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Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020. xix + 183 pp. Notes, figures, bibliography, index. \$99.95 (hb). ISBN 9-780-8203-5432-3. \$34.95 (pb). ISBN -780-8203-5431-6.

Response Essay by Robin Mitchell, California State University, Channel Islands

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the keen insight and careful attention provided by each respondent to my first book, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. The critical lens with which they all crafted their reviews and their generous engagement with my arguments has not gone unnoticed. My sincere appreciation is also owed to Venita Datta for enthusiastically honoring my wishes to select a diverse body of reviewers, because it is essential that any response features a variety of voices and identities within our profession. That each reviewer highlighted the historical and cultural precariousness these Black women in nineteenth-century France occupied—in their representation and lived reality—reflects a growing awareness of the presence of Black women in France; a presence that has until recently gone largely unremarked in historiography. In this brief essay, I first summarize the central arguments I put forth in *Vénus Noire*. I then speak to the moments in which Mary Dewhurst Lewis and H. Adlai Murdoch felt my assertions could have been more developed. Finally, I address the critiques and thoughtful criticism given by Sarah Fila-Bakabadio and Rebecca Rogers regarding the structure, breadth of research, and analytical absences they found in my book.

The book looks at the French appropriation and production of Black female bodies and attempts to show how these symbolic bodies helped French writers and artists talk about the nation's defeat by what would become known as Haiti—and I am thankful all the reviewers highlighted this point. This defeat, represented as a white male loss (based on the rather maddening tendency to see Revolution as an overwhelmingly masculine space), helped fuel certain types of colonial fantasies about a colony lost, and helped white French men and women imagine a new identity after the Revolution's end. I explain that “[t]he discursive presence of Black women in nineteenth-century France—how they were seen, perceived, produced, and represented—suggests that French elites were deeply unsettled by the Haitian Revolution and that this disturbance contributed to an unclaimed and ignored radicalized national identity” (p.11).

In this sense, *Vénus Noire* sheds new light on the white people looking at and using these Black women's bodies and voices. I choose three particularly visible women who loomed large on the French cultural landscape in the beginning to mid-nineteenth century: Sarah Baartmann, known as the Hottentot Venus, Ourika, a young Senegalese girl purchased and gifted as a house pet to a French noble family, and Jeanne Duval, common-law wife of the poet Charles Baudelaire. I wanted to show what white contemporaries knew about or thought they knew about these women to underscore the lengths they would go to manipulate their represented voices and their depicted bodies. This is why it was critical to show what was known about them in real time (and I hope

speaks to Fila-Bakabadio's inquiry as to why the first chapter was necessary). These women did not exist in bubbles; rather, they often interacted with others, who then felt the need to explain them away or manage them when they became inconvenient.

While the political contexts these women inhabited changed over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, what their representations had in common was an illegitimacy at ever being part of the French body politic. Despite the fact that each woman was increasingly enculturated into Frenchness (Baartmann was born in Africa, arriving in Paris as an adult; Ourika was raised in a French household, learning French language and customs; Duval was born and lived in France), white French society denied them access time and time again: the bar kept moving for them. French national identity changed throughout this time, but the fantasies and trauma imposed on Black female bodies were disturbingly consistent in their certitude that bodies like this could never be French.

Mary Dewhurst Lewis and H. Adlai Murdoch are wonderful in their analysis of the overall work. I appreciate that Murdoch rightfully notes that my work is directly informed by Tyler Stovall's (he was my advisor at Berkeley), which links implicit whiteness and national identity in France.[1] Where I differ from Stovall is in the centrality of gender informed by race, and in our respective time periods. Importantly, Lewis states that the three women in my book "were real women who had real thoughts and feelings, most of which are hard to discern given the historical record left to us, though Mitchell excels at asserting what they felt and thought when she has the evidence to do so." In her review, Lewis indicates a desire for more specificity on the connections "between the loss of Haiti and the ways white French people compensated for it by displacing their traumas onto Black bodies." Here I was implicitly invoking historian Darrell Meadows's work about the racist ideologies held by white French men and women fleeing Saint-Domingue, and how they expected the French government to compensate them for their losses; their recollections and memories about Saint-Domingue became more racially specific and more racist when they realized that was not going to happen.[2] While each chapter attempts to directly tie the utility of Black bodies for white people in dealing with their trauma, we see how the bodies of these three women represent a displacement from Haiti. The connections are essentially played out on the specific physical bodies of these women. White French men and women compensated for this loss by ridiculing these bodies—both as corporeal and also as a cultural canvas upon which they express their trauma.

