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Raisa Adah Rexer. *The Fallen Veil. A Literary and Cultural History of the Photographic Nude in Nineteenth-Century France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2021. xii + 328pp. Eighty-seven halftones, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 9780812252866.

Response by Raisa Adah Rexer, Vanderbilt University.

In her review of *The Fallen Veil*, Suzanne Guerlac poses some intriguing questions about what the book is and what it could have been. Before addressing the substance of the review, I'd like to take the liberty of reiterating in my own terms what the book *is* about to ground my response to her suggestions about what it should have been. The book began as a way to explain the many references to nude photographs I had found in nineteenth-century French literary texts. Because of the lack of book-length research on early photographic nudity in France, it grew from there into an attempt both to demonstrate the vast cultural presence of these images and to sketch out the arc of evolving attitudes towards them in the nineteenth century, incorporating my literary readings into that narrative. Over the course of the first half-century (or so) of photography's existence, the debates inspired by nude photography shifted drastically. Whereas at its inception, the genre inspired anxieties about the limits of art and obscenity and the place of the real model's body in delimiting these categories, by the turn of the century, the dominant discourse about photographic nudity focused on social degeneration to the virtual exclusion of debates about art. In the book, I hewed as closely to nineteenth-century voices as possible and tried not to impose my own opinions about nude images upon the texts I was encountering (as impossible as I acknowledge full self-effacement is as an author). I was rewarded by discovering that, even with all the limitations of nineteenth-century thought, its debates and anxieties have much to tell us about our continued discussion about art, obscenity, and the body's signifiatory power today.

While *The Fallen Veil* covers thousands of texts and images, it is certainly not encyclopedic and makes no claims to be. Nude photographs have so long been marginalized that the problem of delimiting a corpus from which to work was vexed and complicated. Far too many images have been lost to time, shame, and bad recordkeeping. Indeed, as I explain in the book, by the 1880s I wager no claim as to what the dominant imagery even looked like because so few photographs have been preserved of the millions that were produced. I worked from specific visual archives in Paris (at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Archives de la Préfecture de police) because they contain the most complete set of dated and attributed nude photographs produced in nineteenth-century France (more specifically, in Paris, the center of both nude photographic production and government recordkeeping). These archives and the texts in my study told a story about the significance of early nude photography. But it is certainly not the only one.

Guerlac's review picks up and focuses on one of the limitations of the archives and texts from which I worked. Her primary criticism of the story told in *The Fallen Veil* is that it does not include race. To be frank, I don't entirely disagree with Guerlac in the general sense. I do wish I had been more explicit about the way that the archives and texts at the backbone of my project normalized whiteness, creating a fictionalized world of racial homogeneity internal to the trade in nineteenth-century nude photographic images. This is not to say that no images of Black bodies circulated but that the discourse around art, obscenity, and the photographic nude was specifically developed in reference to the white female body. Yet it seems to me that Guerlac, rather than criticizing *The Fallen Veil* on its own terms, instead proposes that I should have written an entirely different book, on a different topic, and most importantly, using an entirely different visual archive. For example, the 1853 photograph of the Nuba woman by Trémaux on which Guerlac focuses her counter analysis was taken in Sudan and distributed in the pages of a rare travelogue. It belongs to the corpus of photographs taken in and disseminated from North Africa during the Second Empire. A book that examines Trémaux's and other such contemporary photographs in order to illuminate how obscenity may have been defined specifically in the context of colonial expansion and race would be interesting and much needed, but it is not the book I wrote, and it requires a body of archival knowledge that I do not purport to have.

The citation around which Guerlac's criticism of my book turns is a concrete example of the tension between the archive that I did work from and the one that she believes I should have worked from. In the book, I quote an 1855 review of the photographer Félix Moulin that refers to a model as a "Hottentot."^[1] For Guerlac, this is emblematic of the book's blindness to race because, she believes, I fail to acknowledge that the model was Black. However, the reality is far more complex and requires a knowledge of both the archive of Moulin's photographs and contemporary discourse about the body. When I first read this review of Moulin's work, I, too, thought that the model was a woman of color. However, I was unable to locate any photograph by Moulin that corresponded to the photograph described in the review (specifically, to a list of body parts enumerated by the reviewer and omitted in Guerlac's citation). Additionally, I noted the reviewer's contention (likewise omitted from Guerlac's citation) that this model was not rare: "Look at that Hottentot: she does not have, like those of M. Rousseau, the excuse of being rare," he writes.^[2] As Black photographic models were exceptionally rare in France at the time, the alleged commonness of the model suggests that the term "Hottentot" carried another meaning in this context. When used to describe women in the nineteenth century, the word did not necessarily refer to the color of a woman's skin, but to the size and shape of her buttocks. This usage alluded to the so-called "Vénus hottentote," an enslaved South African woman named Sarah Baartmann who was brought to Europe in the early nineteenth century and was known for her distinctive body shape.^[3] For just one example of how the word was deployed to denote steatopygia see the satirical newspaper *Le Tintamarre's* reassurance to Parisiennes that they will remain the paragons of fashion despite the "efforts de la robuste Flamande, de la Moscovite aux contours hottentots, de la Frau de Baden et de Hombourg, aux formidables hanches" to steal their glory.^[4] Moulin's corpus includes many white models who are photographed in such a way as to amplify the proportions of their backsides, indicating that the reviewer was likely using the term in reference to the proportions of the model, rather than her race. My analysis did not fail to identify the model as Black, but it did fail to explain the word's racist etymology and its nineteenth-century modes of usage. And indeed, that explanation would have enriched the reading I offered in the book. The word is deployed in the context of a nineteenth-century discourse around nude photography that conflated the bodies of female photographic models with their meaning; that this white woman's body was represented as sharing characteristics with that

