

Never Black and White: Representing Black Women in Revolutionary France

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Honors Thesis

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Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Femme Noire*, exhibited in the 1800 Paris Salon, stood out among the plethora of white figures that dominated the walls of the Louvre, sparking controversy due to its peculiar subject: a woman of African descent “who had experienced slavery and in 1794 achieved French citizenship.”¹ (Fig. 1) Benoist painted this remarkable picture in the decade between the first abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1794 and Napoleon’s reinstatement of it in 1804. What did it mean to be a free black woman in this short, politically unstable period? Did she begin to conform to the paradigm of womanhood promoted by Enlightenment thinkers, which mainly concerned white women, or was she defined by a separate set of cultural conventions and ideologies? In the absence of firsthand accounts of art and writing by black women, I have analyzed the conditions of their existence, ideologies that shaped their realities, and a varying range of visual and literary representations, to understand something of the kind of roles and experiences the women had in revolutionary France. Through close readings of a selection of portraits and early nineteenth-century novels by white European women, I argue that their representations of black women treat the latter sympathetically as compelling and multifaceted subjects. Rather than representing them in terms of cultural stereotypes, which was typical of the time, women like Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Isabelle de Charrière, Claire de Duras, and Sophie de Tott presented their black subjects as beautiful—if also sometimes tragic—women capable of feeling a range of emotions, experiencing hardships, analyzing interpersonal dilemmas,

¹ Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, “Who is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist’s *Portrait d’une Négrresse*,” *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 325.

There has been a lot of ink spilled about this painting, which rose to fame in recent years after several scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth century French art history offered their wildly varying interpretations of this complex artwork. In my bibliography, I have cited Mechtild Fend, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, James Smalls, Helen Weston, and Anne Lafont, who have all written essays about Benoist’s portrait, expanding the discourse surrounding it.

and pondering over complex notions of identity and race.² Conventional representations of black women had been shaped by white French culture's perception and construction of black womanhood, but these women went against the grain to portray their subjects with such refinement and beauty at a time when black women were finally considered legal citizens after their liberation from slavery.³

White feminists in the eighteenth century often made common cause with slaves, because they identified their own oppression with that of enslaved people in attempt to categorize the plight of womankind as its own form of slavery.⁴ The works by Benoist, Charrière, Duras, and Tott do offer some insight—however mediated—into the kinds of experiences that black women could have, the cultural conditions in which they lived, and the ideologies of race with which they had to negotiate. Deep-rooted French mentalities and ideologies of race did not vanish instantaneously after abolition. The physical, mental, economic, and social effects of hundreds of years of slavery could not simply be undone. Thus, restrictions on the autonomy of black women remained heavily enforced, and racial prejudice remained the cultural norm. Even if they did paint self-portraits or wrote private journals, those who arbitrated dominant French culture would have prevented black women from receiving public recognition for their work or participating in any academic discussions that would have called for the preservation of their materials by scholars. The

² Contrarily, Helen Weston, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, and James Smalls are scholars whose perspectives on Benoist's portrait is that it is arguably racist; that there is a complete lack of solidarity with black women and that the sitter is robbed of her identity by the artist. I have cited their essays in my bibliography.

³ However, unlike black men, black women were never granted suffrage.

⁴ James Smalls, "Slavery is a Woman: Race, Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist's *Portrait of a Nègresse* (1800)," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring 2004), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring04/70-spring04/spring04article/286-slavery-is-a-woman-race-gender-and-visuality-in-marie-benoists-portrait-dune-negresse-1800>.

entrenched cultural restrictions placed on them were due to reasons of racial bias, compounded by patriarchal cultural attitudes towards women as a class.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, certain beliefs by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers gained wide currency, such as: a woman's youth and beauty factor heavily into her worth as a potential wife and woman in general; she had a duty to her country to be a good wife and mother; she should be educated, but not more than a man; she should not have a profession, even if those of the lower classes were expected to work. Did these beliefs apply to black women? According to Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff in an article about Benoist's now famous portrait, black women were able to develop the "type of individuality the republican culture invented for white French women."⁵ Servants of aristocratic white women were not only exposed to their social circles, fashion trends, and even conversations with close friends, but in some cases they were able to participate—at least up to a point.

Such was the case for the heroine described in Claire de Duras's novel *Ourika* (1823). Based loosely on a true story, Ourika was a young Senegalese girl who was raised in an aristocratic home after the Chevalier de Boufflers, feeling pity for the vulnerable child, saved her from a life of hard slave labor in the colonies by purchasing her as a gift for Madame de Beauvau. Growing up in de Beauvau's home, Ourika excelled at absorbing the many facets of aristocratic life. Perhaps the prescribed conventions for upper class white women applied to Ourika, too, such that her worth comprised of her duties to the family, appearance, behavior, charm, and even level of education—much like her white counterparts. However, there was an additional set of limitations that black women experienced that white women did not, because white culture in France reinforced implicit

⁵ Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Who is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négrresse*," *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 325.