Regarding my chapter on Ourika, Lewis says "it is less clear how playing dress-up Ourika achieved the same purpose, unless it was to mock the fictional Ourika's own incomplete quest for equality by allowing white women to playfully embody a Black woman's position, without letting Black women occupy theirs in real life." The attacks are not about Ourika as much as about white women wearing blackface in an attempt to achieve a state of "playing" Ourika. The embodiment of a Black woman's position by these actresses was not playful—it was serious business that is punishable. That is why critics mocked white women who did this, saying it stripped away the best part of them (read: whiteness). The fact that there is so much pushback on white women who attempt blackface gives us some understanding that this is not playful at all. Rather, it shows the precariousness of both Black women and white women stepping outside of the respective boundaries set by white French men. As I hope I have shown through Duras's positionality, we see that in real life, their gender—of both Black women and white women—

render their situation unstable. Even the performance of Blackness can have important consequences.

In his review, Murdoch similarly asked that my argument be fleshed out more in certain places. My thanks to him for making the connection between New Imperialism of French African expansion, French colonial possession in the Caribbean, and Duval being unable to fit into New Imperial France when he says that they “arguably join patterns and practices of race and sexuality to national identity and its hierarchies and singularities of class in ways that potentially join deliberate patterns of ethnic exclusion to the nation’s implicit and exclusive whiteness.” His beautiful argument furthers this discussion. While his notion about these patterns is absolutely correct, my argument was tied directly to the end of slavery in 1848, how that historical moment operates in conjunction to the cataclysmic loss of France’s Caribbean colonies, and forces a conversation about what that loss of slavery—not just of Empire—does to the white psyche. Those bookends reignite historical patterns of race, sexuality, and national identity. Haiti represents the beginning of the end of France’s ability to enslave Black people. There is a difference between New Imperialism of the 1880’s forward, and the end of enslavement in 1848. My focus is not on ethnic exclusion but rather it is predicated upon France’s own identity as a nation which enslaves Black people. I am asking readers to understand Duval within the context of France’s grappling with the fact that slavery was ending, and I raise questions of what it meant in a post-slavery French world. Duval existed when slavery was still legal in France—if we read her in conjunction with a France that now had to see itself as a post-slave nation, we can see how a New Imperial France functioned when slavery was not at the heart of its mission. We can better understand the transition from what slavery produced for France and what Empire did. Not only were Black bodies going to be used differently, but French people were going to have to behave differently. Elaborating upon patterns of race, sexuality, and national identity after 1850, while important, was beyond the scope of my project.

Sarah Fila-Bakabadio and Rebecca Rogers remark generously on the scope of my book with regard to the sources I use and their utility in demonstrating the importance of Ourika, Baartmann, and Duval as cultural representations and real human beings. At the same time, they both raise questions I would like to address here. Fila-Bakabadio’s comments on certain shifts in discourse and ideology are interesting to contemplate. She indicates that the stories (as well as historical absence of stories) belonging to the women in my book: “ces destins représentent effectivement l’oscillation d’un pays pris entre des principes fondateurs d’égalité et des hiérarchies raciales fondatrices de l’esclavage colonial” and goes on to ask for “un bref développement sur les modalités de ce glissement d’un discours politique de la grandeur impériale supposément toujours pertinente vers la culture populaire (en fait celle des élites).” I would like to emphasize that what I examine in my book is not a shift—political discourse and popular culture have been constantly informing one other. Part of what I hope to demonstrate is that a necessary link between scientific discourse and popular culture remains prominent throughout history—and here I would also argue political discourse is not exempt from this conversation. My examination of popular culture (the plays, songs, and the like) is so important because it is regurgitating political discourse in a more digestible way for non-elites. French physician François Bernier is speaking in the seventeenth century about race, with Black women taking a peculiar and noteworthy place in his discussion. My intervention is to show how popular culture is not distinct from political or scientific discourse; rather, they are simply discussed and

