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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.

Review Essay by Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Harvard University

In spring 2019, the Musée d'Orsay held a fascinating exhibit, "Le Modèle Noir." [1] Its premise was to take the Black figures from nineteenth- and twentieth-century French art and make them real: to inform observers, to the extent possible, who these mostly female and usually anonymous people were, what the conditions of their participation in the art were, and to stress the importance of Black people to French understandings of self and other, freedom and servitude, modernity and sexuality. While not all the relationships highlighted in the exhibit were exploitative, the history of Black objectification for the pleasure and profit of a white audience was the dominant theme. Among the most jarring of the displays was not art but film footage of the "Village Noir" at the Jardin d'Acclimatation, an amusement park in the Bois de Boulogne, where Blacks brought from France's empire were displayed as entertainment to crowds, at once sources of curiosity and examples of what France was not. In effect, a human zoo, the "Village Noir" resembled early nineteenth-century exhibitions of Sarah Baartmann (ca 1770s-1816), one of the three Black women, along with Charlotte Catherine Benezet, known as Ourika (ca. 1771-1799), and Jeanne Duval (ca. 1820-ca. 1870s), whose lives and afterlives are analyzed in Robin Mitchell's unsettling and beautiful book, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. At the end of *Le Modèle Noir*, playful reimaginings of Manet's *Olympia* and Matisse's *Odalisque* that featured Black women more prominently than in the originals only served to underscore their previous relegation or objectification.[2] As Mitchell writes, "The discursive presence of Black women in nineteenth-century France – how they were seen, perceived, produced, and represented ... contributed to an unclaimed and ignored racialized national identity" (p.11). Mitchell rightfully underscores the long legacy of this relationship.

Naturally the exhibit had a gift display, where museum-goers could literally buy into the very commodification of Black life that Mitchell's book so trenchantly lays bare. In my case, I walked away with a paperback copy of Claire de Duras' *Ourika* (1823), whose main character and the real-life person who inspired it figure centrally in Mitchell's elegant, disturbing, and deeply affecting book.[3] I read *Ourika* in Bordeaux while researching how individuals in that port city reimagined empire in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, which, by abolishing slavery in Saint-Domingue in 1793 and by establishing the independence of Haiti in 1804, forever changed Bordeaux, France, and the Atlantic World. Still, I did not know until reading *Vénus Noire* that Duras was connected to Saint-Domingue via her father's business. A former émigrée, Duras was not easily reconciled to the French Revolution, let alone the Haitian one, and thus "displaced" the "trauma of losing Saint-Domingue" onto a Black female body (p.7). Mitchell's analysis offers a useful corrective to other scholars who have suggested that the very act of depicting a

Black woman as an aristocrat meant the novel should be read as largely sympathetic to Blacks, and even, in one reading, to abolitionism. Mitchell's reading is the more convincing one: that the novel "shores up" Duras's "own precarious status as a refugee and émigrée" (p. 88). Indeed, one could read *Ourika* as a cautionary tale about radical (in)equality in an era when some were trying to "restore" an overthrown monarchy and reverse a democratic revolution.

A bit like Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, whose uncle "rescues" her from her impoverished family and raises her alongside her cousins on a country estate (though still in a relatively subservient role), Ourika is "saved" from slavery (in fact purchased) and raised to become a genteel young lady. Like Fanny, she falls in love with a man with whom she was raised. In the case of *Mansfield Park*, however, white Fanny's transformation is complete. A brief return to the crowded home of her parents in Portsmouth is enough to make her realize that she is forever altered by her genteel upbringing. She even receives the grand prize when cousin Edmund finally returns her love at the end of the novel. Ourika, on the other hand, has a jarring realization that her race prevents her from enjoying the full fruits of her French upbringing, when she discovers that object of her affections plans to marry a white Frenchwoman. Ourika's subsequent death in the convent to which she relegates herself is intended to evoke pity, but not empathy. Critiquing the radical egalitarian premises of both the French and Haitian Revolutions in one blow, Duras suggests that the revolutionary political and social experiment was unsuccessful: Black emancipation, in her view, was a failure, even an impossibility. The moral of the story is really a projection, however. As Mitchell observes, Duras makes Ourika wish to stop being the "dupe of their false notion of fraternity" and to pine for a return to an Old Regime racial hierarchy where "[s]corched by the sun, [she] should be laboring someone else's land" (p. 89). It is really Duras, however, who is nostalgic for a lost world, as much imagined as real. Writing at a time when the former white planters still held out some hope for a reconquest of Haiti, but when the government was negotiating to, as Charles X later put it, "close such a painful wound," Duras might have been part of the colonial lobby that would continue licking its wounds for much of the rest of the nineteenth century.[4]

