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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 Rebecca Rogers, Cerlis, CNRS, Université de Paris

Robin Mitchell's book is a timely one for historians and academics on both sides of the Atlantic. It is timely in political terms, as highly publicized deaths of unarmed Black citizens have led to widespread protests and the rise of #BlackLivesMatter in France and the United States. These events have, of course, played themselves out differently in the two countries. In France, the political moment has trained unprecedented public attention on the legacy of slavery and empire rendering more visible the work of scholars and activists alike.[1] In political terms as well, it has provoked widespread debates about the history of race in France, a country where the analytic utility of the term "race" continues to generate debate among historians.[2] From the vantage point of France, *Vénus Noire* is especially timely in scholarly terms since the book explores representations of the Black female body that have been recently much discussed following the publication of the lavishly illustrated 2018 publication, *Sexe, race et colonies,* and the Musée d'Orsay's 2019 exhibition on Black models in French art.[3] Mitchell's arguments about the colonial legacy of gender and race echo in many ways the dominant themes running through both of these cultural productions, including the foregrounding of visual images and an interest in analyzing the presence of Black female bodies in an emerging commodity culture.

Vénus Noire explores white colonial fantasies of Black women's bodies over the revolutionary divide, through the stories of three women: Sarah or Saartjie Bartmaann, Charlotte Catherine Benezet Ourika, and Jeanne Duval. Mitchell describes her project as "a cultural history of white Frenchmen and -women looking at Black women" (p. 17). This history, she argues, sheds light on the "historical production of French nationalism and of gender and racial identities from the ancien regime through the first half of the nineteenth century" (p.12). Black women mattered in France, Mitchell writes, and it is time to both examine the traces their presence left and assess their importance to the early nineteenth century.

This is a book with broad ambitions. It aims to chart the cultural and even psychological ramifications of the loss of empire in metropolitan France. Her central argument is that the attention paid to Black female bodies in early nineteenth-century France offers a way to reread the trauma of losing Saint-Domingue in the Haitian Revolution; representations of the eroticized female body offer insights into how slavery, the colonies and the loss thereof gave rise to "an unclaimed and ignored racialized national identity" (p. 11). In this study of the role of Black women in the French imaginary, Mitchell is less interested in lived experiences, than in questions of national, racial, and gendered identity, as seen through the cultural productions of white men and women. The focus on three "real" women allows Mitchell to explore the diverse cultural artifacts—paintings, plays, novels, newspaper accounts, correspondences—that testified to

French colonial fantasies around Black female bodies. “These women’s real counterparts were culturally devoured, sliced, paraded, swallowed, and, finally, spit out as fantastical representations that bore scant resemblance to the originals,” Mitchell writes (p. 50). These fictional representations absorb most of Mitchell’s narrative attention.

Underlying Mitchell’s study are a series of guiding intellectual convictions. For Mitchell, portrayals of women’s bodies allowed white Frenchmen and -women to discuss issues of race and gender, while simultaneously informing and regulating normative French behavior; their bodies are foils, she notes repeatedly, for “all kinds “French imaginations” (p.16). Both in scientific and popular culture “the use and production of their bodies reinforced strategies of whiteness, blackness and Frenchness” (p.11). The book analyzes fictional letters, lighthearted comedies or biographers of Baudelaire to reveal more somber truths about cultural responses to such weighty issues as the challenges of the post-Revolutionary period, the abolition of slavery, and the erosion of French imperial power in the course of the violent Haitian revolution. Following in the footsteps of pioneering British feminist historians of empire, Robin Mitchell is interested in how Black female bodies become a “rich focal point” to analyze a cultural politics of whiteness and Frenchness.[4] Taking seriously the post-colonial contention about the “colony at home,”[5] *Vénus Noire* tracks the presence of the female Other, the foreign or colonial Black woman, through an exploration of her cultural manifestations in early nineteenth-century France.

