A history of Black women in nineteenth-century France

Robin Mitchell

Nineteenth-century French cultural representations of Black women reflected historical events going back to the establishment of France’s Caribbean colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Conditions of slavery generated pervasive tropes about Black women that migrated to metropolitan France, where they provided an attractive canvas for the subjects and citizens of a traumatized country digesting their political, military, and social losses in places such as Haiti. Yet the historical presence of and discursive focus on Black women in the metropole remains under-examined.

I suggest a few reasons why this might be the case. One of the reasons could be the lack of substantial numbers of Black women in France during the nineteenth century. A second reason, I argue, is because of the difficulties in separating out the tropes and stereotypes about Black women from the historical silences in the archives about these women and their actual lives. Finally, it helps to unpack the psychic and actual trauma of the loss of the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath on French citizens, as well as a tendency to “read” Revolution as a predominantly male sphere.

Representations of Black women in nineteenth-century France – how they were seen, perceived, produced, and imagined – suggest that French elites were deeply unsettled by the consequences of the Haitian Revolution. Focusing on both the representations and the realities of Black women such as Sarah Baartman, Ourika, and Jeanne Duval not only provides a history of these women but also illuminates the cultural histories of the white Frenchmen and Frenchwomen looking at them. They worked as artist models, domestic servants, sex workers, actors; they were enslaved and free, spectators, performers, lovers, wives, and sometimes even French. Black women mattered in France for myriad reasons.

This can be seen by the zeal of legislators, administrators, writers like Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo, artists such as Louis-Léopold Boilly and Marie-Guillemine Benoist, and laypeople trying to convince themselves that these women lacked importance – often denying them their own names. According to its own self-definition of Frenchness, Black women were not supposed to be in France. Yet they were. And that anxiety needed to be managed. The trauma of losing the crown jewel of colonies, Saint-Domingue, was displaced onto a body and in a manner that appeared to simplify a far more complex range of experiences and identities. It is this event
where representation converges with these women’s actual lives and where any understanding of Black women in nineteenth-century France needs to begin.

The impact of the Haitian Revolution

A sustained analysis of the Haitian Revolution reveals that this event was cataclysmic, sending shock waves throughout the entire Atlantic world.\(^3\) Even before France’s own 1789 revolution, the nation had been struggling with a series of imperial losses that began in Canada and India in the 1760s. And as France was grappling with the thorny issues of citizenship and national identity brought on by the revolution, it had to contend not only with the loss of its most important colony, Saint-Domingue, but also with the 1803 sale of Louisiana to the United States (which some historians would argue was the result of financing the continued but eventual loss of the war with Haiti).

Even standard terms used to describe French constitutional history since 1799, such as the Empire and the Second Empire, elide the true imperial history and legacy of defeat. The loss of Haiti and the collapse of Napoleon’s empire threatened France’s self-perception as an imperial power (with its connotations of racial superiority) and its image of its masculine prowess. The vast majority of the migrants from Saint-Domingue were white settlers, with only about 800 Blacks fleeing the colony.\(^4\) Yet when Saint-Domingue violently and permanently unyoked itself from France, the cultural reverberations both fueled and haunted the ongoing discursive construction of race and gender. In particular, the representations of Black women (who comprised a small minority among the influx) illuminate these tensions.

Tropes emerged in response not only to the presence of particular Black women but also to the convulsive changes in French culture and society, only to take on a life of their own, circulate widely, and be re-deployed again and again, slightly altered or fully resurrected in new historical contexts. Part of the complication for white Frenchmen and women was that real Black women were also on French soil, however, and not completely containable in those tropes and representations. Black women, seen as Other by the new republican definition of citoyenneté,\(^5\) are a particularly rich focal point to study in exploring how France grappled with both race and gender. Looking at them as both representation and actual people opens up new spaces to understand their overall importance to French ideas about race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Black women exist in nineteenth-century France, in ways not always expected or comfortable. But they exist. And they can teach us how France (mis)managed the myriad tensions that their presence engendered.

