

6-1-2010

Review of: Neil Safier, *Measuring the New World*

Jan V. Golinski

University of New Hampshire, Durham, jan.golinski@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/history_facpub

Recommended Citation

Golinski, J.V. Review of: Neil Safier, *Measuring the New World*. In *Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010), 438-439.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

Measuring the New World: Enlightenment Science and South America.By *Neil Safier*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. xviii+387. \$45.00.

It has often been said that the discovery of the Americas transformed European conceptions of the natural world. America was so prolific in new plants, animals, and people that the encounter with its natural wonders ushered in an age of dramatically expanded scientific knowledge. As recent scholarship has shown, however, early modern Europeans did not confront these new natural riches with completely open minds. They voyaged to the New World with considerable cultural baggage; literally so, as they shipped trunk loads of books across the Atlantic. At first, they interpreted what they saw in the familiar terms of scriptural tradition and classical philosophy. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as European scientific institutions set about the systematic study of American nature, they again subjected it to their own categories of understanding, through collection, classification, and ethnographic description.

Given all this, one might ask: Where was the new scientific knowledge made? By explorers, surveyors, naturalists, merchants, and Creoles in the Americas? Or by savants, philosophers, and scholars in the libraries and academies of Europe? Neil Safier proposes a new way to answer these questions, one that owes a good deal to recent work on the sociology and anthropology of science. In his remarkably accomplished book, he sets out to follow the routes along which people, artifacts, texts, and specimens traveled from the New World to the Old. Following things in motion, he aims to capture scientific knowledge in the making, as naive inquirers became skilled observers, as the objects they collected were decontextualized and then recontextualized elsewhere, and as their narrative reports were transformed into information. This kind of historical research is very demanding, calling for extensive travel and considerable linguistic versatility. Safier has followed his trails into the archives of at least half a dozen countries in Europe and the Americas; he cites primary and secondary sources in almost as many languages. He insists that historians must break with the habit of dependence on a single national archive if they are to grasp how the international networks of early modern science operated. Only by matching our efforts to those of early modern inquirers themselves can we uncover “the interconnecting and contingent pathways that link . . . *between* institutions and *across* empires” (14).

The book takes as its starting point the expedition to the Spanish province of Quito (now Ecuador) sent by the Paris Académie des Sciences in 1735. The primary purpose was to measure a three-degree arc of the meridian close to the equator, in order to compare the results with those of an expedition sent to Lapland at the same time and thereby determine the shape of the earth. The party was led by the French savants Charles-Marie de La Condamine, Louis Godin, and Pierre Bouguer, accompanied by two Spanish officers, Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa. The meticulous trigonometric and astronomical measurements made by this team are not Safier’s prime concern. Rather, he considers how the textual legacy of the expedition was constituted, transmitted, and reinterpreted to form European knowledge of this region of South America and its inhabitants. In one chapter, he examines La Condamine’s narrative of his descent of the Amazon river, published after his return to Europe in 1745. La Condamine was able to establish himself as an authority on the territory by means of this text, notwithstanding his unacknowledged plagiarism of earlier writings. He disparaged previous cartographers and travelers, even while relying on uncredited native informants and indulging in traditional fantasies about the city of El Dorado and female Amazon warriors.

In the next chapter, Safier passes to the criticisms directed at La Condamine's journal, especially those that emerged after its publication in an abbreviated Spanish translation. The critics, who included Creole writers from the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, contradicted La Condamine's negative portrayal of the South American natives. A similar fate befell the Spanish narrative published by Juan and Ulloa in 1748, of which Safier has located an unpublished and anonymous critique that again defends the native peoples of the region. Notwithstanding these ripostes, the stereotyped picture of American natives as lazy and weak passed into common currency among European writers. As Safier shows, it featured in the *Encyclopédie*; in the massive *Histoire naturelle* of Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon; and in the work of the Scottish historian William Robertson. At each stage, the passage of information was, as Safier notes, "partial and contingent" (9), the outcome of local negotiations that resulted in quite unfaithful transmission. Even the appearance of supposed facts in print did not ensure their fixation once and for all. On the contrary, Safier sides with other recent historians of print culture in showing that published texts and maps were the result of complex negotiations that continued even after the type was set and the pages impressed. He analyzes the 1751 map of the Quito region, supposedly authored by La Condamine, the proofs of which reveal the important role played in its production by Pedro Vicente Maldonado, a Spanish Creole from Amazonia. In another chapter, he discusses the republication in Paris in 1744 of a description of the Inca empire originally written in the previous century by a mestizo Spanish American. The eighteenth-century edition was a printed palimpsest, with multiple layers of translation and commentary, which juxtaposed the original text with descriptions of the South American plants then being cultivated in the king's garden.

Safier's meticulous narratives create an impression of the fragility of the networks by which natural knowledge was built in the early modern period. The Atlantic was wide. Specimens and artifacts often suffered damage in their passage and were frequently misinterpreted when they arrived. Texts were altered and misunderstood by readers who had agendas of their own. Safier's book calls into question the notion that the sciences worked through rigid and efficient systems integrated with the structures of imperial power—a view that might arise from privileging the archives of the metropolitan centers. He shows how—when we follow objects, people, and texts in their unpredictable peregrinations—we can tell a much more interesting story.

JAN GOLINSKI

University of New Hampshire

Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography. By

Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. xvi+232. \$29.95.

From 1810 to 1815 a Scottish military surgeon, Alexander Dunlop, and three European and South African merchants and showmen displayed the Khoekhoe (more commonly Khoikhoi) domestic servant Sara Baartman in Britain, Ireland, and France as the "Hottentot Venus" in circumstances combining theatrical performance and the aura of a menagerie. After Baartman's death in Paris in 1815, the noted comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier and his assistant Henri de Blainville published elaborate reports on the dissection of her body. Europeans were fascinated with the remarkable physical appearance of some Khoekhoe women, particularly their large buttocks and unusual extended genital labia. European scholars could thus portray the Khoekhoe as primi-