By focusing on three highly unusual and already well-studied women, Robin Mitchell is able to engage with a wide range of disciplines and perspectives—art history, political theory, women’s and gender studies, and critical race theory—while remaining firmly grounded in cultural history. Mitchell’s approach to cultural history brings together a history “that seeks to recover an accurate and changing past” with theories of representation. Whereas one tries to access a stable truth, she writes, the other insists on the repeated distortions produced by the dominant culture (p. 12).

The book begins biographically with “The Tale of Three Women” in an effort to reveal “their most authentic selves, establishing and emphasizing the importance of their lived realities” (p. 21). The reader learns about the enslaved Senegalese woman, Charlotte Catherine Benezet Ourika, whom the French Governor of Senegal, the chevalier de Boufflers, “gifts” to his uncle M. de Beauvau in the late eighteenth century. She was emancipated in December 1794 and achieved a modicum of notoriety in elite French society before dying in 1799. Since the traces of the historical Ourika’s authentic self are few and far between, Mitchell’s focus is on the fictional representation that received posthumous fame a quarter century later when Claire de Dufort, the duchess of Duras, re-presented Ourika’s story in fictional form during the Restoration. This sparked an Ourika-mania in the form of at least four plays, poems, and various food and fashion creations.

Mitchell argues that the posthumous fetichization of Ourika depended on the earlier exploitation of a second woman, Sarah Baartmaan, who is the subject of chapter two, aptly titled “Entering darkness: colonial anxieties and the culture production of Sarah Baartmann.” Baartmann is probably the best-known Black woman among colonial historians and the subject of numerous scholarly volumes.[6] Known as the Hottentot Venus, Baartmann was born in South Africa, and came to London in 1810. It was in London that she was exhibited by the men who sponsored her

trip. Although it is unclear whether she was an enslaved person or an employee, there is ample evidence of the intense popular and scientific interest her body provoked in London, Ireland, and, then, in France, where she arrived in September 1814. She died in December 1815 or January 1816. Like Ourika, Baartmann acquired even greater posthumous fame. The scientist Georges Cuvier made a plaster cast of her body that was exhibited at the Musée de l'Homme until 1974. But she was also the object of a series of fictional letters, of a comedy of morals, as well as a series of satirical visual representations. For Robin Mitchell, the spectacle of Baartmann prepared the way for the cultural consumption of Ourika afterwards. Baartmann became "a cultural distraction" onto which that colonial failure "could be mapped" (p. 79).

Jeanne Duval, the third woman analyzed, was the common-law wife of poet Charles Baudelaire, who referred to her as his Vénus noire in his poetry. Born around 1820 in France, Duval's father was probably white, her mother Black. Baudelaire first saw her on stage in 1842. Their relationship lasted until his death in 1867. Details of her life, like those of the previous two women, come from others, most notably, Baudelaire's letters to his mother. The final chapter, devoted to Jeanne Duval as a "site of memory," explores Baudelaire's written and visual representations of his lover, the writings and paintings of Duval by the poet's contemporaries, and her treatment by Baudelaire's biographers. Mitchell concludes that, "Because Baudelaire's defenders could not find a way to incorporate Duval and other Black women into the definition of Frenchness, they demonized and expunged her from the record as much as possible" (p.133). For Mitchell, the most dramatic evidence of her disappearance is Gustave Courbet's erasure of her presence at Baudelaire's request in *L'Atelier du peintre* (1855). Mitchell makes a convincing claim for the ways her description "ultimately made her into fantasy and erased her true character" (p. 124).