Portraits of Black womanhood

Although some scholars have studied Black female representations in France, particularly in literature and art, less attention has been paid to analyzing these representations within a larger historical framework. Historical studies of the presence of Blacks in the colonies and in France have lacked a sustained focus on Black women. Some scholars of literature, critical theory, gender, and art history have studied images of Blacks in France and the meaning of such depictions.\(^6\) But tensions exist between these types of scholarship: history seeks to recover an accurate and changing past, while theories of representation look for the ways that enduring power relations, especially those built on binaries, operate as abstractions. Scholarship that seeks to incorporate both types of analytical models can be challenging: one tries to access a stable “truth” through documents, while the other insists that all documents, texts, images, or representations are distorted by powerful discourses of the dominant culture.
Historian Marisa Fuentes investigates the “‘mutilated historicity’ of enslaved women (the violent condition in which enslaved women appear in the archive disfigured and violated),” which often causes the women themselves and their histories to disappear. Historically, many of the women in nineteenth-century France enter the historical archives in degraded ways. The tropes of Black women from France’s Black colonies – as hypersexual, hyperviolent, and/or defeminized – makes uncovering their lives difficult. The loss of the Haitian Revolution (rhetorically at the hands of Black men) was also placed at the feet of so-called vicious Black women, like Marie-Jeanne Lamartiniére and Suzanne Béliar, who were implied not to have been women at all.

This national embarrassment for France was also a blow to national identity – gendered as well as racial – and shifted some of the tensions of that loss onto Black women’s bodies. So, we must bear this in mind when understanding that while Black women of course existed outside those representations, some of the rhetoric followed them into France proper. Many of them enter the historical archives in a multitude of guises: as domestiques, as sex workers, as fads, as spectacles, as artist models, actors, lovers, as prisoners, as nuns, and sometimes as wives. The nature of their lives was often precarious, based upon their race and gender. And we know that they had a cultural power that far outweighed their actual numbers in France, which were quite small until the mid- to late nineteenth century.

But we do know some of their names and their occupations, and this helps to show both that they were present in France, and why French men and women were often pre-occupied with them. Sarah Baartmann (c. 1770–1815/6), called the “Hottentot Venus,” was born in South Africa, 50 miles north of the Gamtoos River. It is possible that she was married and had children before her arrival in London in 1810, but documentation regarding the earlier years of her life is scarce. According to musicologist Percival Kirby, Baartmann was smuggled out of British-occupied Cape Town by Hendrik Cezar (the brother of her old master, Peter) without the colonial governor’s knowledge. The only female on board the HMS Diadem, Baartmann sailed with them on April 7, 1810, and they arrived in Chatham, just 30 miles from London, in July.

Alexander Dunlop – a surgeon with a penchant for exporting “museum specimens” from South Africa – had first seen Baartmann in Capetown around 1809 and at some point entered a partnership of sorts with Cezar. According to an alleged contract between the two men and Baartmann, she would be exhibited in England and Ireland as well as performing domestic duties, and a portion of her earnings would fund her repatriation to South Africa after two years. Because she was considered an oddity, her handlers hoped that European fascination with certain types of human curiosities would garner income and fame. Baartmann was then brought to France in 1814. Her true status (as an enslaved performer or as a willing participant earning a salary) remains controversial.

Given her enslaved status in South Africa, there is little doubt that her life was governed by the whims of both her enslaver and then her handler in France. Though only in Paris for a short time, she cast a wide cultural shadow, inspiring fashion, theatrical works, and scientific scrutiny. Even in her death, Baartmann still remained the object of scientific investigation. Baartmann’s physical body – specifically her genitalia – was an obsession in France, and this is perhaps most evident in George Cuvier’s dissection of her cadaver. Given Cuvier’s role in Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt, it is not surprising that he too needed to reassert his white masculine dominance through the sexual and colonial conquest of the Black female body.

