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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 H. Adlai Murdoch, Tufts University

Robin Mitchell's very interesting monograph performs an analysis of various literary and critical representations of three women of color whose lives marked a number of key points in France's long nineteenth century. Sarah Baartman, popularly known as the Hottentot Venus, arguably elicited a range of fear and desire in a France that was still reeling from its defeat by Haiti. Ourika was a young Senegalese girl brought to live in France by the Maréchal Prince de Beauvau, and her life inspired poems, plays, and a novel, even as such appropriations of her identity extended current stereotypes of the nature of Black women. And Jeanne Duval, mistress of the poet Charles Baudelaire, gained notoriety and suffered demonization as a woman of color at the expense of the increasingly venerated reputation of her poet paramour. By demonstrating the points of intersection and parallel between these Black women's stories, Mitchell illuminates the ongoing contentiousness that undergirded France's relationship to Black subjectivity and Black sexuality in an era marked and striated by slavery and its abolition. From the French Revolution through the Napoleonic era to the Second Empire, coming to terms with Black female identity meant confronting stereotypes of hypersexuality even as efforts at controlling it revealed extended attempts to expunge it from the national landscape.

This historical landscape is best understood in terms of its conflicted, contradictory approach, relationship, and response to slavery. On the one hand, as many of us know, slavery was abolished twice in France; first during the Revolutionary era, when the National Convention abolished slavery in all French territories on February 4, 1794. Napoleon overturned that decree in 1802, reintroducing slavery, which continued until it was abolished again in 1848. And although France officially abolished the slave trade in 1815, the continuing invisibility of slavery on the French mainland was perpetuated primarily by the paradox of key Enlightenment philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire, who neglected to condemn slavery in principle even as they condoned it – and, indeed, even profited from it – in practice. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to claim that many Enlightenment thinkers disparaged, belittled, and vilified the integrity and validity of the Black subject. In addition, slavery was largely restricted to the plantation colonies in the periphery, where it shored up economic practices critical to the nation's livelihood, and by the governmental policy summed up in the phrase, “there are no slaves in France.” In other words, any slaves arriving on the mainland, for whatever reason, were automatically freed.

But this very non-Europeanness had long determined the material conditions for Blacks in eighteenth-century France. Tyler Stovall sums it up thusly, “The single most important determinant of black life in eighteenth-century France was the so-called Freedom Principle, according to which slavery did not exist in metropolitan France.”[1] This creeping but eventually ineluctable inscription

of the Black French subject as inferior, marginal, and worthy of exclusion signaled a major shift in policy and perspective, a social and cultural transformation even more noteworthy given the fact that it took place during the much-vaunted Age of Enlightenment. A range of bureaucratic milestones led to a century-long contestation over the meaning of freedom in France, and overall, the eighteenth century saw a widespread attempt to foreclose the very ground of possibility for Black subjectivity, in any form and in any location.

It is within this context of ethnic and political struggle that Robin Mitchell's *Vénus Noire* unfolds. Despite the reality of a minuscule non-white population in France for most of the eighteenth century—"about three thousand people out of a population of more than twenty-five million as of 1777," as she puts it (p. 3)—these Black bodies, and especially the female ones, "attracted a disproportionate amount of attention" (p. 3), made unwilling arbiters of French social and national identity. So if Black women were "seen as Other" (p. 11), as Mitchell argues, "the use and production of their bodies reinforced strategies of Whiteness, Blackness, and Frenchness" (p. 11), strategies which themselves "reveal[ed] fissures in the definition of what it meant to be French" (p. 12).

One of Mitchell's key points here is the way in which she makes explicit the correlation between racial categories and hierarchies and colonial domination. In sum, the latter was placed at the service of the former: "Developing racial hierarchies served as justification for colonial occupation and imperial domination...[and] perpetuated the notion that body size and shape correlated to intelligence and social roles" (p. 36). Put simply, then, not only were racism and exclusion fundamental forces in shaping the French nation's view of itself over two hundred years ago, the complex conjunction of race, othering and nation—operating in tandem with contemporary crises like the Haitian Revolution—gave rise to "an unclaimed and ignored racialized national identity" (p. 11). Here, racialization includes whiteness, so that the implications of this critically important cultural clash—one which Mitchell defines as "a cultural history of white Frenchmen and -women looking at Black women" (p. 17)—establish clearly that, as Tyler Stovall explains, the conjunction of implicit whiteness with national identity in France created "a new vision of France, one constructed along subtle but real lines of racial domination and exclusion."<sup>[2]</sup> Stovall's fundamental premise, one upon which Mitchell's argument is arguably predicated, revises the history and structure of French citizenship by claiming that "the very nature of Frenchness was conditioned by race. This distinction between white citizens and nonwhite subjects lay at the base of French identity as white identity," a largely unacknowledged perspective that radically alters the myth of a universalist, race-blind France.<sup>[3]</sup>