institutional and cultural restrictions on their autonomy as legal citizens due to their blackness. Such restrictions were hardships white women experienced as well, including the struggle to obtain a proper education or to earn a sustainable income with a viable career. But as Ourika learned to her detriment, to be an educated black woman was to be an impossible category of being. A black woman artist would have been similarly impossible, because artists would not instruct black women, and the *Académie* would not have accepted, exhibited, or preserved art by black women. There was not just an absence of black women's contributions to French society in this period, but an active rejection and exclusion of them, despite their supposed freedom and legal citizenship. Instead, white French artists and writers were the ones that created representations of black women, with which black women may or may not have identified. Although we cannot deduce their reactions to these images and texts, the varied range of representations produced by the four-mentioned white European women can tell us quite a lot about the cultural conditions in which black women lived and the ideologies about race that they had to reckon with throughout their lives.

Before the abolition of slavery in 1794, which was achieved in large part by the Haitian revolution, the institution was an abstract concept to most French people; it was not allowed in continental France, but at the same time, black individuals were never equal or fully free.⁶ Thus, the status of black women in France was always ambiguous. The Atlantic Ocean separated French people from the horrific realities of the brutal practices in the colonies, which meant that people were for or against it without really understanding its severity.⁷ Their exposure to slaves, and

⁶ "The Code Noir (The Black Code)," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/>

⁷ David Bindman, "The Black Figure in the European Imaginary: An Introduction by David Bindman," *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary*, (Winter Park: Trustees of Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, USA, 2017), 12.

blackness in general, might have only been their encounters with black children as “pets,” or black women as servants or mistresses in aristocratic homes. These were some of the possibilities available to black women in mainland France. Although they did not necessarily work or live in upper class homes, most of the visual evidence of their presence in France during the 17th and 18th centuries were portraits of aristocratic French women in which they appeared as subalterns.

Aristocratic portraiture had long included servants, who were often black women dressed in colorful Oriental clothing and tending to their mistress’s needs, like the servants in Jean-Marc Nattier’s painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* or *Mademoiselle de Clermont at her Bath Attended by Slaves* (1733). (Fig. 2) *Mademoiselle de Clermont*, the first French woman to be represented as a Turkish odalisque, is sumptuously draped in fine Sultana clothing, with a rich scarlet color that matches the ornate rug beneath her.⁸ Her company is a group of black women in Oriental costume—their accessories and clothes enhance the exotic appeal of her portrait. They look up at her in adoration as they hold up her garments and *accoutrements*. The mistress’s large figure underscores her authority over them in this visual hierarchy, taking up more of the picture plane than each of her servants. As in other images, not only are black women shown here providing practical service, they are also aesthetic elements to the composition. The servants’ brown and black skin contrast *Mademoiselle de Clermont*’s porcelain white skin, highlighting her as the subject of the portrait. Nattier demonstrates this facet of white culture’s perception of blackness and construction of race, one that represents black women as props in an aristocrat’s portrait rather than painting them as subjects themselves. Such images convey a sense of how black women were typically portrayed in art, but I have pondered over their secondary roles as servants—working so closely with aristocratic women who had access to many resources—and

⁸ Kathleen Nicholson, “Practicing Portraiture: *Mademoiselle de Clermont* and J.-M. Nattier,” *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in eighteenth-century Europe*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003).

wondered if in real life they ever participated in aristocratic culture, perhaps even aspired to the conventions of womanhood embraced by their mistresses, or if they always remained camouflaged in the background and ignored. It is difficult to imagine that they did not. Claire de Duras was the first author to write a novel narrated in the first person by a black woman, and she created an imaginative space in which her protagonist, Ourika, certainly had such aspirations, at least until she learned of her social limitations imposed by her difference.

The range of representations of black womanhood was often paradoxical, because different groups produced images and texts that stem from their contradictory beliefs. In France, as elsewhere in Europe, there was cultural and political tension in the late 1780's through to the 1820's, which included a tumultuous push-and-pull between pro-slavery activists and abolitionists, which resulted in conflicting representations of black women. On the one hand, black women were widely considered to be hideous, and when Benoist portrayed her black sitter, for many critics the portrait was proof of a white artist's talent to have painted such an ugly creature with grace.⁹ Paradoxically, black women were also objectified, exoticized, and hyper-sexualized. On the other, women like Benoist had a different take on black women and represented them as beautiful people. But, unlike white women artists, there seems to be a lack of documentation of black women publicly or even privately responding to the discourse on their representation in French culture. Perhaps this restriction on black female autonomy and contributions to society is due to the engrained belief that blacks were inferior to whites, less intelligent, and savage—refusing to educate black people and hindering the development of their art, literature, etc. within the dominant white power structure in France.

⁹ Mechthild Fend, "Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Nègresse* and the Visibility of Skin Colour," *Probing the Skin: Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 207.