As well as Baartmann, a young Senegalese girl named Ourika (c. 1780–99), gifted to a French noble family in the late eighteenth century, inspired a fad in the 1820s that I call “Ourika Mania,” which entailed a novel, plays, poetry, food, fashion, and colors named after her. Similarly to the colonial conquest of Baartmann’s blackness, the Duchess de Duras appropriated the voice
of an imagined Ourika in her overwhelmingly popular novel of the same name. In the novel, “Ourika” herself states that the revolution of Saint-Domingue further authenticates the savagery and barbarity of blackness.

Literary scholar Roger Little believes that Ourika was from Fouta-Djallon, in what is now southeastern Senegal, and that she was likely of Peul origin. In early 1786, the governor of Senegal, Stanislas Jean, the Chevalier du Boufflers, purchased a two- or three-year-old Senegalese girl for the Duchesse d’Orleans. This little girl, Zoé, is often confused with Ourika but was raised as a servant in the home of another aristocratic family. Boufflers described the girl as follows: “She is pretty, not like the day, but like the night … Her eyes are like little stars … She does not speak yet, but she understands what we say to her in Wolof.”

Victor Hugo saw fit to write about the ramifications of the Duchess de Duras writing about the Black girl in an early edition of his novel, Les Misérables.

Another Black woman fueling the French imagination was Jeanne Duval (c. 1820–70s), who was the product of a mixed-race mother and a white French father. She lived on and off with the French writer and icon Charles Baudelaire for over three decades as his common-law wife. As is the case for Ourika and Baartman, many of the details about Jeanne Duval’s life are the product of hearsay, at times both vague and contradictory. Her claim to fame (or infamy) came from Baudelaire’s literary writings describing her as his “Vénus noire” and his copious letters about her. Baudelaire’s 1857 publication of Les Fleurs du mal, a poetic cycle in which numbers 22–39 are influenced by or about Duval, forever bound her to him. The book was quickly denounced on grounds of obscenity.

Duval has been associated with several surnames, including Prosper as well as Lemer and Lemaire. In addition, she often performed under the stage name Berthe. Her grandmother, Marie Duval, may have been from Saint-Domingue and of African descent. Jeanne’s mother, whose name may have been Jeanne-Marie-Marthe Duval, Jeanne Lemaire, or Jeanne Lemer, was “an old, respectable-looking negress, with thick, greasy hair which tried in vain to twirl over her cheeks and ears,” and although it is unclear whether she immigrated or was born in Nantes, she is generally considered to have had ties there. She may have been a prostitute, and both Jeanne Duval’s father and grandfather were almost certainly white Frenchmen, though it is not known whether they were planters, slave owners, or members of the working class, and as far as the documents indicate, she had no contact with either man.

Other Black women emerge in the imagination of French nineteenth-century culture. In art, a Black woman named Madeleine is the model in Portrait of a Negresse by Marie-Guillemine Benoist. A Black woman named Laure appears in several paintings by Manet, such as Olympia, Children in the Tuileries Gardens, and La négresse (Portrait of Laure). A Black woman named Esther is present in Louis-Léopold Boilly’s painting The Galleries of the Palais-Royal. Miss LaLa appears in the painting of Edgar Degas called Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando; Jean Frédéric Bazille’s Young Woman with Peonies features a Black woman in a tignon; and Henri Matisse used Black women as models. This list is by no means exhaustive. Photographer Nadar also centered Black women in his work, as did sculptors Charles Henri Joseph Cordier and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux.