of a “Hottentot” (even if those characteristics did not include skin color) was part of the matrix of physical signifiers that allowed viewers to read her as a prostitute, rather than the embodiment of a work of art.

As I noted above, however, the solution that Guerlac proposes is not that I should have expanded my discussion in the book, but rather that the book should have turned to entirely different archives and topics. Citing Audre Lorde, Guerlac argues that *The Fallen Veil* conflates the erotic and the pornographic in ways that could be disentangled via some of the photographs of non-white bodies that it does not address. As to the issue of conflating the erotic and the pornographic, although I did not undertake in the book to theorize the difference between the erotic and the obscene, I do address these very issues throughout. If Guerlac sees a collapse of the two categories in the book, it is not in my own or the book’s position on photographic nudity.[5] But more to the point, her concluding turn towards the colonial archive and reception history is tangled and problematic. Against my book’s alleged conflation of nudity with obscenity, Guerlac proposes a counterexample in Trémaux’s portrait of the Nuba woman, which she presents as a stand-in for the missing “Hottentot”; in so doing, she invokes and deploys nineteenth-century assumptions about the interchangeability of distinct Black identities, even in the name of taking my book to task for failing to discuss race. She then argues that the “simple modesty” of the woman in this photograph is an example of the ways in which the erotic and the obscene could be decoupled, thus arriving at the conclusion that the limits of obscenity are to be found in colonial difference. Yet the image that seems an example of “simple modesty” to Guerlac is obviously constructed by the photographer as such; once one moves beyond the surface, it can be read in many ways, none of which are simple and most of which are painful and difficult (on the signifiatory burden of images of black women in nineteenth-century France, see for example Robin Mitchell’s *Vénus Noire*).[6] The very phrase “simple modesty” that Guerlac borrows unquestioningly from Trémaux is so laden with racialized signification and colonial violence that it is impossible to take at face value. Indeed, even if we could accept the “simple modesty” of Trémaux’s single photograph, it is in no way representative of the corpus of nineteenth-century photographs of North African women, much of which plays actively on the pornographic appeal of racial difference and colonial power dynamics.[7]

While meant to illustrate the failings of the *The Fallen Veil*, Guerlac’s reading of Trémaux’s photograph ultimately illustrates exactly why I was so attentive to the scope of my project in the first place. The history of nude photographic representation in the context of race and colonial exploitation is a different book, its own book, one that should not be shoehorned into mine. Colonial difference certainly has a role to play in the cultural meaning of obscenity, but it does all women—most egregiously, women of color—an enormous disservice to suggest that the limits of obscenity can only be understood by means of racialized difference.

NOTES

[1] The term “Hottentot” is now recognized as racist, and I use it only to clarify what is at stake in its nineteenth-century usage.

[2] Paul Périer, “Exposition universelle,” *Bulletin de la Société française de photographie*, (September 1855): 273.

[3] On Baartmann's biography and reactions in France in the early part of the nineteenth century, see Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020), pp. 30-42 and 51-79. On the usage of "Hottentot" to denote steatopygia with reference to the "Vénus Hottentote," see the CNRTL lexicographie, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/hottentot>, accessed January 18, 2022.

[4] "Objets d'art et de curiosité," *Le Tintammare*, April 1, 1866, p. 6.

[5] Although they are not part of my book, I have shared my thoughts on such issues elsewhere. See Raisa Rexer, "At Loose Ends: Gender, Sex and Nude Photography in Nineteenth-century France," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 48/3-4 (Spring-Summer 2020): 170-178.

[6] Again, see Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire*, esp. pp. 3-14 and 36-42.

[7] On these photographs, see, for example, Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) or Ali Behdad, "Le harem pluriel: Jean Geiser and Photographic Orientalism," *Yale French Studies*, 139 (Summer 2021): 119-113.

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