Since black women had little control over their lives, or voice in French culture in this period, representations of them were in some way always affixed to the condition of slavery, which is why I will discuss *Le Code Noir*, signed by Louis XIV in 1685, to put the perception and construction of black womanhood in French culture into context.¹⁰ The code outlined the laws governing colonial slavery, and the regulation and policing of slavery practices. It defined the “condition” of slavery, required all slaves to be instructed as Catholics, instituted harsh control over any misconduct, and insisted that the condition is passed through the mother’s lineage and not the father. Slaves effectively had no rights as human beings, and the Black Code controlled slavery practices right up to 1789. Below is an edition of the code that clarifies the status of slaves in mainland France:

Edict of the King, Concerning the Slave Negroes of the Colonies. Given in Paris in October 1716. This is a complement to the black code, specifying the regulation of slaves sent to metropolitan France, consisting of a set of fifteen articles confirming the permanence of the initial status of the slave and his direct link with the colonies with impossibility for him to access freedom by the mere fact of his presence in France.¹¹

I emphasize this edition of the code because it reaffirms the enslaved status of most black people in France, even thousands of miles away from the Caribbean plantations. Moreover, the “condition” of slavery was passed through the mother’s lineage, so black women were often burdened with this classification. Surely, the long regime of *Le Code Noir* embedded this rule in white French mentality. This embeddedness could explain French society’s unchanged perceptions of black women—and blackness in general—even after abolition.

¹⁰ Adrienne L. Childs and Susan H. Libby, “European Art and the Possibilities of Blackness,” *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* (Winter Park: Trustees of Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, USA, 2017), 18.

¹¹ “The Code Noir (The Black Code),” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/>

After the end of the Black Code administration in 1789, the slaves of Saint Domingue in the colonies spearheaded a rebellion against the French slaveholders in 1791, killing hundreds of white civilians in a gruesome manner. The slave uprisings occurred over the next few years, until they achieved abolition in 1794. According to T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, “images of the rebellion of Saint Domingue in 1791 where the French were slaughtered still plagued the French psyche into the nineteenth century.”¹² (Fig. 3) It would be no surprise if average citizens in continental France resented black people after this massacre, and possibly projected this hatred onto every black individual, even the former servants or mistresses in aristocratic homes who had had no part in the rebellion. Writing in the early 1820’s, thirty years after the first rebellion, Claire de Duras even incorporated her reaction in *Ourika*, using Ourika’s voice to say that when she learned of the past uprisings, “The Santo Domingo massacres caused me a new, excruciating pain: Until then, I had been distressed at belonging to a proscribed race; now I was ashamed of belonging to a race of barbarians and murderers.”¹³

Not coincidentally, soon after the Saint Domingue rebellion, there were images of the derogatory “Hottentot” stereotype that grotesquely sexualized black women, such as the print called *Hottentote à Tablier* from 1793. (Fig. 4) Her features are heavily exaggerated: the shape of her nose and magnified nostrils resemble a pig’s snout, the areolas of her breasts are enlarged, and the title “nature’s apron” refers to her extremely elongated genitalia. The exaggeration of the length of her genitalia speak to a belief of the heightened sexuality and animality of blacks. The “Hottentot” trope remained prevalent well into the nineteenth century, developing into more

¹² T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, “Black Blood, White Masks, and Nègresse Sexuality in de Pons’s *Ourika, l’Africaine*,” *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 54.

¹³ Claire de Duras, *Ourika*, France, (1824), English translation, University of Georgia, http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/literary_works/ourikaenglish.pdf.

explicit caricatures of black female bodies to the point of unabashed ridicule, such as the *Les curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers* print of 1815. A naked black woman is depicted atop a box (hearkening to slave auction platforms) with enlarged, unseemly lopsided buttocks, among other warped features, and ogled by the white Europeans surrounding her. (Fig. 5) Upon closer inspection, some of their scrutinizing exclamations are, “What a strange beauty,” “Nature is funny,” and “Quite like roast beef.” The “Hottentot” stereotype and the corresponding images contributed to racist ideologies about the inferiority of blacks to whites, because white artists presented them as spectacles of nature—oddities that are less like humans and more like animals.

Much more sympathetic, multifaceted and compelling representations of black women also emerged throughout the 1790’s. They challenged the existing conventions of black female representations, which were often pejorative, derogatory, and based on cultural stereotypes. In the same year as the *Hottentote à Tablier* print and the rise of the Haitian revolution, Sophie de Tott painted a portrait of actual Ourika in 1793 after word of this young Senegalese girl began circulating among Parisian salons. (Fig. 6) In Tott’s portrait—which has received little to no scholarly attention—Ourika is the main subject, which is a divergence from the compositional norms of black representation in portraiture. Tott depicts the young girl in Oriental dress, partially bare-breasted, kneeling, holding a wreath of flowers over a marble bust of her benefactor—the gesture alludes to the iconography of Nike, goddess of victory—touching his chin affectionately, and meeting the viewers’ gaze with a sweet smile. Even while kneeling, Ourika’s head rises higher than the white portrait bust. Her more prominent hierarchical position in the composition, her smile, and her eager crowning of the bust with a wreath of flowers may suggest that she is expressing an appreciative attitude towards her benefactor, who had saved her from a miserable life of slave labor. Tott’s saccharine portrait of Ourika may further suggest that her interaction

with the young black sitter was a pleasant one, which reveals a change in the way black women were represented in French culture. Perhaps Ourika's adoring gestures in the portrait could also convey her genuine "opinion" of her master. Even slight traces of a black woman's agency, such as this, should not be taken for granted.