The cover image on my French pocket edition of *Ourika* featured a rather different message: it depicted the real Ourika's rough contemporary Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804), the enslaved (and eventually emancipated) natural daughter of Sir John Lindsay who was raised alongside her white cousin, and treated as her equal by their great uncle, William Murray.[5] Murray was the first Earl of Mansfield (the same Mansfield who inspired the title of *Mansfield Park*), famous for his judicial rulings that chipped away at the institution of slavery.[6] While the cover art for *Ourika* featuring Dido Belle is the twenty-first-century publisher's marketing decision, the placement of Belle and her white cousin on the cover of a book questioning the possibility of Black emancipation gave me pause. Duras probably was not familiar with the portrait, which hangs in a private English estate house to this day, but she had to have known that such "experiments" had *not* failed everywhere they had been tried; it was no doubt this fact that frightened her more than anything else.[7] Which brings me back to Robin Mitchell's extraordinary book. White fear drives much of the logic of what Mitchell unveils: fear of sexuality, fear of equality (and a lost social hierarchy that comes with it), fear of national defeat and humiliation, each and all of which, as Mitchell powerfully shows, can be displaced onto Black women's bodies. *Vénus Noire* chillingly demonstrates the lengths nineteenth-century Frenchmen and women went to as they objectified, classified, and manipulated Black bodies in

the name of pseudo-science, morality tales, entertainment, and sometimes just to buttress their own egos. Mitchell's preface, detailing the author's poignant encounter with the cast made posthumously of Sarah Baartmann's body (and without any prior permission) is both unforgettable and painful. But that is the point. Elegantly written, though not an easy read because its subject matter is at times so horrifying, *Vénus Noire* is a meditation on a topic that still haunts contemporary France. (An offensive mural "celebrating" the first French abolition of slavery and a right-wing magazine's depiction of a member of parliament as a slave are only the most recent reminders.[8])

Mitchell's book focuses on three Black women, Sarah Baartmann, better known as the "Hottentot Venus"; Charlotte Catherine Benezet, known as Ourika, the inspiration for *Ourika*; and Jeanne Duval, the famous muse and common-law wife of one of France's greatest modern poets, Charles Baudelaire. Mitchell selects these women because of the outsized importance that their representations took on in nineteenth-century French cultural life, but also because they were not *just* representations. They 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. For instance, when Baartmann was still alive, she repeatedly refused to let "scientists" see her genitalia, a fact that leads Mitchell to conclude: "It is thus particularly relevant that the only word we have a direct record of Baartmann saying is *No* in response to Cuvier's request to access her genitals" (p. 41). Rebuffed by Baartmann while she was alive, Cuvier does not hesitate to violate her bodily integrity once she was not. Mitchell makes clear that Cuvier's "autopsy" quickly deviated from searching for a cause of death (if ever he had this intention) and into corroborating his preconceived notions of Black female sexuality. In the name of "science," he effectively raped her corpse: "Only after Cuvier had literally entered her were the 'secrets' that the Hottentot hid between her legs definitively uncovered and analyzed," Mitchell writes evocatively (p. 40). He then proceeded to dissect her buttocks, pickle her brain and genitals, making her in death even more what she had already represented in life – a "scientific specimen" (p. 38).

Mitchell's writing is at once succinct and luminous. Sometimes, it is frankly breathtaking:

These representations present a contradictory picture of Duval: she is both angry and strong-willed and fragile; fat and thin; dark and light; frizzy- and smooth-haired; stupid and shrewish; angelic and devilish; a muse, a wife, a whore, and a lesbian; a second-rate actress and a sexual vampire of such biblical proportions that she sucked everything of value from Baudelaire and reduced him to a carcass. (p.107)

So much for the image of Duval. We know much less about the real Jeanne Duval, though Mitchell makes clear that, however fraught her relationship with Baudelaire was, he cared about her enough to tell his mother that he planned to "consecrate the income of what capital remains" to her, despite his own financial woes and even after they had split definitively, and he also was worried about her being alone (p. 47). Despite such concerns, Baudelaire was not above being vindictive toward Duval. As a poet and art critic himself, he was aware of the power of representation and convinced their friend Gustave Courbet to paint over her image, thereby removing the one Black person in their Bohemian milieu from fully appearing in Courbet's

famous painting, *L'Atelier du peintre* (p. 47, p. 106). Instead she appears almost as a ghost, which seems fitting inasmuch as Mitchell demonstrates how Black women's bodies haunted white France. In sum, Mitchell is extraordinarily effective at interweaving the real with the fabricated to present a disturbing and deeply moving account of how Black women's bodies were displayed, commodified, represented and misrepresented.