Mitchell juxtaposes these Black women's stories to demonstrate how representing these subjectivities appropriated strategies of commodification and scientific racism to conjure an alternative vision of French history. Chapter 2, devoted to the case of Baartman, seeks to examine the ways in which the so-called Hottentot Venus became socially inscribed as the icon of a deformed Black sexuality that purportedly confirmed the innate "abnormality" of Black subjectivity. By defining Baartman in this way and then commodifying her for display, the resulting conjunction of Baartman as scientific artifact and Baartman as cultural commodity put a range of prejudices and what can only be termed a predisposition towards racial and racist discrimination and intolerance into place at the national level. These perspectives and practices

found their validation in “authoritative European male expertise; an opportunity for returning émigrés, colonial refugees, and commoners to observe anti-Frenchness via the spectacle of Baartman and shore up their own identities; and the elevation of European womanhood through the demotion of the Black female body” (p. 54). And so while Mitchell might have provided a more detailed analysis of Baartman’s particular history of objectification, enslavement, and exhibition, and her subsequent inscription as the iconic archetype of deformed and sexualized Blackness, Mitchell clearly demonstrates her appropriation by politics and nationalism, in the ways in which the population “attempted to mitigate these traumas through the Black female body, seeking ways to redefine Frenchness” (p. 7), and her appropriation in the wake of the Haitian Revolution as a scapegoat-like figure meant to harness and even to validate “the residual anger and anxieties the French harbored after losing their most important colony” (p. 15). Coded as the antithesis of Frenchness, Baartman embodied the very otherness that supposedly justified the *mission civilisatrice* in the first place.

Mitchell turns to the figure of Ourika in Chapter 3, beginning by detailing the phenomenal success of the eponymous novel by Claire de Duras, *Duchesse de Duras* in 1824. Indeed, the chapter’s title, “Ourika Mania,” effectively sums up the overwhelming effect of this figure on the Parisian worlds of literature, drama, and fashion. But this figure and its effects were immediately and thoroughly stigmatized, as Mitchell claims; indeed, most analyses of the phenomenon saw “the desire for Ourika” as “a sickness” and “diagnosed both the Black female body and the desire for that body as inherently suspect, abnormal, bizarre, and wrong” (p. 83). Mitchell contrasts the trajectory of the fictional Ourika with the life story of Claire de Kersaint, “born in France in 1777 to a white creole mother from Martinique and a father who had a colonial enterprise in Saint-Domingue” (p. 85), highlighting the fictional Ourika’s random discovery of her Blackness as precipitating a debilitating depression that ultimately leads to her death. This allows Mitchell to offer a corrective to any blithe acceptance of what this mania implies at a social level, since this story “offered a means of reminding French subjects that whiteness and Frenchness were in direct opposition to Blackness” (p. 87). Her analysis of key paradoxes in Ourika’s subjective trajectory is mainly located within the novel’s fictional frame, and is predicated on Duras’s paradoxical but deliberate strategy. As Mitchell observes: “For all practical purposes, Duras creates a version of Ourika who is a Frenchwoman; she receives exactly the same upbringing that Mme. De B. would have provided a white daughter” (p. 90). As a result, Ourika’s horror at discovering the reality of her Blackness “thrusts her into an identity crisis” (p. 86); the immediate context of the revelatory conversation she overhears, asserting her lack of marriageability, forces her to realize that “despite her upbringing, her race precludes her from membership in the aristocracy” (86). The resulting reading allows Mitchell to highlight the limitations and contradictions inherent in inscribing Ourika through a “traditionally French” upbringing.

The result of this inscription proscribes Ourika in a number of ways, again made visible, as in the case of Baartman, through the prisms of national politics and societal norms of gender and sexual practice. In the first of these, Ourika’s judgement on the Haitian Revolution could just as easily have been made by a white Frenchwoman; what gives it fresh impetus here is the rejection of a reviled race by a member of it, “The Santo Domingo massacres gave me fresh cause for fresh and heartrending sadness... Now I had the shame of belonging to a race of barbarous murderers.”[4] Such an out-of-hand rejection effectively validates the view of the revolutionary slaves already held by mainland France on the one hand, even as it masks the barbarity of the

colonial enterprise on the other. As Mitchell indicates, “similar atrocities committed by whites remained invisible” (p. 90). Rounding out her analysis with sections on Ourika-themed food and fashion, poetry, and plays, Mitchell concludes that Ourika’s superficial Frenchness “depends on the code of white Frenchness to reestablish the narrative of racial illegitimacy” (p. 101). This central dichotomy bridges the hierarchies and ambiguities of race, gender, and sexuality that marginalized and commodified these women, rehearsing and reinforcing their perceived difference in order to buttress national and social articulations of Frenchness seen as under threat. The manner in which this society dealt with Jeanne Duval would be no different.