Concerning the more common types of portraits of black women, David Bindman argues that the agreeable relationships between mistresses and their servants in portraits were a façade "suffused with fantasy, expressed in the assumption of the latter's willing acceptance of their subordinate role... [when] in reality, slaves often tried to escape and were sometimes forced to wear immovable collars with their owners' names to identify them."¹⁴ It is nearly impossible to determine whether the historical Ourika really appreciated her benefactors and enjoyed her aristocratic upbringing, or if she ever wished to run away due to any mistreatment. I am more inclined to believe the former, because we can assume that she lived in a comfortable home with a benevolent family who treated her kindly, since the chevalier felt enough pity to rescue her from a life of strenuous slave labor in the colonies. It makes sense that she would have been naïve about her blackness and genuinely believed that she was an unquestioned, beloved member of the family who raised her, because she was just a child after all. Her sheltered life as the house "pet" protected her from the realities of slavery in the colonies and of servanthood in continental France.

Isabelle de Charrière was a woman author working in this period who also expounded upon the typical representations of black women, around the same time as Tott and Benoist. Her short piece entitled *Constance's Story*, which was an unpublished elaboration of her novel *Three Women* (1798), details the tragic story of Bianca, the favored slave of an aristocrat named Madame del

¹⁴ David Bindman, "The Black Figure in the European Imaginary: An Introduction by David Bindman," *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary*, (Winter Park: Trustees of Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, USA, 2017), 12.

Fonte in the French colony of Saint Domingue. She kept Bianca a secret from her nephew, Victor, in fear that she would lose Bianca to him, but he eventually encountered Bianca while she was bathing alone in the grand bath hall. Charrière's description of their clandestine meeting envisions Bianca as a kind of black Venus, evoking the goddess's seductive, alluring charm:

With water to her waist, [she arranges] flowers in a vase. She starts laughing at the amazement of the young man, and quickly stripping the leaves from all the roses she is holding, she throws them around her. This pretty way of disturbing the water and concealing herself, this modest, ingenious, laughing, lovely gesture crowned my uncle's enchantment: from that moment he was lost in love.¹⁵

Thereafter, Victor insisted that Madame del Fonte give Bianca to him. He stated that Bianca could be his mistress forever, because he has no desire to get married. Soon after Madame del Fonte's approval, Victor and Bianca have a baby named Blondina. He considers marrying Bianca and legitimizing their child after spending two years together. To complicate matters, two actresses begin spending a lot of time with Victor in his house. They demand Bianca serve them, thinking that she was his slave, and Bianca immediately suspects Victor of infidelity. A weak-minded and a helpless conformist in the company of his friends, Victor fails to address or put an end to the actresses' harassment of Bianca. His inaction causes Bianca to lash out, and their story ends with both of their deaths.

Within this short, ill-fated story, Isabelle de Charrière tackled several cultural ideologies of race that had restricted Victor and Bianca's romance from blooming to its full potential. Victor stated that he had no desire to marry because he would rather be with Bianca, tacitly acknowledging that it was culturally unacceptable for someone of his status and race to marry his black servant with whom he had an illegitimate daughter. He refrained from protecting her because he might have feared that society would shun him if these two actresses were to discover his illicit

¹⁵ Isabelle de Charrière, "Constance's Story," *The Nobleman and Other Romances*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2012), 288.

romance with Bianca. This story further illustrates the stringent cultural conditions that discouraged white men like Victor from marrying black women like Bianca, due to their blackness, their status as servants, and the fact that they did not quite belong to any class, much less the aristocracy. Yet, having pointed out such cultural restrictions, Charrière still presented her black female protagonist as a beautiful, charming, and emotionally complex woman. She even dwells on Bianca's extreme blackness as a *source* of her beauty. Expanding the conventions of black female representation, she gave Bianca a depth to her character that the usual caricatural representations lacked. Charrière's evocation of the goddess of love, beauty, and sex in her description of Bianca starkly contrasts the insulting "Hottentot" imagery from a few years prior to her novel, which may also suggest the way Benoist felt about her own sitter; that she, too, may have viewed her as a beautiful black Venus.

I now bring my discussion back to Benoist's *Portrait d'une Femme Noire* of 1800. Here is a solitary, black woman who takes up the majority of the picture plane, shown in $\frac{3}{4}$ view, seated in a chair, and her body cropped at the waist, which was typical of portraits made for the bourgeoisie. There is no sense of depth in the ambiguous setting behind her, but the flat, golden-brown backdrop contrasts the sitter's dark, smooth skin. She is wearing a crisp, white draped garment that she bundles up around her stomach, just underneath her bared breast. The head wrap appears to be a similar white cloth wrapped intricately around her head—a bit of it left hanging to frame her cheek, while the negative space between the cloth and her throat emphasizes her long neck. A royal blue shawl cascades down her chair like water next to the delicate red ribbon that acts as a sash holding up the white drapery to her body with the help of her left hand. The light falls softly on her skin, subtly indicating the gentle curvature of her muscles and facial features.