Blackness was racialized and gendered in nineteenth-century France. Gustave d’Eichthal, the secretary of the Société Ethnologique, wrote in his 1839 Lettres sur la Race Noire et la Race Blanche that Blacks were a “female race.” “Just like the woman,” he pontificated, “the black is deprived of political and scientific intelligence … Like the woman he also passionately likes jewelry, dance, and singing.” Eichthal’s assignment of a discursive gender to an entire race at the beginning of the colonial project in Africa helps illustrate how the failure in Haiti, taken as a defeat at the hands of Black men, facilitated a reordering of French national identity via the Black female body, which was represented as savage, hypersexual, and above all, an existential threat to the
purity of the French nation. To recover from this defeat by a Black nation, the French shifted their focus to a Black continent – Africa – where they could reassert their racial superiority and continue their “mission to civilize.”

The prevailing narrative of these gendered representations, which transcends the vastly different political and cultural structures of multiple French regimes, established and reinforced the inability of Black women to be French, regardless of their individual stories or backgrounds. That France continued to exert ownership of Black bodies in the form of slavery until 1848 does not mean that they extended citizenship when slavery officially ended. Yet the representations of these women also reveal fissures in the definition of what it meant to be French, challenging existing gender and racial boundaries within white society.

**Constituting race, gender, and nation**

It was into this political, cultural, and racialized environment that a mix of émigrés, exiles, and colonial refugees returned to France in 1802. William Cohen states that

> in the nineteenth century, race became the main explanation of human variety. The tradition of attributing social differences between the nobility and the third estate to descent from distinctive “racial” groups was already evident in France; it continued in the nineteenth century.13

The influx of refugees from Haiti who had fled the “troubles” and who, by their very presence and need for assimilation, already testified to the colonial failure brought with them their own notions of proper French behaviors and culture. White French women dressed in blackface to play Black women on the stage. Caricatures, plays, poems, and novels were utilized to highlight and instruct white French men and women on how dangerous these behaviors were.

And white Frenchmen employed types of racial ventriloquism to hide behind Black women in order to speak about compelling issues of the day, to highlight unacceptable white French behaviors, or to silence moving too far beyond acceptable gender boundaries. Elite white French women were playing with racial drag – mimicking blackness in their clothes and in some of their attitudes – which was reflected in cultural movements such as the previously mentioned “Hottentot Venus” and “Ourika Mania.” At the same time, white French men were still “playing” with Black female bodies, setting them at odds with many in the metropole.14 Moreover, accusations of so-called colonial blood were discussed in elite circles, and tainted ancestry – and thus illegitimate Frenchness – became a powerful insult, which was the case against Napoleon’s wife, the Creole Empress Josephine, who was born in Martinique in 1763, and aristocrat Claire de Duras, who was born to a plantation owning family in 1777. This was a shorthand way of genetically linking whites from the colonies with Blacks. For instance, Creoles like Empress Josephine and aristocrat Claire de Duras, with origins in France’s Black colonies, tried to ignore or brush aside innuendoes that they had “impure blood.”

If the various French classes could not agree on who and what they were, they could come together around what they were not. In the case of émigrés and some foreigners, it was race that allowed the possibility of incorporation into the idea of citizen and thus Frenchness, something that eluded Blacks, regardless of their gender. The identification of an Other facilitated the notion that previously excluded bodies could now be (re)incorporated. The presence of individuals designated as different allowed codification of a cohesive French identity. By holding themselves up against a specifically defined and racialized Other, elites could still claim cultural, racial, and political dominance, while the lower classes could throw off the shackles of a formerly
perceived racial difference to be incorporated into the definition of French. Coming together to rally for a common good – Frenchness – would afford greater opportunity to consolidate collective ideologies and national unities.

