

11 October

3<sup>rd</sup> Annual **International  
Conference on Social Justice**

2022

Conference Theme:  
**RESTITUTION**

12 October

4<sup>th</sup> Annual  
**Social Justice Summit**

 **Stellenbosch**  
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## The story of Sarah Baartman and the poem *'I've come to take you home'*

*In 1815 Sarah Baartman died after years spent in European "freak shows". Today she is seen by many as the epitome of colonial exploitation and racism, of the ridicule and commodification of black people. Twenty years ago, South African poet, writer and storyteller **Diana Ferrus** was instrumental in restoring Sarah's dignity through her touching tribute to Sarah *"I have come to take you home."* Ferrus wrote the poem in the midst of the French reluctance to release Baartman's remains from the Musée de L'Homme; and the popularity of the poem is widely believed to be responsible for the return of Baartman's remains to South Africa, in 2002. The poem was included in a French law about restitution.*

**Ferrus will be a speaker at the Annual Social Justice Summit themed restitution on Wednesday 12 October.**

*In her own words **Diana Ferrus** explains the background to a remarkable story of restitution:*

**S**arah Baartman, an indigenous South African woman was taken to England in 1810 under false pretenses. Upon arrival William Dunlop, her owner immediately put up advertisements on lamp posts and in newspapers, *"New, new from South Africa, the Hottentot Venus, come and buy your tickets, come and see."* This was to be the start of a journey of exploitation, humiliation, of pain.

She ended up in Paris where Dunlop sold her to Reaux, an animal trainer. Reaux in turn used her in freak shows and exhibited her. The scientists Georges Cuvier and Geoffrey St Hillaire wanted her to pose in the nude so that they could inspect her private parts. Up to her death she refused to. The harsh treatment in Paris and forced prostitution led to her early death, at the end of 1815 she died at the age of 25.

It was then that Cuvier made a plaster cast of her body, put her brain and genitalia in formalin and dissected the body. He held numerous talks and wrote books in which he declared that of all the races that he studied, Sarah's was the closest to the monkey. She had lips like an orangutan, and woolly hair, in fact, she was what Darwin would call *"the missing link between human and ape"*. Her remains were then put on display in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris from 1816.

In South Africa, the Griqua people, a tribe of the Khoekhoe petitioned the French as early as the 1950s to send her remains home. The remains should be buried in order for the soul to rest, they believed. The French would not budge because they made a law in 1850 that all artifacts in French museums belonged to the French state.

In 1998 I went to study on a fellowship at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands. There I learned about Sarah again in the module *"Sexuality in the Colonies"*. I was already homesick and learning about Sarah's ordeal broke my heart. I thought of Sarah one evening while missing my mother who died the previous year and I said to myself, *"If I miss my mother this much, how much more did Sarah miss her mother!"*

Drenched in tears it was as if I heard Sarah's voice call, *"I want to go home, I want to go home."* I turned around and went to my desk and wrote, *"I've come to take you home"* never knowing how prophetic those words were going to become. After the stint in The Netherlands, I came home and recited the poem. The reactions were astounding. People cried and were deeply moved by the poem. I realised there was power in the words.

The French Senator Nicholas About came across the poem on the internet. He wrote to me to that the poem shows exactly how Sarah's people feel about her remains still being in Paris. He was extremely moved by the poem and wanted to use it as part of his argument/bill to have Sarah's remains returned to South Africa.

It was like a dream come true for me. Senator About had the poem translated into French and read it as part of his bill in the French Senate on 29 January 2002. It must have touched the hearts of all the senators because the bill was passed unanimously. The poem today stands as part of the law that enabled the return of Sarah Baartman's remains, a first in French history.

On 29 April 2002, I recited the poem at the handing-over-ceremony of Sarah's remains. On 3 May the South African delegation left France with Sarah's remains in the plane. Sarah arrived home 192 years after her departure. She was buried on 9 August 2002 (Women's Day) in Hankey, Gamtoosvalley in the Eastern Cape, the valley where Sarah came from.

*A story of triumph, a story of hope. The pen is indeed mightier than the sword. Words healed, words can still heal.*

**Diana Ferrus**  
**2 October 2022**