The stark contrast between the white and black of the portrait signifies more than just paint on canvas. This striking vibration of opposing colors perturbed critics. An anonymous author of a "Critique en vaudeville" wrote, "The contrast wounds the eyes; the more it brings out the figure, the more hideous the portrait appears."¹⁶ Even though this is a humanizing, beautiful, and therefore unprecedented painting of a black woman, she is still viewed by this critic as a hideous creature. The chance of such criticism did not stop Benoist from challenging existing tropes of blackness to create this portrait. Benoist gracefully captures her sitter's beauty and portrays her in the neoclassical style, with elegant, well-defined forms, and a minimalistic color palette that hints at the Tricolor, perhaps correlating the love for the French nation with the sitter's legal citizenship. This portrait is the most refined image of a black woman in this era of French art history. It is a remarkable image that does not portray her attending a mistress, posing like a compositional or aesthetic prop, wearing an exotic Oriental costume, or highly caricatured with obscenely distorted features. At first glance, the portrait does seem to play into the eroticization of the black female figure. But, as Schmidt-Linsenhoff has convincingly argued, Benoist grounded this painting with iconographic elements from Raphael's *La Fornarina* to construct a similar composition for her portrait. (Fig. 7) She asserts that the "quotation of a canonical masterwork, linked with narratives on colonial eroticism and idealism in art, transforms the frivolous connotation of the naked breast into a discourse of high art."¹⁷

Anne Lafont has recently contributed to the scholarship surrounding this portrait with a perspective that tilts her argument away from artist intentionality and mainland France, and towards the sitter herself, as well as her possible identification with a Senegalese *signare* in the

¹⁶ Viktoria Schmid-Linsenhoff, "Who is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négrresse*," *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 335.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 329.

colonial spaces of the French Caribbean in this period. (Fig. 8) By recontextualizing the portrait as belonging to an imperial system separate from the Parisian center, in which African women had an unusual degree of agency, and the artist's intellectual and stylistic concerns, it reveals a deeper meaning to the work. Lafont concurs with scholars like Schmidt-Linsenhoff that the iconography of the sitter's bared chest is part of an erotic tradition of portraiture influenced by Renaissance examples. However, she finds it more interesting to "Africanize the sitter's semi-nudity by recalling the extent to which the representation of these breasts relates to widespread practices of women's use of their bodies in the imperialist system."¹⁸ Senegalese *signares* and Creole consorts essentially committed to marriage contracts with white European colonists on the plantations in the Caribbean. The women knew how to take advantage of these forms of marriage contracts, particularly to achieve visible material benefits; thus, the proud appearance of the black woman painted by Benoist suggests that she was, like the *signares*, a woman in control of her destiny.¹⁹ Lafont has also offered tantalizing evidence that the sitter may have been the wife of Benoist's brother-in-law, which is a game-changer in terms of how we understand this picture: Benoist de Cavay could have asked Marie-Guillemine Benoist to paint a portrait of his beloved wife, which would explain the elegant execution of her likeness on canvas.

Another unique feature of this portrait is her direct, frontal gaze and slight smile; the poise of her body and the stoic expression on her face radiates confidence, or at least a sense of self-assurance. The head wrap that Benoist's sitter is wearing could also suggest that she was just a woman of the West Indies participating in the fashion trends of the region—it is not necessarily

¹⁸ Anne Lafont, "The Body as a Project: Women in colonial Art," 2018 Bettie Allison Rand Symposium in Art History: Taking Exception: Women, Gender, Representation in the Eighteenth Century. Presentation: Feb. 1-3, 2018.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

related to the Phrygian cap, which symbolizes liberated peoples, like other scholars have inferred. Lafont also notes that the “iconic model of the Creole, a black woman from the colonies in control of her body, had already been invented by Canadian painter François Malépart de Beaucout in 1786, fifteen years prior to the Parisian painting.”²⁰ In his *Portrait of a Black Woman With Still Life*, the composition of a black woman cropped from the waist up, in ¾ view, single breast exposed, and wrapped in garments with a head scarf were new motifs that the artist borrowed from colonial life, similar to Benoist’s formula for her composition. (Fig.9) But, this work was not widely known until recently, and it was never given a public airing like Benoist’s portrait.

