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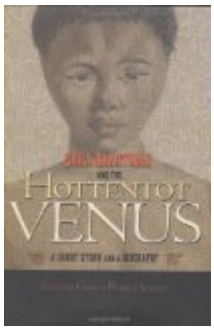

Clifton C. Crais, Pamela Scully. *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xiv + 232 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-13580-9.

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Published on H-AfrArts (September, 2010)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

When historians Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully began research for *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, they intended to uncover details about Baartman in the years before she became known as the Hottentot Venus. Aware that most scholarship has focused on her pre- and post-mortem display as a scientific oddity, exotic curiosity, and freak of nature, the authors wondered: "What if we looked at the totality of her life and resisted the temptation of reading her history backward as a story of inevitable victimization?" (p. 4) This question led them to five countries on three continents where they conducted research in more than a dozen archives and libraries and interviewed possible relatives of Baartman. Unfortunately, they discovered only fragmentary scraps of enticing information that offered little real insight into their elusive subject.

Crais and Scully's frustration over this lack of evidence is palpable throughout the text. They note, for example, that Baartman gave only three interviews; of those, two are probably fiction. The third, which took place in London, was conducted in Dutch (Baartman's second language) under the scrutiny of court officers "and then translated and handed down to history as a paraphrase" (p. 5). The authors also outline some of the more disheartening logistical aspects of their research experience: a Parisian archivist denied them access to a centuries-old document for fear of causing a "diplomatic incident," according to an archivist quoted by the authors (p.183), and dealing with the South African government proved challenging. (One important document was said to have disappeared.) At the beginning of the book, the authors openly admit the defeat of their original goal: "We will always know more about the phantom that haunts the Western imagination [the Hottentot Venus] … than we do about the life of Sara Baartman" (p. 6).

Nevertheless, Crais and Scully breathe life into Baartman as thoroughly as they can, frequently situating her story within historical events and physical geography to compensate for the gaping absences in the archival record.

Throughout the book, they correct a few misconceptions and provide some thoughtful analysis. For example, they emphasize that Baartman was born in South Africa in the 1770s and not in 1789 as is generally thought. Her earlier birth is significant because it means she witnessed the shift from an African to a colonial way of life. By the time Baartman crossed the sea to London in 1810, she had lived and worked in Cape Town and its environs for more than a decade. When her feet touched European soil, she was "a worldly woman in her thirties, not an innocent child recently brought from Africa's interior" (p. 57).

Even so, Baartman never was a free woman, and males hoping to profit from her otherness largely dictated her life. One of her owners, Hendrik Cesars (a Free Black), first displayed her in 1808 to medical patients in Cape Town to pay off his debts. About this situation, Crais and Scully note: "In all likelihood Sara became something of an early nineteenth-century exotic dancer and may have provided sex as well" (p. 51). Later, during Baartman's time in London, the authors "can well imagine that the relationship between Cesars and Sara moved, if it had not been so previously, to one of sexual intimacy" (p. 81). While this type of conjecture, which appears throughout the text, adds detail to the authors' historical analysis, it opposes their stated intention for this project. Since Crais and Scully chose to exclude such educated guesswork from the footnotes (perhaps in an effort to lengthen a relatively short book), parts of the text reinforce Baartman's status as a victim, a blank signifier (or "ghost," as the title states) who, throughout history, has been molded to fit others' agendas.

Baartman herself may have attempted to fulfill others' expectations, and Crais and Scully argue that an astute comprehension of European desires coupled with an impressive acting talent made her a convincing performer. She also may have altered her life story--leaving out certain details and embellishing others--to suit various interviewers. Ironically, assuming that Baartman was a savvy strategist in terms of her image, the same tactics that benefited her while alive probably contributed to the erasure of her true self from history.

Although the authors make repeated efforts to grant their subject agency, the enticing tidbits of information that suggest Baartman may have exercised her own will seem forced. The authors interpret Baartman's refusal to allow Georges Cuvier to examine her genitals, even while artists rendered and scientists measured the rest of her body, as "a profound statement of self" (p. 135). But, only five pages later, the dramatic way in which they describe the fate of Baartman's body after her 1815 death seems to undermine her act of defiance: "Now she could no longer resist their entreaties. Spreading her legs open, the men examined Sara's genitals, to their delight discovering her 'apron.' Science as rape, institutionalized" (p. 140).