Among the most original findings of Mitchell's book are the ways in which white Frenchmen and women became obsessed with the women she discusses, or at least their representations. The "Hottentot Venus" became something of a metaphor for deviant female sexuality and foreignness in general, so much so that a cartoon making fun of the foreign influence in retail clothing made an oblique reference to her (fig. 15, p. 77). Ourika became such a fad that there were multiple renditions of it in play form, fashion featured "Ourika collars, feathers, cuffs and ribbons," and everything from chocolate to particular colors to certain styles of clothing were referred to as "à la Ourika or à l'Ourika" (p. 92) And finally, quoting a litany of Baudelaire biographers who had blatant contempt for Duval, Mitchell shows how representations of Black women both diverted and obscured attention from the reality of race and gender relations in French society. In so doing, these representations fashioned a certain kind of white Frenchness.

Every word of Mitchell's book is purposeful. While this economy of prose was impressive, I did sometimes want more. In particular, I would have appreciated more specificity on the connections Mitchell sees between the loss of Haiti and the ways white French people compensated for it by displacing their traumas onto Black bodies. The case is clearest with Claire de Duras, since she had family business connections to the former Saint-Domingue. Can we say that those engaging in Ourika-mania were projecting racial anxiety in the same way Duras was? What did people actually *think* or *feel* when they observed human beings like Sarah Baartmann, as if they were animals in a zoo? Did gawking at perceived racial inferiority provide white Frenchmen and women some reassurance of their preeminence, not only vis-à-vis Haitians but also the British? (Mitchell usefully reminds us in the Baartmann chapter that the period coincided with Britain's occupation of France following the Napoleonic Wars). But 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. After all, as Mitchell starkly puts it: "Black women served as their ventriloquist dummies" (p.140). With this vivid image, Mitchell ends *Vénus Noire* with a beautiful, at times even lyrical, call to awareness.

NOTES

[1] The exhibition "Le Modèle Noir de Géricault à Matisse" was held at the Musée d'Orsay from March 26 to July 21, 2019: <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/evenements/expositions/aux-musees/presentation-detaillee/article/le-modele-noir-47692.html>.

[2] The reimaginings were: Larry Rivers (born Yitzroch Loiza Grossberg), *I like Olympia in Black Face*, 1970; Aimé Mpane, *Olympia II*, 2013; Ellen Gallagher, *Odalisque*, 2013. Interesting, all of these were by non-French artists. Rivers was American, Mpane is from the

Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gallagher is American. Gallagher superimposed her own image as the odalisque onto a photo of Matisse sketching a study for the famous painting.

[3] Claire de Duras, *Ourika* (1823) (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

[4] I discuss this group in Mary Dewhurst Lewis, “Legacies of French Slave-Ownership, or the Long Decolonization of Saint-Domingue,” *History Workshop Journal* 83, 1 (2017). Charles X quote on 153.

[5] David Martin, *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray* (c. 1778), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dido_Elizabeth_Belle.jpg#/media/File:Dido_Elizabeth_Belle.jpg. For more information on this portrait and the life of Dido Belle, see <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/women-in-history/dido-belle/>

[6] Most famously, the Somersett case, in which Lord Mansfield ruled in 1772 that enslaved persons could not be removed from England against their will, thus acknowledging that Black people, even the enslaved, had some modicum of rights. He also ruled in the famous *Zong* case (1782) that slaves could not be insured and that the owners of the *Zong* thus could not be compensated. For details on this and his relationship to Dido Belle, as well as his influence over Austen, see Paula Byrne, chap. 12 “The Daughter of Mansfield,” in *The Real Jane Austen* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013).

[7] Whether she would have known that Dido Belle married a man of French origin is harder to say.

[8] On the French mural, see Mame-Fatou Niang, “On France’s Contempt for Black Bodies,” <http://monitoracism.eu/on-frances-contempt-for-black-bodies/>. On the depiction of Danièle Obono as a slave, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/31/racism-investigation-after-french-magazine-black-mp-slave-daniele-obono-valeurs-actuelles>.

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