After considering the alternate perspective that places this portrait within an imperialist system, one can find an increase in and a variety of representations of black women that draws from the colonial life of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and other French colonies, especially in the works of Agostino Brunias. As Lafont puts it, Brunias was the “pictorial chronicler of Caribbean life,” and his abundance of paintings revealed the widespread use of white clothing by black women.²¹ In *Free Women of Color with their Children and Servants in a Landscape* (1762-1796), Brunias illustrates the diversity of black women that lived in the colonies. (Fig. 10) Although I have anchored the context for my argument in continental France, I bring up this Italian painter working in the West Indies to underscore how absent black women are from the art historical canon in revolutionary France. There is no French equivalent of Brunias’s works and they were not prominent in mainland France, nor were they considered part of the canon of artwork from the revolutionary French period—they are more so a part of the set of exceptional representations of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

black women that includes the works of Benoist, Duras, Charrière, and Tott, all of which were considered outliers as well.

When Benoist painted her most famous portrait in 1800, it had been six years since the abolition of slavery, but instead of this being a progressive time where black women could begin their lives as legal French citizens, it continued to be a time full of political unrest until Napoleon's eventual reinstatement of slavery in 1804. Decades later in 1823, Claire de Duras wrote *Ourika*, inspired by the Senegalese girl from the 1790's. The novel is the first to have a black female protagonist written in first-person, which allows readers to empathize with her on a deeper level.

In Duras's fictional portrayal, Ourika was educated like any other young women in elite culture and partook in conventional female pastimes and accomplishments: engaging in modes of fashion, learning multiple languages, and receiving dance lessons. She remained in blissful ignorance of her blackness until she overheard her mistress and her friend talk about her unfortunate "condition." Ourika comes to terms with the institutional and cultural obstacles that inhibit her from realizing her true potential, regardless of the amount of education and wit she possessed: obstacles such as her inability to earn her own money and not being able to marry a white man of her own class were all contributors to her turmoil—obstacles that rang true in Charrière's short story as well. The preoccupation of white women over courtship, wifedom, and motherhood were objectives that Ourika would never experience because of the deep-seated cultural barriers working against her due to her blackness. Ourika may have been raised as an aristocrat, but she did not share the wealth and privileges of her white benefactors, even though she was considered a beloved member of their family. Although Ourika's life in the novel was filled with self-doubt, internal turmoil, resentment, and inconsolable anguish, Duras has presented

a compelling black female protagonist with a believable personality, intelligence, complexity, and depth to her character.

Surprisingly, Ourika's fictionalized story captivated French audiences—their rapture rapidly developed into a phenomenon called Ourika Mania. In Robin Mitchell's analysis of the phenomenon, he cites Augustin Challamel, a contemporary of this short-lived fad, by honing in on the immediate success of Duras's novel, as it was “already known and admired at court... it was received with rapture by the general public, and was spoke of as the ‘Atala of the Salons.’ There were ‘Ourika’ bonnets, caps, gowns, shawls, [steaks, biscuits] and a color named *Ourika*.” Mitchell reaffirms that Ourika was “too aristocratic to be a slave, yet too black to marry a white French man of her own ‘class.’”²² The public was swept away by this fictional, postmortem representation of the young Senegalese girl.

It is notable that, in Gaspard De Pons's “*Ourika: L'Africaine*,” poem of 1825 published shortly after Duras's novel, he portrays her as an incurable nymphomaniac beast, feeding the stereotype of uncontrollable, animalistic black female sexuality. This white male poet's dramatization of Ourika's character seems completely detached from the initial portrayal of the young girl in Sophie de Tott's portrait from 1793 and is equally distant from Duras's version of the girl.²³ Of course, Duras could not have expected her novel, of which she had only secretly published fifty copies to distribute under an anonymous name, to become such a trend-setting sensation. While “*Ourika L'Africaine*” was another absurd, stereotypic representation of black women that a white man produced, which resembled the degrading images of the “Hottentot” prints of 1793 and 1815, Duras's *Ourika* demonstrated her attempt to present a compelling,

²² Robin Mitchell, “‘Ourika Mania’: interrogating race, class, space, and place in early nineteenth-century France,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2015.1085665>

²³ *Ibid*, 57.

multifaceted black female protagonist. Perhaps her well-rounded characterization was what appealed to the French public—that they were able to read from the perspective of someone who was usually overlooked and to empathize with her throughout her tumultuous journey. The representations of black women created by Claire de Duras, Isabelle de Charrière, Marie Benoist, and Sophie de Tott were more captivating, multilayered representations than those that were typical of this period.

After considering the varying constructions of black womanhood and representations of black women in art and literature, they seem to become an elusive mythical creature. Even with such enthralling accounts, we can only use them to infer the ways in which the cultural conditions and deep-seated ideologies of race shaped the experiences of black women. Perhaps they reveal something of the kind of experiences they had in revolutionary France: They were granted freedom and legal citizenship, yet their human rights were still a privilege; they faced lifelong institutional obstacles that prevented them from contributing their voice and creativity to French culture; they were plagued by the color of their skin, even in the eyes of those closest to them; and they live on in French art history as a kaleidoscope of paradoxical visions of their blackness by white artists who could never relate to the horrors of slavery. Yet, being a black woman in revolutionary France meant that they were also, without a doubt, exceptional. In spite of the system that refused to acknowledge, respect, and protect them—the system that exploited the most vulnerable—they survived.