Mitchell opens her chapter on Duval by pointing out the central paradox that by contrast with the “hypervisibility” accorded her first two subjects, “Baudelaire’s contemporaries and biographers sought to annihilate Duval from his narrative” (p. 108). Interestingly, however, this assertion contains within it an implicit duality that attaches the contemporary themes of a French colonialist praxis linked to an assertive masculinity that co-opted Baudelaire and similar artists to serve their quest for national greatness. At issue were key matters of colonial conquest and expansion, impacting French territoriality and its role and standing in the world, as Mitchell observes, “New as well as unresolved colonial anxieties contributed to the need to shore up specific new kinds of Frenchness – represented by Baudelaire and other artists – and made Duval into a repository for anti-French venom” (108). To put it another way, Duval as a woman of color could not remain visible as the paramour of a masculine poet with national standing, a fly in the ointment of the new imperial project that Mitchell cites as the crucial factor in this project of erasure: “Duval could not fit into the new imperial project that arose with the French colonization of North Africa, so his allies simply removed her after he was no longer alive to provide her with some measure of protection” (p. 108). By the end of the invasion of Algeria in 1830, the seizure of control of the Senegalese coast in 1843 and colonial expeditions in Asia and Mexico in the 1860s, France “controlled more territory in West Africa than any other European power” (p. 110), as Mitchell accurately indicates. As a result, any social and cultural acceptance of this Haitian-born actress and dancer of mixed French and Black African ancestry as mistress and sometime muse of this unquestionably gifted poet would imply the corollary of accepting the uncontrolled and uncontrollable sexuality of the depraved, otherized woman of color as an integral part of a national identity which was arguably still at a critical stage of development through imperial expansion into the territories of those very peoples and cultures of color. Indeed, the point here was that Baudelaire and his work were being co-opted as key components in the articulation of a singular and expansive French national identity which was predicated on its conjunction of inviolate whiteness and territorial, political, and cultural domination. As Françoise Lionnet succinctly points out in her impressively nuanced reading of Baudelaire’s poem “A Une Malabaraise” in her landmark 1998 article “Reframing Baudelaire,” within this framework, ambiguities and their implications were not to be tolerated, “this poem performs a deconstruction of stable meaning by putting into question all continental forms of identity, be they French, African, or Indian, and reconstructing them as hybrid, insular, and local.”[5] And so while Baudelaire displayed “a full range of emotions regarding Duval, from hate and fury to love and sentimentality” (p. 110), contemporaries like Toubin, Lepelletier, and Tournachon sought to diminish or erase Baudelaire’s recognition of the complexities of creoleness and, by implication, the extent of her role and influence in his life. Mitchell argues that “his contemporaries sought to restore him to a more elevated and respectable space in which there was no place for Duval and her Blackness” (p. 124). The resulting synecdoche-driven demonization of Duval was

simultaneously a validation of white French identity; her detractors fell back on “the tropes long associated with the Black woman, most notably an exaggerated and aggressive hypersexuality” (p. 124). This is an intriguing argument, and frankly, one wishes that Mitchell had fleshed it out more. In conjunction with the new imperialism of French African expansion, which itself is joined to French colonial possession in the Caribbean, the assertion that “she and women like her could not fit into a new imperial France” (p. 120) arguably inserts patterns and practices of racial and sexual exclusion into a national identity also predicated on hierarchies and singularities of class. Ultimately, these configurations added to the nation’s implicit and exclusivist whiteness, and indeed they might have aggravated it.

The book concludes with a brief look at how these principles and practices of race, gender, sexuality, and othering in France might apply proleptically to Josephine Baker, arguably France’s most famous Black female performer of the twentieth century. Beginning in 1925, and dancing only in a skirt made of feathers, and later, most famously, of artificial bananas, Baker consciously and deliberately exploited these stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality for her own ends, so that “her naked Black body was manipulated to represent Africa, and she was the quintessential African woman—sexually available and uncivilized, in direct opposition to French self-identity” (p. 137). The limits of this performative paradox can be seen in the fact that “Baker never claimed Frenchness” (p. 137), but ultimately Baker’s performative persona was subsumed by the notion that “the Black female body provided a canvas that...rearticulate[d] notions of a true (white) French (masculine) national identity” (p. 138). In the final analysis, all of these women were victims of a process of commodification explicitly meant to act as a counter to a Frenchness that emerged from a “definition implicitly steeped in whiteness. Social constructions of whiteness required constant reminders as well as revisions” (p. 139). It is the pervasive, if unacknowledged nature and purpose of these ethnic, social, political and cultural patterns and practices that must, especially now, be acknowledged.

## NOTES

[1] Tyler Stovall, “Race and the Making of the Nation: Blacks in Modern France” in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Michael Gomez (New York: NYU Press, 2006): 206.

[2] Tyler Stovall, “National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor after World War I,” *Representations* 84 (2004): 53.

[3] Stovall, “National Identity,” p. 54.

[4] Claire de Duras, *Ourika: An English Translation*, trans. John Fowles, intro. Joan DeJean and Margaret Waller (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1994), p. 21.

[5] Françoise Lionnet, “Reframing Baudelaire: Literary History, Biography, Postcolonial Theory, and Vernacular Languages,” *Diacritics* 28/3 (1998): 78.

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