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Alexandra Poulain

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Jorunn S. Gjerden, Kari Jegerstedt, and Željka Švrljuga, eds. *Exploring the Black Venus Figure in Aesthetic Practices*. Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2019. 223 p. ISBN: 9 7890 0439 5206 (hb)/ 9 7890 0440 7916 (e-book). €99 (hb & e-book)

- 1 Since the days of her infamous exhibition in early nineteenth-century London and Paris and her posthumous dissection at the hands of French naturalist Georges Cuvier, the story of Sarah Baartman returned to public attention in 1985 with the publication of two ground-breaking articles by Stephen Jay Gould and Sander L. Gilman, who both remarked that Baartman's remains were still on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. In 1994, newly elected President Nelson Mandela visited President François Mitterrand and requested that her remains be repatriated to South Africa, a request that initiated a protracted period of diplomatic squabbles between the two countries and contributed to further place the Baartman story in the public eye. By the time her remains were effectively brought back to South Africa in 2002, when she was at last given a funeral, her story had been revisited by many artists and writers, a lot of them black women, and had sparked much interdisciplinary new scholarship, often at the intersection of feminism, critical race studies and visual studies. Jorunn S. Gjerden, Kari Jegerstedt and Željka Švrljuga's new edited collection *Exploring the Black Venus Figure in Aesthetic Practices* is one of several recent interventions which consider how the story of

Sarah Baartman, and the related “figure” or “trope” of “Black Venus,” have been reinterpreted in various artistic and literary modes since Baartman’s death.

- 2 The volume offers a general introduction followed by nine original case studies of such aesthetic revisitings of the Black Venus figure, organized in two sections, “Histories” and “Epistemologies.” One issue I found myself struggling with is that no effort is made in the introduction to define the historical and epistemological parameters of the Black Venus “figure,” or indeed to explain exactly what is meant by the ubiquitous terms “figure” and “trope.” While some of the contributions are concerned with works that return explicitly to the actual story of Sarah Baartman, others deal with stereotypical representations of hypersexualized black women and the ways in which these stereotypes are resisted, destabilized or resignified in modern and contemporary art and writing. The implication of the volume’s juxtaposition of both kinds of essays seems to be that the Baartman story is the cultural Ur-text of all later versions of the Black Venus stereotype, but this debatable assumption is not articulated clearly. Only Kjersti Aarstein, in her fine exploration of H.C. Andersen’s fairy tale “The Marsh King’s Daughter,” which she reads as an early critique of Danish colonialism, building on Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s work on “the Black Venus narrative,” clarifies that she accepts “the general notion that ‘Black Venus’ is a metaphor for African women’s supposedly unrestrained sexuality and affinity with animals” – a notion which she sees as related to, though distinct from, “the life and legend of Sarah Baartman” (41). One useful starting-point for the collection might have been Janel Hobson’s claim in her landmark book *Venus in the Dark*, republished in 2018, that

Baartman’s exhibition as the famed Hottentot Venus conjoined two existing tropes of black femininity in that era—the ‘Hottentot’ and the ‘Venus’ [...]. Whereas the Black Venus is an enticing representation of sexualized, exotic black femininity, the Savage Hottentot is a repulsive icon of wildness and monstrosity. Yet both representations elicit fear and attraction, which are combined and reflected in grotesque images of the Hottentot Venus. (21)

- 3 Despite this conceptual ambiguity, the volume offers exciting new readings of a wide range of literary and artistic productions. The first section, “Histories,” focuses on textual figurations of the Baartman story and/or of the “Black Venus” paradigm, while the second section, “Epistemologies,” addresses the ways in which spatiality and visibility are implicated in the process of (racist) knowledge-production historically associated with the Western gaze when it focuses on black female bodies. Analysing the treatment of narrative voice in Beryl Gilroy’s *Inkle and Yarico*, Željka Švrljuga shows how the novel subtly destabilizes the implicit hierarchies ingrained in the white male narrator’s story. Carmen Birkle examines the bold recycling and ironizing of stereotypes in Kara Walker’s 2014 ephemeral monumental sculpture *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, and reads it alongside Nicki Minaj’s wax figure at Madame Tussauds Las Vegas and her “Anaconda” rap video, showing how, as they elicit audience interactions, both work to make visible the latent racism in contemporary American culture, and reclaim the “Black Venus” figure while asserting full control over its modes of aesthetic figuration. Camilla Erichsen Skalle writes of fascist ideology’s investment in the Black Venus tropology and reads two Italian novels of the fascist era, Ennio Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) and Mario Tobino’s *Il deserto di Libya* (1951), as questioning the Western male gaze on black women and thus engaging critically with fascist constructions of masculinity. Kari Jegerstedt offers a brilliant reading of Angela Carter’s “Black Venus,” in which the speaking voice is that of Jeanne

Duval, Baudelaire's Caribbean lover. Rather than purporting to "give voice" to Duval, thus silencing her anew, Jegerstedt argues that the story makes apparent the act of imperialist silencing which is inevitable within the parameters of Western literature, but finds a way out of this impasse by gesturing towards traditional storytelling as an alternative discursive regime allowing transnational feminist solidarity. Ljubica Matek argues that the emancipatory potential of Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* is grounded in its Brechtian aesthetics as epic theatre. Margery Vibe Skagen reads together Baudelaire's prose poem "La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse," which stages a monstrous orangutan-woman at a fair, with a dream of a male monster displayed in a brothel/museum as related in a letter to his friend Charles Asselineau in 1856. Drawing on Foucault's notion of heterotopias, she argues that the two monsters in their respective settings function as ironic distortions of the stereotypical poet, and that they "resist emerging discourses on the nature of the human" (153). Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen offers a fascinating, richly illustrated piece about contemporary engagements with the visual apparatus of the Western museums (specifically, the display case) and the construction of the Western gaze in the work of visual and performance artists Fariba Hajamadi, Tracey Rose, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Finally, Jorunn S. Gjerden examines the cinematic techniques at work in Abdellatif Kechiche's *Vénus noire* (2010) and convincingly argues that Kechiche mobilizes similar strategies as those analyzed by Deleuze in Carl Th. Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) in order to inhibit the viewer's cognitive mastery. The volume brings important new perspectives on well-known works and brings attention to lesser known ones, testifying that the story of Sarah Baartman and the Black Venus tropology are central to critical engagements with Western imperialist culture and epistemology.

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AUTHORS

ALEXANDRA POULAIN

Sorbonne Nouvelle – EA 4398 (Prismes)

Alexandra Poulain is Professor of postcolonial literature and theatre at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle. She has published widely on modern and contemporary Irish drama and performance, with a special focus on Yeats and Beckett. Her latest book, *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play* (Palgrave, 2016), looks at rewritings of the Passion narrative as a modality of political resistance in Irish plays from Synge to the present day. Her current research focuses on decolonial projects in contemporary art.