EPILOGUE

After *Ourika Mania* in the 1820's, there were two more decades of political tension before the final abolition of slavery in 1848. *La Société Française pour l'Abolition de l'Esclavage* was established in 1833 wherein the members campaigned and worked for the abolition of slavery

in the French colonies. According to British historian, Lawrence Jennings, the French abolitionists of this society lobbied year after year to revive the emancipation issue and maintain its position in the forefront of French politics.²⁴ Their tactics were the most effective during the 1830's when leaders of the society held influential positions in government, such as François Arago, who was the Minister for the Navy and the Colonies. After a course of rebellions and battles, the July Monarchy was eventually overthrown and a Provisional Government replaced it. The new administration believed that the law abolishing slavery will have to be passed by the National Constituent Assembly. Victor Schœlcher, a member of La Société, returned to France in 1848 after a trip to Senegal and managed to convince François Arago, member of the Provisional Government and La Société, that they should not wait for the Constituent Assembly to pass the abolition law—they must abolish slavery as soon as possible.²⁵ Thereafter, the Provisional Government successfully established a decree to end slavery in 1848. Below is an excerpt from the decree:

Act. I. Slavery will be completely abolished in all the colonies and the French possessions, two months after the promulgation of the present decree in each of them. From the promulgation of the present decree in the colonies, any corporal punishment, any sale of not free persons, will be absolutely forbidden.²⁶

And the rest is history, right? Unfortunately, historical issues like the effects of slavery and colonialism, racism, imperialism, and Orientalism are still relevant to us today, but present in different contexts.

²⁴ Tyler Stovall, "Lawrence Jennings, *French Anti- Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802–1848*," *The Journal of Modern History*, University of Chicago Press Journals 74, no. 3 (September 2002), 650.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Eric Mesnard, "The Revolution of 1848: *The Emancipation to the Reunion Island and the decree of the abolition of slavery in the French colonial empire*," *Multicultural Interdisciplinary Handbook*, University of East Paris Creteil (2010), Art. 1.

As an epilogue to my research, I would like to mention the Benoist-inspired photograph *Bonnie Greer* (2001) by Maud Sulter, a contemporary Ghanaian-Scottish artist. (Fig. 11) In future research, I will seek to explore how she further critiques, complicates, or expands conventions of black representation in visual art by reinterpreting such historical images and choosing prominent black women as sitters in her contemporary work. According to Jim Mabon in an article about the artist, “Focusing on the contemporary Black British experience in a Pan-European and African context, Sulter’s aim is, at least in part, didactic: she seeks to *educate* her audience by exposing the presence of African peoples and their descendants in Europe over many centuries.”²⁷ He goes on to reference Sulter’s statement, “the fact that Black people have been in Europe for over four hundred years has to be taken on board.”²⁸ With this in mind, Sulter’s photographic portraits are a kind of homage to, as well as a reinterpretation of, the rare examples of black representation in visual art, like Benoist’s *Portrait d’une Femme Noire* of 1800.

The composition of her *Bonnie Greer* photograph mirrors the composition of Benoist’s portrait: Greer is seated in $\frac{3}{4}$ view, alone in the portrait, and occupying the majority of the picture plane. She mimics the direct and stoic expression on her face—recalling Lafont’s assertion that this expression exudes the confidence of a woman in control of her destiny—and meets the viewers’ gaze. She is also wearing a white garment held up close to her body with a sash and more of it wrapped around her hair, which is similar to Benoist’s stylistic choices for her own sitter. The differences between the two portraits, however, signify Sulter’s slight reinterpretation of the famous Benoist portrait: the photograph is in grayscale instead of color, with a completely black background; the black background does not emphasize the darkness of the sitter’s skin color, but,

²⁷ Jim Mabon, “Europe’s African Heritage in the Creative Work of Maud Sulter,” *Research in African Literatures*, Winter (1998), ProQuest, 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

rather, complements it by emphasizing the whiteness of her garments and the highlights along the contours of her muscles, collarbones, and face; the garment she is wearing covers her completely, as opposed to revealing her breast; and instead of calling the photograph "*Portrait of a Black Woman*," Sulter uses the name of her sitter, who is an accomplished black woman herself. Recognizing the identity of the sitter transforms the photograph into the kind of portrait that an affluent or successful individual would have commissioned an artist to make, much like the way aristocrats commissioned artists to have their portraits made in this manner and composition in the eighteenth century. The fact that Sulter does not depict her with a bare breast is another artistic choice that diverges from Benoist's composition. Since Bonnie Greer is a public figure, it is possible that she did not want to expose herself in her photograph portrait. Moreover, the concealment of her body avoids inciting speculation about the continued eroticization of the black female body and heightens the focus on Greer's beauty and confident disposition in the portrait.