Robin Mitchell's book offers much food for thought, as it engages with questions at the heart of contemporary culture wars. Yet the wide-ranging nature of the author's scholarly interests and inspirations sometimes makes the book's real focus hard to pin down. Is the book about Black women in nineteenth-century France or a biography of three highly unusual Black women? Is the book about cultural fantasies or about national identities? Is the book about representations of Blackness or the construction of whiteness? Is the book about the loss of empire or the enduring legacy of colonialism? Is the book about Black female sexuality and science or about popular and consumer culture? Is the book about nineteenth-century French cultural conversations about race or a twenty-first century American's re-reading of these conversations? From the perspective of this reviewer, the author's attempts to engage with all of these topics in a mere 140 pages of text provokes more questions than answers, and some frustration too. The reader leaves the book with a range of fascinating cultural nuggets, thanks in no small part to the judicious inclusion of 25 illustrations. The reader comes away convinced that the focus on the representation, commodification, and fetishization of Black female bodies offers a stimulating perspective on the early years of the nineteenth century – and that it merits further study in the wake of a flourishing "Atlantic" historiography where issues of gender and race are increasingly prominent.[7] The reader also comes away newly appreciative of how analysis of race exposes silences in the historical record that historians must acknowledge and analyze.

Still, the author's larger claims about such subjects as Frenchness, whiteness, and imperial trauma often seem over-argued and at times unsubstantiated given the material under

examination, the method deployed, and the focus on only three case studies. The discussion of Mitchell's *Vénus Noire* in this forum offers an opportunity to consider scholarly concepts, categories, and conversations that raise challenging questions about how we write history on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly when gender and race are subjects of analysis. This monograph does a great service in directing attention to cultural representations of race in early nineteenth-century France, while building on the work of gender historians who have demonstrated how gender relations were reconfigured in the wake of the French revolution. By bringing together the analytic categories of race and gender, Mitchell demonstrates how they interacted to produce conversations about Frenchness, whiteness, or sexuality in ways that historians of metropolitan France have rarely acknowledged. In this way, the book powerfully calls into question an all too frequent color blindness. Drawing our attention to the representational use of the Hottentot Venus in satires following France's humiliating defeat at Waterloo, Mitchell underscores the complexity of national imaginings at this critical juncture. That French "civilized society" *saw* B**l**ackness and perceived its potential to threaten class, gender, and racial order is a point well worth making.

The Ourika-mania of the Restoration similarly demonstrates how Blackness could both attract and repel. When the Lyonnais Café de l'Europe changed its name to Café Ourika, the *Journal de commerce* advertised that "the most exquisite products of our colonies will be offered and served to you by *les naturels* du pays" (p. 100). While café culture viewed male Blackness as a form of exoticism, Claire de Duras's novel about the Franco-Senegalese orphan who is "rescued" by a white aristocratic family or the play *Ourika, ou l'orpheline africaine* ultimately emphasize the disruptive and essentialized nature of race in French society. The Black female orphan may have the education of a white upper-class Frenchwoman, but that is not enough to erase racial boundaries. In the end, the dangers associated with cross race intermingling are revealed and "proper" class and racial hierarchies restored. Like much educational literature of the time, the examples mobilized in *Vénus noire* highlight the limitations of education in transforming socially constructed hierarchies. Mitchell's work reveals that, alongside fears of *déclassement* in France, there also existed fears of what one might term *déracisément*. These clearly merit more attention.[9]

The approach that Mitchell uses to explore representations of Baudelaire's Vénus noire similarly reminds us of the powerful intersections of race, class, and gender in artistic and historiographic conversations about the great male (white) artist. Baudelaire wrote extensively about his muse, Jeanne Duval and left sketches of her that are included in the volume. His contemporary Théodore de Banville described her as both divine and bestial, while Baudelaire's biographers have erased or slandered her, distorting or subjugating representations of her nonwhite body (pp. 124-125). Her subjectivity, not surprisingly, has been neglected. Taking her inspiration from Toni Morrison, Robin Mitchell inscribes Duval as a "site of memory." Morrison writes: "For me —a writer…who is black and a woman…my job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.' The exercise is also critical for any person who is Black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" (cited p. 105).

This revealing epigraph offers a lens through which to read *Vénus noire*, as an effort to pull away the veils that have covered Black female bodies in early nineteenth-century France and to point

to the realities their unveiling hint at. Viewed in this light, the book succeeds admirably. Yet the connection of these realities to slavery and the Caribbean is more assumed than established. Similarly, the emphasis on imperial defeat in Saint-Domingue leaves the reader wondering how the reality of colonial conquest in Algeria and the proliferation of representations of the racialized "Oriental" female body coexisted with her Caribbean Black counterpart.