received in different ways precisely because of the Haitian Revolution. My goal was not to outline the trajectory of how political discourse and pop culture have worked together, but rather to establish the ways in which they have informed each other throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Similarly, Fila-Bakabadio notes the common thread of the destinies these three women share and asserts that “le sursaut nationaliste autant que le basculement des élites françaises vers une racialisation aurait mérité un développement plus ample.” Race is built into the foundation of Frenchness and as such, I argue there is no abrupt shift toward racialization. That becomes clear, I hope, in the first half of the nineteenth century. I chose these women because their experiences and identities highlighted that racialization was happening at least since the late seventeenth century.[3] French Republicanism is predicated upon the notion of Universalism—these women expose the fundamental idea that Universalism is based upon *whiteness*. Many of these women have been ignored and erased from narratives of Frenchness as unimportant. By amplifying them, I hope to show they always existed (either in theory or in reality). And, because they existed, they had to be managed—unfortunately, it is far easier to erase bodies from the historiography rather than to actually engage them. Lastly, and importantly, I want to respond to Fila-Bakabadio’s concern of leaving art historian Anne Lafont out of the conversation: given my dependence upon images, including Lafont would have been wise, and I appreciate her indicating this absence.[4]

Rebecca Rogers notes that my book is one “with broad ambitions” and that “the wide-ranging nature of the author’s scholarly interests and inspirations sometimes makes the book’s real focus hard to pin down.” Part of my endeavor was to bring these Black women into a specific kind of historical focus—to see them not only as productions, but also as real women living, however precariously, in nineteenth century France. What their archival traces revealed to me was that I needed to look at the people who were looking at them, in this case, white French men and women. This also leads Rogers to question what exactly my book is about, as it utilizes a variety of source material and draws upon different fields of study. Among others, she wonders if my book is about “representations of Blackness or the construction of whiteness?” or “Black female sexuality and science or popular and consumer culture?” At the risk of being deliberately obtuse, the answer to these questions is yes—to all. The reason why these women are so important is because their fluidity in the hands of white French men and women challenges the idea that all of these binaristic categories exist separately.

I finally want to speak to Rogers’s concerns regarding my argument in the conclusion of the book—that “representations of Black women were used to mitigate devastating economic and psychological losses”—as this argument is not made without analysis of the most critical component of my book: race. Here there may be a disconnect in interpretation. While the letters using racial ventriloquism which she highlights may discuss the processes of enslavement, “the refusal” of white French men and women that Rogers says I put forth, is, in fact, my argument that white French men and women “refuse” to understand slavery as necessary to their own identities. The “refusal” of the very people who penned these letters in an act of racial ventriloquism; to acknowledge the importance of slavery and anti-Blackness, is the key to understanding Frenchness. Rogers’s keen observations about my overall work are thorough, and I am pleased that she said my book will leave readers “pondering what they have failed to see in

the historical record,” and that “this can only encourage the pursuit of more complex histories exploring the intersection of racial, gendered, and national identities, while adding to our knowledge of Black women whose voices and experiences have only begun to be recovered and explored,” as these were my hopes for the book.

Despite moments of disagreement, this exercise has been so important and affirming. I am humbled that my work has been engaged with on such a thoughtful level. While, at times, overwhelming, knowing there is such an audience for my work propels me forward and speaks to my passion in continuing to answer unanswerable questions. These reviews also raise new challenges and avenues for scholarship around the history of gender and race in nineteenth-century France that have otherwise been neglected.

## NOTES

[1] See Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2012), and *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2019); *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, eds. Tyler Stovall and Sue Peabody (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and forthcoming from University of Princeton Press, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea*, among many others.

[2] R. Darrell Meadows, *The Planters of Saint-Domingue, 1750-1804: Migration and Exile in the French Revolutionary Atlantic*, 2004, <http://lib-ebook.colorado.edu/ebook/3120207.pdf>, last accessed October 4, 2010.

[3] Mélanie Lamotte, “Colour Prejudice in the Early Modern French Atlantic World,” in *The Atlantic World*, eds. D’Maris Coffman, Adrian Leonard and William O’Reilly (Routledge, 2014), 151-171.

[4] Anne Lafont, *L’art et la race: L’Africain (tout) contre l’oeil des Lumières* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2019).

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