874, and of Nubians from the Sudan in 1876. In North America, Phineas Barnum is credited with the first comprehensive display of living

humans with his 1883 "Ethnological Congress of Strange and Savage Tribes."

The showmen and the scientists (and the colonialists) in the new imperial age between them propagated crude racist ideas that penetrated mass consciousness through popular entertainment. But Roslyn Poignant emphasizes that, after settling down in their new role as human exhibits (with a significant initial death rate), such "savages," to be successful, had to become active entertainers participating in the hokum of show business; in a word, professionals.

Professional Savages concentrates on the careers of aboriginal Australians overseas, culminating in the repatriation of the remains of one "Tambo" from Ohio to the Torres Straits in 1994, but also contains much fascinating non-Australian material. Thus in 1886 a family of !Ko people from the Kalahari, imported by the Canadian showman G. A. Farini, was paraded on stage at the Folies Bergres and was "examined" by the anthropologist Paul Topinard. The body of one who died was presented to the Societe d'Anthropologie for dissection. In 1888-89, forty-five year old Esther the Hottentot received particular attention among the thirteen Khoekhoe exhibited at the Jardin d'Acclimatation. Out of the seeds sown by Hagenbeck and Saint-Hilaire, came the colonial villages characteristic of International or Universal Fairs and Expositions—from Paris in 1889 and Chicago in 1893 through to Brussels in 1958.

Books like this tread a knife edge between satisfying general readers seeking interesting narrative and scholarly readers seeking deeper discussion of issues. The imprint of Yale University Press tells us to expect the latter. Some readers may miss more discussion of the history of the presentation of human bodies and more discussion of the ethics of "repatriation" of human body parts, but Roslyn Poignant has successfully trod the knife edge in covering so many countries and diverse areas of scholarship.

Ben Shephard's *Kitty and the Prince* is set around the Savage South Africa show which opened at Earl's Court exhibition arena in London in 1899. The following advertisement had previously appeared in a Cape Town newspaper: "Savage South Africa in London: Wanted, horned animals, baboons, zebras, giraffes, koodoos, springbucks, hartebeests, young Afrikaner girls (good looking and to be slightly coloured)." One hundred and fifty Swazi, Basotho and Shangane mineworkers, supplemented by fifty Zulu, were imported into Britain to play the parts of Ndebele warriors. The show was designed to advertise British

South Africa (BSA) Company territory (aka Rhodesia) to potential settlers and investors—and was thus a rival to, as well as an imitation of, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, which had initiated the Earl’s Court arena fifteen years earlier advertising the prospects of the American West. But while “savages” had to be exterminated to make way for white civilization, the labor power of Africans partly-civilized “under the kindly rule of the white man” was appreciated as an asset for capitalist expansion.

Kitty and the Prince is a London love story across color lines, which, as the author acknowledges, has parallels with (but a very different outcome from) the story of Seretse Khama and Ruth Williams half a century later. Kitty Jewell was a feisty piano teacher direct from Bloemfontein and Kimberley, but originally from Cornwall. The Prince was Peter Kushana Lobengula, supposedly the son of the late King Lobengula of the Ndebele. Peter Lobengula led his troops into twice-daily theatrical battle with the forces of the BSA Company—notably a simulation of Allan Wilson’s last stand of 1896, boosted as an iconic colonial moment to rival Custer’s last stand.

There was also a “native village” at Earl’s Court, where “savage” men sipped tea with five Korana women. Newspapers whipped up prurient panic about ignorant London women flocking to see near-naked black male bodies—publicity no doubt encouraged by the show’s agents. Africans and African Americans meeting in London for the 1900 Pan-African Conference protested to the Colonial Office against these “unfortunates” being “made a spectacle of constant ridicule and caricature.”

Ben Shephard has crafted his book to read like a film scenario. He is himself a distinguished film documentarist, having contributed to the 1973 Thames Television *World at War* series that still runs on television stations round the world. (He has unearthed actual film of Savage South Africa’s fifty Zulu arriving at Southampton on April 21, 1899.)

The book begins with a flash forward to the very end of the story: Peter Lobengula dying in abject poverty in the industrial North of England. Shephard then sets us up with vital background for his sub-plots (notably the career of circus man Frank Fillis), and then takes us through twists in the main plot—marriage and parting, and reconciliation and final parting, into Peter’s humiliation. The book ends with a bang—a blinding historical revelation, too good to reveal here, suggesting that poor old Peter, pilloried as a liar about himself and his origins, may have been trying to tell the truth after all. (The history of the old Transvaal under Kruger will never again be quite the

same to me.)

Kitty and the Prince reads very well. It helps us to understand extraordinary lives and extraordinary times. It is based on many years of research in many archives and gives them due acknowledgement, but bears its scholarship lightly in popular paperback format. The book throws interesting sidelights on the new sensationalism of the London yellow press, South African circus history, and the history of black people in the Manchester area—where Peter Lobengula’s descendants lived but are now extinct. It also cries out for investigation of the Cornish mining families who emigrated to Africa as well as America and Australia. (Jewell was not a rare surname; one R. J. Jewell visited Matabeleland and probably met Lobengula in 1869.)

Kitty and the Prince, *Professional Savages*, and *The Return of Sara Baartman* raise questions about nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interactions between supposedly objective science, “spectacle” in modern entertainment, and biological race and ethnicity in the minds of the masses. The two books and the film complement each other in many ways, suggesting gaps in present knowledge and understanding of ethnological show business. But they stop short of tackling the twentieth-century conundrum of how normality became freakery in American circus sideshows, carnivals, and “freak shows.”—how ordinary non-Western people came to be grouped and equated with highly individualized Western “freaks” and human oddities who created themselves by self-mutilation.

There has always been a tendency for exotic people to be “gaffed” or faked in Western show business, substituting African American and Caribbean actors from the slums for the real thing. Charles Dickens observed one such group, George Sanger’s so-called “Ojibbeways” who were not Native Americans at all and performed “no better than the chorus at an Italian opera in England—if such a thing were possible.”

By the mid-twentieth century the eye-popping images of “savagery” became much more important than the pretence of scientific presentation. “The Darkest Africa” show at the 1933-34 Chicago world’s fair depicted “life in Africa in its most primitive form.” It opened with real Gold Coast men staffing the exhibit, but their drumming and dancing were considered so dull that they were replaced by Chicago unemployed—in feather headdresses and tooth necklaces, jumping about and jabbering and screaming, chanting and muttering curses. The main attraction, however, was the sight of women of color naked

from the waist. Much the same formula was the key to the success of Ripley's "Believe It or Not" Odditorium at the Chicago fair, and was repeated thirty years later in the 1962 popular Italian film *Mondo Cane (A Dog's World)* showing exotic tribes and customs round the world.

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