Conclusion

The rapid changes in France in the nineteenth century, with the tensions between modernity and tradition, enrich the potential for exploring the idea of blackness during this time. The shoring up of Frenchness predicated upon whiteness and maleness, concomitantly incorporating blackness and femaleness into the antithesis to that definition, is what places Black women squarely in the center of my exploration. While legislation was important in early nineteenth-century France, the importance of science as a field of expert male knowledge gave ground to scientific racism. The Black female body became an important canvas on which to apply that new-found expertise, as seen with Cuvier’s fixation on Baartmann, while at the same time firming up normative behaviors. Volatile political and social tensions figured prominently in the construction of self and the presentation of a French national identity. How these constructions were articulated shows much about what was at stake in a unified collective identity. What differentiated France from other nations in Europe in the early nineteenth century were new types of conversations about race powered by the Haitian Revolution and bolstered by science. One of the ways France did this was by demanding in 1825 – with ships – that Haiti compensate France for its lost property (including lost “slaves”) in order to recognize Haiti as a sovereign nation; in 1838, it would reduce those payments.15

On the Left Bank in Paris, a candle shop – founded in 1643 – continues to reproduce works of French icons in wax. Cire Trudon, the world’s oldest candle maker still in operation, has made candles for French monarchs, fashion houses, and discerning Parisians for nearly four centuries that span extraordinary shifts in government and culture. Among its collections, Cire Trudon includes one called Les bustes de cire, which is a series of oversized busts that “tries to revive the faces of those who marked its history and the history of France.”16 There are currently three candles in this collection: Marie-Antoinette (1789), Napoleon (1803), and the third, titled “L’Esclave” (1867).17 It is identical to the terra cotta bust, La Négresse, created in 1872 by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Not only does the candle depict the importance of slavery, then, but also its eventual end. Although my work has argued that slavery very much “marked the history of France” (and continues to do so), the inclusion of L’Esclave is a stunning recognition. The Haitian Revolution shifted the focus of France to redirect its imperial impulse in Africa while also heralding “revolutionary” ideals of championing the abolition of slavery, yet still pushing for the colonizing of African subjects, whom the French viewed as inferior.

Regardless of who they were or where they came from, the overarching narratives for Black women served to reinforce the inauthenticity of their Frenchness. Within the realm of vastly different political and cultural structures, their inappropriateness was foregrounded. Yet in almost every case, these femmes noires – not only apparitions from Saint-Domingue, but all those carrying the racial legacy of slavery – reveal through their narratives a chipping away, however slight, of racial and gender boundaries designed to constrain them.

Notes

1 It is important to clarify that Haiti and Saint-Domingue are considered one and the same by France and were often used interchangeably before the Revolution. France took great strides to continue to refer to Haiti as “San Domingue,” however, even after it was declared a republic.


5 Female citizenship.


8 Lamartinière and Béliar were both female soldiers during the Haitian Revolution and were masculinized in their representation because they fought in battle, something considered to be a male space. Women like this helped perpetuate the idea of masculine Black women in the French imagination.


11 Ibid., 42.


14 See Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Vénus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), and Janell Hobson, *Vénus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), for a discussion on the ways in which the plays and poems engage these representations. In the case of Sarah Baartman, a plaster cast was made of her body after she died, and her genitalia were studied to contrast her Black women’s body with those of white French women.

15 The debt was finally paid off in 1947; in 2005, Haiti demanded repayment of the original payments. France declined to do so.


17 While it appears that the copy precedes the original, as with many pieces of sculpture, the “final” piece went through many iterations over several years. It was originally created by Carpeaux in 1867 for a fountain; many variations were done in marble, bronze, and plaster. [www.artquid.com/artwork/5836/2826/captive-negress-carpeaux.html](http://www.artquid.com/artwork/5836/2826/captive-negress-carpeaux.html) (accessed October 27, 2010).

Further reading


Chalaye, Sylvie. Nègres en Images. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002. For representations of black women in literature, see Hoffmann, Nègre Romantique; Fanoudh-Seifer, Mythe du Nègre; Jean-Claude Blachère, Modèle Nègre; Sharply-Whiting, Black Venus. For art, see Doy,”More Than Meets the Eye”; Chalaye, Nègres en Images. See also Grigsby, Extremities; Grigsby, “Revolutionary Sons.”


Black women in nineteenth-century France