Another way in which Crais and Scully emphasize Baartman's agency is by stressing that she was a multilingual businesswoman who, at least to some degree, controlled her image as the Hottentot Venus. In a move unusual for the time, Baartman held the copyright and was the official publisher of two famous Frederick Christian Lewis aquatints (dated September 1810 and March 1811) that represent her in indigenous dress; both were converted into broadsheet advertisements for her performances. Since Baartman was the only person in London who had knowledge of Khoekhoe clothing, body paint, and accoutrements, the authors "think that Baartman sought to render her depictions with verisimilitude, even if the overall design of the poster was out of her control" (p. 75). Further revealing the absence of her power (after suggesting its presence), however, they deem it unlikely that Baartman saw royalties from her own image. They also argue that Alexander Dunlop, Baartman's owner at that time and the originator of the Hottentot

Venus idea, may have made her the publisher in an attempt to allay Londoners' fears that she was being exploited. Supporting this theory, Crais and Scully emphasize that the second aquatint, which appeared in the wake of the London court case that questioned Baartman's liberty, presents a more conservative rendering of its subject than the first.

Confusing to the reader, however, is that Dunlop "*got rid* [reviewer's emphasis] of the tight body stocking that suggested a nude Hottentot Venus" in October 1810 to make Baartman's performance more conservative (p. 91). This apparently was an attempt to forestall additional criticism about Baartman's possible slave status. However, according to Crais and Scully, the second, less conservative aquatint presented Baartman *in* a body stocking: "Lewis produced a second aquatint in March 1811, depicting Sara closer to how she was then being exhibited" (p. 75). The authors state that the depiction is not an exact replication of Baartman's costume and note that the second image is less revealing since it presents her from the side rather than the front. Nevertheless, the contradiction in the body stocking discussion needs acknowledgement and explication.

Another point of confusion is Crais and Scully's conflation of the Khoekhoe and the Gonaqua peoples. While they state in a footnote that "[r]econstructing Khoekhoe culture and society is notoriously vexing" (p. 186), in the text they merely note that the mostly pastoral Khoekhoe lived among the Gonaqua. They then repeatedly speak of these two peoples as one, as in the following passage: "Strokes somewhat bolder than one would usually have found among the early Gonaqua of the Eastern lands paint her [Baartman's] face. She holds a staff, smokes a pipe, and wears shoes--the latter clearly not part of original Khoekhoe dress" (p. 75). Is the reader supposed to gather that the two peoples' material cultures are interchangeable? This lack of clarity weakens research findings the authors present as straightforward fact. For example, Crais and Scully note: "There is always a tension within European reportage. Seventeenth-century observers typically portrayed Khoekhoe as a dirty, even vile people. In the more romantic imagination in the second half of the eighteenth century, Gonaqua often earned the reputation for being kind and generous, and their women fair and beautiful" (p. 15). Are the Khoekhoe and Gonaqua here being discussed as two distinct peoples?

Two particularly strong aspects of the book are the authors' contrast of the cultural climates in London and Paris and their discussion of Baartman's significance to South African nation-building in the 1990s. The London public and the city's legal system were critical of Baartman's display and concerned about her status as a possible slave. (In 1810, ***The Case of the Hottentot Venus*** was brought before the King's Bench; the ruling declared Baartman free.) By the time Baartman performed in Paris, however, her reputation as the Hottentot Venus preceded her; she had a predetermined role to fill. Moreover, Parisians were seeking entertainment during a particularly stressful time in French history. Public outcry was nonexistent when S. Reaux, who purchased Baartman from Taylor in 1815, and displayed her for ten hours a day at the Palais-Royal, placed a collar around her neck: "Here the pubic mark of slavery, the collar, elicited no complaints" (p. 128). Even when Parisian journalists were sympathetic to Baartman's plight, "[t]he public understood Sara Baartman in the context of a wider cultural enthusiasm of the exotic" (p. 130).

In South Africa, Baartman's post-mortem treatment also was less than desirable as various groups attempted to "claim" her and take possession of her remains, which were repatriated from the Museé de l'Homme in August 2002. After much controversy and outcry, she was buried in the outskirts of Hankey (near Port Elizabeth) simply because one primary source suggested she was born in that area. Although Baartman had be-

come a symbol for South Africa and for women everywhere, her gravesite fell into disrepair within months and was even vandalized. Metal bars now surround her grave: “Returned to South Africa, Sara Baartman remains behind bars, imprisoned still” (p. 168).

Throughout ***Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography***, Crais and Scully stress the difficulties of attempting to draw conclusions from piecemeal secondary sources. They also examine the power dynamics that problematize seemingly straightforward facts. Unfortunately, large gaps in the archival record thwarted their attempts to write a straightforward biography (thus the wise placement of “A Ghost Story” before “a Biography” in the subtitle). As a result, they use a fair amount speculation to construct a plausible portrait of Baartman--they bestow her with hopes, desires, and fears. This approach, which is more creative writing exercise than factual analysis, is flawed as scholarship. Since the authors criticize others who have spoken for Baartman throughout history, it is also contradictory. Nevertheless, ***Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*** may be a necessary addition to scholarship about Baartman. The product of an exhaustive research mission, it indicates that the search for details about Baartman's life can now end, for “her story … also is a cautionary tale about silence and the limits of history, and about what happens when someone, or something, comes to stand for too much, when the past can bear no more” (p. 6).