Understanding Slavery Initiative

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The Human Zoo

The exhibition of 'human curiosities' had been an essential component of travelling fairs and carnivals in Europe from the Middle Ages. As advances in the technology of navigation in the early 16th century put Europeans in touch with human communities all over the globe, the non-Western world became an important source of such exhibits. As early as 1501, 'Eskimos' were being shown in Bristol, and in 1603, native Americans were displayed in their canoes on the Thames. Many of these human exhibits ended up being seen as human curiosities. It was the examples of African humanity, however, that held the greatest fascination for European visitors.

Misconceptions

One offshoot of the large-scale trafficking of people across the Atlantic was a constant demand for 'Pygmies', 'Zulus', 'Amazon' warrior-women from Dahomey, albinos and others for display. African bodies (dead and alive) were always displayed with the understanding that their humanity was questionable, that they were distanced intellectually and morally from all other population groups. These notions had some of their roots in the earliest European misconceptions about African people. For instance, the first maps of Africa were decorated with images of tailed half-men and even wilder headless creatures with eyes and mouths in their chests. Eventually Africans of various types would become attractions at anthropological displays, zoos, music halls, world fairs and amusement parks of all kinds, right into the middle of the 20th century.

Amelia Newsham, the White Negress

Amelia Newsham, an albino enslaved woman, arrived in London having been sent from Jamaica as a present from her master to his son. She was sold on to two men who exhibited her at fairs throughout Britain. By 1795, she was being exhibited by Thomas Hall at the House of Curiosities, No. 10 City Road in London. While marvelling at her unpigmented African features, visitors were treated to her recitation of the following verse:

> My nose, my lips, my features, all explore, The just resemblance of a blackamore; And on my head the silver-coloured wool Gives further demonstration clear and full. This curious age may with amazement view What after ages won't believe is true.

Souvenir coins struck with the likeness of the 'White Negress' were also for sale. Mrs Newsham continued to exhibit herself after she gained her freedom and had met and married an Englishman, with whom she had six children. Amelia was the most prominent of a number of young albino women who were put on display as 'white negresses' in the 18th and 19th centuries. The earliest record is of a 'white negro girl' exhibited at Bartholomew Fair (London's Smithfield) at 'a penny a look' in the 1740s.

George Gratton, the Piebald Boy

Piebaldism, or vitiligo, is a condition of partial albinism. In people of African origin, this results in unevenly pigmented skin and hair. In 1808, George Alexander Gratton was born into slavery on the Caribbean island of St Vincent, suffering from vitiligo . His unusual pigmentation led to him being displayed before paying spectators while only a few months old. At the age of 15 months, he was sent to Bristol where he was sold for £1,000 to the showman John Richardson. Baptised two years later, he was exhibited all over Britain as the 'Beautiful Spotted Boy' or the 'Spotted Negro of Renown'. He died of a facial tumour before his 50th birthday and was buried at All Saints Church, Marlow in Buckinghamshire.

Saartje Baartman

Born in southern Africa in 1789 of the Khoisan people (then referred to as Hottentots), Saartje Baartman was brought to England by British ship's doctor William Dunlop who saw the possibilities of exploiting her unfamiliar appearance to curious European audiences. She was first displayed – as the 'Hottentot Venus' – in London's Piccadilly where she was described as parading on: a stage raised about three feet from the floor, with a cage, or enclosed place at the end of it; … the Hottentot was within the cage; that on being ordered by her keeper, she came out, and that her appearance was highly offensive to delicacy … 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 on a chain than a human being. Not all observers approved of this exhibition. Some considered Saartje an 'unfortunate female, who was exhibited to the public under circumstances of peculiar disgrace to a civilised country'. From Piccadilly, she was moved to Bartholomew Fair and Haymarket. Four years after her arrival in London, she was bought by Hendrik Cezar, a 'showman of wild animals'. In Paris, she was displayed at society events and it was at such a function that she caught the attention of Napoleon's surgeon general, George Cuvier. Over the following year, she was repeatedly studied by doctors and anthropologists. Eventually she was driven into prostitution and alcoholism and, pregnant, she died in Paris in December 1815. She had been ill for three days before she and her unborn child died, perhaps from tuberculosis and syphilis. Dr Cuvier wasted no time in making a plaster model of her brain and preserved her buttocks and vagina, all to be displayed at the Musée de l'Homme. In 2002, 187 years later after her departure from southern Africa, Saartje's remains were returned to her native land. A succession of other women performed under the name of the 'Hottentot Venus' throughout the 19th century.

The Great Exhibition and after

At London's Great Exhibition of 1851, people of African origin appeared in a replica of an African village. By this time, the demand for 'human curiosities' from Africa was so great that people of African heritage who had been born outside Africa often posed as 'wild men', 'Amazons' and 'savages'. From 1859 onwards, as Darwin's theories of evolution were being debated, Africans were constantly viewed as occupying a lower place to Europeans on the 'Great Chain of Being'. People of African origin would continue to be displayed at zoos, fairs and freak shows throughout Europe and North America for another 100 years. These displays were presented as entertainments. But by attempting to establish a continuum between the local fauna in Africa and its human inhabitants, they rationalised slavery and ultimately lent legitimacy to European expansion into Africa as proof that Europeans stood atop a hierarchy of deepening darkness and deformity.