I was intrigued and perplexed by contemporary black artists who look to the past in their work, specifically eighteenth and nineteenth century French art. Maud Sulter often quotes the compositions of paintings from French art history in her oeuvre, as do other artists of African descent, like Yinka Shonibare, Kehinde Wiley, and Zanele Muholi. What does it mean for contemporary artists of African descent to recreate and reinvent artworks from the past? Do the works by these artists reflect a means to reclaim or shape African identity in response to centuries of racial stereotyping and the lack of black representation in the art historical canon? Perhaps Maud Sulter's photograph is an attempt to transform the icon of a black woman in white garments seated in $\frac{3}{4}$ view into an empowering image. Her portrait of Greer emanates the excellence and beauty of a compelling, multifaceted woman, much like the way Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Claire de Duras, Isabelle de Charrière, and Sophie de Tott represented their own black female subjects at a time

when black women remained in the peripheries of French society. Inspired by the *Portrait d'une Femme Noire*, Maud Sulter's photograph offers a new vision of black womanhood, one that can empower black women and hearkens to the complicated history of black female representation in revolutionary France.

Image Index



Fig. 1: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait d'une Négrresse*, 1800, oil on canvas.



Fig. 2: Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane*, 1733, oil on canvas

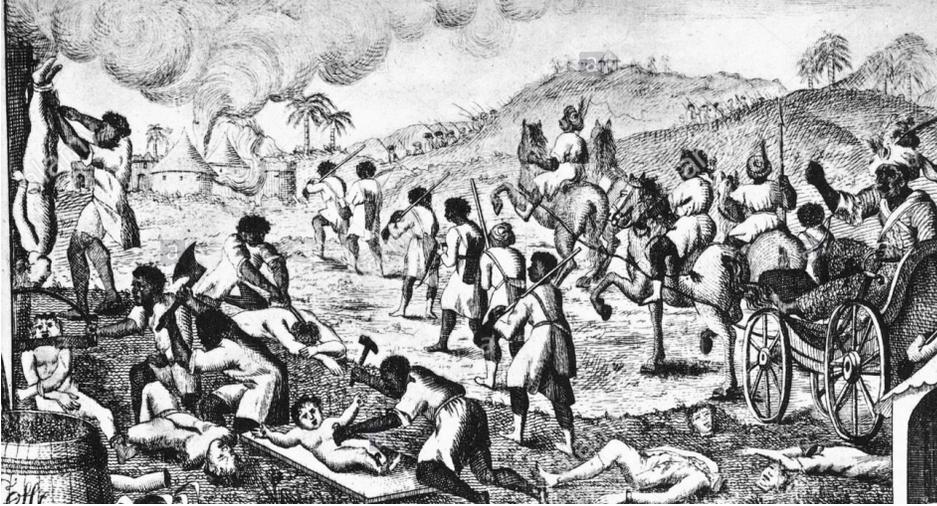


Fig. 3: *Massacre des Haïtiens français lors du soulèvement des esclaves noirs de Saint-Domingue, 1791, engraving*



Fig. 4: *Hottentote à Tablier, 1793, print*



Fig. 5: *Les curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers*, c.1814, print



Fig. 6: Sophie de Tott, *Ourika*, 1793, oil on canvas



Fig. 7: Raphael, *La Fornarina*, 1518-1520, oil on canvas

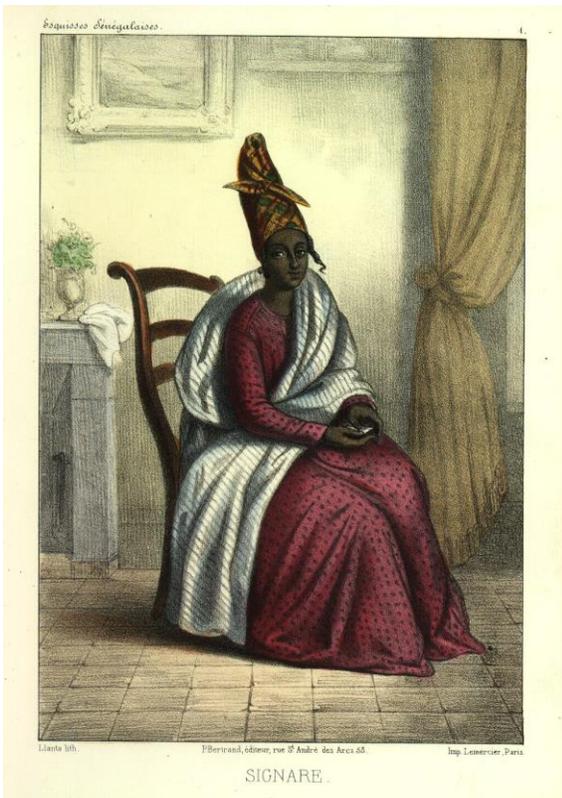


Fig. 8: Llanta, *Signare*, *Esquisses Sénégalaises*, 1853, lithograph plate, printed by P. Bertrand



Fig. 9: François Malépart de Beaucout, *Portrait of a Black Woman with Still Life*, 1786, oil on canvas



Fig. 10: Agostino Brunias, *Free Women of Color with their Children and Servants in a Landscape*, 1762-1796, oil on canvas



Fig. 11: Maud Sulter, *Bonnie Greer*, 2001, photograph

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