



Clifton C. Crais, Pamela Scully. *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xiv + 232 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13580-9.

Reviewed by Scott Rosenberg

Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch

Sara Baartman: More than the Hottentot Venus?

Over the last decade, the story of Sara Baartman has captured the imagination and been the subject of several scholarly works, and her remains were at the center of international and national debates. Yet, for all this attention, we know very little about who Sara Baartman was, or what her life was like. In their book, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully seek to shed light on her life, and to provide insight into how she may have perceived and reacted to a world that sought to exploit her on the basis of race and gender. From the outset, the authors recognize the difficulty of telling Baartman's story due to the paucity of sources, especially the mere fragments left by Baartman herself (p. 5). However, the authors' thorough research allows them to reconstruct her life and they do an excellent job of using the world around her to help tell the story. Using extensive archival research to reconstruct her world, the authors are able to give the reader an accurate portrayal of Sara's life and how she might have interacted with those who sought to exploit her. Crais and Scully set forth a noble and difficult task, to tell her story without presenting it as one of "inevitable victimization" (p. 4). What makes this work different from the other scholarly works about Sara Baartman is the effort to tell her story instead of narrowly focusing on the story of racial science of which she was a victim.

The first two chapters focus on who Sara Baartman was before she came to Europe and what her life was like, both on the Cape frontier as well as later, when she was a domestic servant in Cape Town. In trying to uncover who Sara Baartman really was, Crais and Scully conducted extensive archival research to present an accurate date and place of her birth. The authors use the story of the Khoekhoe and life on the frontier at this time to shed light on what life probably was like for Sara Baartman as a child. Chapter 2 explores Sara's life as a servant in Cape Town. It is here that we start to learn some of

the details of her life, such as the loss of her first child, how she came to be in the employ of the Cesars' house, as well as her relationship with the Dutch sailor Hendrick Von Jong. The authors fill in a lot of the blanks through their vivid description of Cape Town and the lives of servants at that time. By exposing the reader to the world that Sara experienced in Cape Town we can get a sense of how she probably changed there. The authors argue that she became a "Cape Woman," exposed to many peoples and cultures, and that the woman who later arrived in Europe was not straight from the hinterland (p. 48). This fact is important as it contradicts the narrative of her life that surrounded her presentation in Europe.

The concept of the Hottentot Venus was probably born around 1808, when Sara began to perform at the British hospital in Cape Town. It was at this time that the Scottish doctor Alexander Dunlop began to make plans to bring Sara to Europe. The next three chapters examine her life in Europe and how Europeans viewed her. It was in 1810, after her arrival in London that Sara Baartman truly began her life as the Hottentot Venus. By adorning Sara in clothing that accentuated her bottom, Dunlop sought to create an exhibit that combined science and freak show with a touch of sex, transforming her into something that was "sexually wondrous and ethnographic," the "Venus Hottentot" that the British public came to see. Within a few months of her arrival, she became embroiled in controversy. Leading abolitionist Zachary Macaulay made it his personal quest to free Sara, thinking that she was a slave in England. Crais and Scully raise some interesting questions about Macaulay's motives and whether he took the mission on in an attempt to restore his reputation as a "saint" after accusations of slavery had rocked the Sierra Leone Company. As a result of Macaulay's actions, the attorney general launched an investigation, which resulted in one of the few direct pieces of evidence left behind by Sara Baartman. Dur-

ing the interview to ascertain whether Sara was a slave or not, she stated that she had come to Cape Town and later to London of her own will, and that she had been promised money in exchange for exhibiting herself. During the course of the interview she stated that she had everything she wanted and that she had no complaints (p. 99). The authors raise a number of questions about the veracity and context of her statements. First, they raise the obvious question of whether Sara was free to speak her mind with Dunlop in the room. Furthermore, they raise a deeper question of whether her life experiences would have prevented her from objecting to her condition. Nonetheless, as a result of her statement, the investigation was closed. Soon, London lost interest in the Venus Hottentot and Dunlop took Sara on the road. It was during this time that she was baptized as Sara Baartman in Manchester Cathedral. The authors offer several possible explanations for why Baartman was baptized, in hopes of revealing more about her life at this time.

Sara Baartman arrived in Paris with Henry Taylor in September of 1814 and would spend the final fourteen months of her life there. During her time in Paris, she became more deeply enmeshed in the pursuit of racial science, as eminent French scientists believed that examination of her bottom would reveal whether she was closer to ape than human. The French public mirrored this fascination with her private parts. Much as she had been in London, Sara was put on display in Paris, where for three francs, one could look at her. However, whereas in London there had been some interest in her person, Parisians seemed only interested in her physical features, being a living representation of our evolutionary past. In addition to examining her presentation and life in Paris, the authors carefully analyze the historical sources. In 1815, two supposed interviews with her appeared in the Parisian press. However, the authors discount both as credible sources: rather, they were designed to further her image as the Venus Hottentot. The authors also question the lecture given by De Blainville after his interview with Sara: did she tell De Blainville what he wanted to hear, what was expected of the Venus Hottentot, or did he simply change the story of her life to fit his image of her?

Much as the Parisian public was fascinated with her bottom, the scientific community was interested in the medical condition of “steatopygia,” or significant amounts of fatty tissue on the backside. Because of the prevailing philosophical belief that women were closer to nature, it was believed that Sara’s private parts would hold the key to whether she was human or not. Although Sara refused to allow Georges Cuvier to examine her, after her death Cuvier obtained her body and dissected her, made a cast of her body, and then boiled her down and reassembled her bones. Cuvier and others concluded that she was closer to ape than human, and Sara Baartman became one of the first victims of racial science.

The last chapter focuses on the political and economic struggle to control the remains of Sara Baartman. In the 1990s the Hottentot Venus became a symbol of the oppression faced by blacks under apartheid and the South African government demanded her return. Questions of where she should be buried, or even what name should appear on her tombstone became political issues. Although buried near her most likely place of birth in a style that sought to include both her Khoekhoe and Christian pasts, the interment of her remains was ultimately dictated by larger political forces than the concerns of the local Khoi.

This book provides a glimpse into who Sara Baartman was, and what her life was like. It also explores the creation of her public image and her unwitting role in racial science. Sara Baartman was a victim of race, class, and gender in the nineteenth century, but she was also a human being. This is a very well-researched and -written book, which should be of interest to scholars, but the book is also very accessible and draws in the reader with its rich detail, which should make it of interest to students and non-academic readers. The authors raise many provocative questions and intellectually exciting ideas, as one realizes how much her story has influenced Western science and thought. The book also reveals the tragedy of how her body was used to validate racial and gender persecution in the nineteenth century and her role as a victim in the ideology of racial science.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Scott Rosenberg. Review of Crais, Clifton C.; Scully, Pamela, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25156>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.