The conclusion advances a bold argument: that representations of Black women were used to mitigate "devastating economic and psychological losses." For Mitchell, these representations rearticulated "notions of a true (white) French (masculine) national identity" and "France used large-scale racial ventriloquism to ignore slavery, in the process showing precisely how great a social, political, and cultural role it played in the metropole and in the colonies" (p. 138).[8] While some of these sweeping statements are plausible, Mitchell's jump from fictional letters adopting the voice of a Black woman, for example, to the French refusal to address issues of slavery raises questions about interpretation that weaken the achievements of this passionately conceived monograph, particularly when the letters discussed speak specifically about processes of enslavement. In the end, the three biographies contained in the book offer tantalizing insights into the diverse cultural representations that circulated in scientific, artistic, and popular culture even if the suggestion that "their presence in the metropole led to cultural clashes that demanded redefinitions of Frenchness" (p. 15) is hard to substantiate on the basis of these case studies alone. Without a doubt, however, readers will take away from this book a set of racialized images and a series of questions about these three women, about Black women in metropolitan France, and more generally about the historical methods and language we employ in our political projects to integrate the historically marginalized into our narratives. The book will undoubtedly leave readers, as was the case with this reviewer, pondering what they have failed to see in the historical record. 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. That is no small achievement.

NOTES

[1] See, in particular, the activities of the Centre international de recherche sur les esclavages et le post-esclavages: https://esclavages.cnrs.fr/.

[2] See Fanny Gallot, Michelle Zancarini-Fournal and Camille Noûs, "Imbrication des dominations et conditions d'émancipation," *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire* 146 (2020): 2-16. The theme for this issue of the journal, "À l'intersection des dominations," tackles the question of intersectionality in contemporary French historical scholarship. See also Aurélia Michel, *Un monde en nègre et blanc. Enquête historique sur l'ordre racial* (Paris: Seuil, 2020).

[3] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch et al, *Sexe, race et colonies. La domination des corps du XV^e^ siècle à nos jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018), and *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*, published in conjunction with the exhibition "Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse" shown at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, March 25-July 21, 2019 (Paris: Musée d'Orsay/Flammarion, 2019). The Parisian exhibition followed two other versions, one at the

Wallach Art Gallery in New York and the other in Pointe-à-Pitre et the Centre caribéen d'expression et mémoire de la traite et de l'esclavage.

[4] See for example, Catherine Hall's pathbreaking *White, Male and Middle-Class. Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Vénus Noire draws explicitly on the insights of Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[5] See for example, Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire. Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[6] French historians of Africa as well as historians of science have published extensively on Baartmaan: for example, François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymard, *L'Invention du Hottentot: histoire du regard occidental sur les Khoisan, XV^e^-XIX^e^ siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002); and Claude Blanckaert, ed., *La Vénus hottentote entre Barnum et Muséum* (Paris: Publications scientifiques du Museum, 2013). She figures prominently in the research group ACHAC's numerous publications, notably around the concept of the "human zoo."

[7] See Cécile Vidal, "Femmes et genre dans les historiographies sur les sociétés avec esclavage (Caraïbes anglaise et française, XVII^e^-mi-XIX^e^ siècle)" in *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 50 (2019): 189-210.

[8] In this period that saw the explosion of a vibrant print culture, can one qualify as "*large-scale* racial ventriloquism" the evidence of a handful of plays or newspaper articles where white Frenchmen or -women adopt the voice of a Black woman?

[9] Bénédicte Monicat's scholarship draws attention to the early presence of colonial themes and racial metaphors in the hands of white Frenchwomen authors, cf., *Devoirs d'écriture: modèles d'histoire pour filles et littérature féminine au XIX^e^ siècle* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2006).

Rebecca Rogers
Cerlis CNRS, Université de Paris
rebecca.rogers@parisdescaetes.fr

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