

Never Black and White: Representing Black Women in Revolutionary France

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Abstract

My research was inspired by Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Femme Noire*, exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1800. This remarkable picture of a free woman of African descent was painted in the decade between the first abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1794 and Napoleon Bonaparte's reinstatement of it in 1804. I address the question of what we can make of the existing representations of black women during this period, and how these representations can be used to understand something of the kind of roles or experiences the women had in French society. In the absence of firsthand accounts of art and writing by black women from the 18th century, I analyze the conditions of their existence, the cultural ideologies that shaped their experiences, and the visual and literary representations of them by Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Sophie de Tott, Claire de Duras, and Isabelle de Charrière.

Where Are The Women Of Color?

Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Femme Noire*, exhibited in the 1800 Paris Salon, stood out among the plethora of white Europeans that dominated in the paintings of the Louvre. It sparked controversy due to its peculiar subject: a woman of African descent “who had experienced slavery and in 1794 achieved French citizenship.”¹ Benoist painted this remarkable picture, as shown in Figure 1, in the decade between the first abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1794 and Napoleon Bonaparte's reinstatement of it in 1804. What did it mean to be such a 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?



Figure 1. Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait d'une Femme Noire*, 1800, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In the absence of firsthand accounts of art and writing by black women from this period, I analyzed the conditions of their existence, the cultural ideologies that shaped their experiences, and the visual and literary representations of them by Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Sophie de Tott, Claire de Duras, and Isabelle de Charrière. I argue that their unprecedented, sympathetic portrayals of black women do offer some insight into the kinds of experiences that actual black women might have had in revolutionary France. Through close readings of *Portrait d'une Femme Noire* (1800), the portrait *Ourika* (1793), the novel *Ourika* (1823), and *Constance's Story* (1798), I demonstrate how they challenged the conventions of black female representation. Rather than representing black women in terms of dehumanizing cultural stereotypes, they presented them as beautiful, multidimensional human beings, which revealed aspects of their lived experiences in France that otherwise would have been lost to history.

Typical Representations

In 1791, the slaves of the Saint Domingue colony spearheaded a rebellion against the French slaveholders, killing hundreds of people in a gruesome manner. Led by General Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, the rebellion continued over the next few years, known now as the Haitian Revolution. They eventually achieved abolition in 1794. After abolition, however, the institution of slavery remained an abstract concept to most French people; it was not allowed in continental France, but at the same time, black



Figure 2. Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane*, 1733, oil on canvas, Wallace Collection, London.

individuals were never equal or fully free. 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, and subsequently the events of the Haitian Revolution, which meant that people were for or against slavery without fully understanding its severity.² Their exposure to slaves, and 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, much like the servants in Jean-Marc Nattier’s painting *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (1733), as shown in Figure 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. Her company is a group of black



Figure 3. *Hottentote à Tablier*, 1793, print, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.



Figure 4. *Les curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers*, 1815, print, British Museum, London.

women in Oriental costume—their accessories and clothes enhance the exotic appeal of her portrait. They look 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 here shown providing practical service, but 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.

Soon after the Saint Domingue rebellion in 1791, black women were represented more explicitly, but as subjects of ridicule. The “Hottentot” stereotype developed during the early 1790’s, which grotesquely sexualized black women. In the *Hottentote à Tablier* print from 1793, as shown in Figure 3, 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 caricature of her genitalia speaks to a belief of the heightened sexuality and animality of black women. The "Hottentot" trope remained prevalent well into the 19th century, developing into more explicit caricatures of black female bodies, such as the *Les curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers* print of 1815, as shown in Figure 4. 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. These "Hottentot" images contributed to racist ideologies about the inferiority of blacks to whites, because white artists represented them as spectacles of nature: oddities that are less like humans and more like animals.

Overturning Conventions

As demonstrated by the "Hottentot" prints, 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, racial prejudice remained the cultural norm, and restrictions on the autonomy of black women remained heavily enforced, even after achieving French citizenship. There are no surviving works by black women from the 18th century that could have combatted these dehumanizing representations. Even if black women did paint self-portraits or wrote private journals, those who arbitrated dominant French culture would have prevented them 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, all due to the entrenched cultural restrictions on black female autonomy.

Much of the restrictions on female autonomy in general stemmed from 18th century Enlightenment ideas, to which the vast majority of French citizens adhered. Perhaps these conventions applied to black women, too, particularly in the decade after the first abolition of slavery in 1794. The paradigm of womanhood in France comprises these Enlightenment beliefs, such as: a woman's youth and beauty factor heavily into her worth as a human being; she has a duty to her country to be a good wife and mother; she should be educated, but not more than a man; and she should not have a profession, even if those of the lower classes were expected to work. One could assume that black women might have abided by such beliefs after they had gained French citizenship. 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 [of the French Revolution] invented for white French women."³ Servants of aristocratic women were not only exposed to their social circles and fashion trends, but in some cases they were able to participate—at least up to a point. This could very well have been the case for the young Senegalese girl named Ourika.

Ourika

In 1793, the same year as the Saint Domingue uprising and the *Hottentote à Tablier* print, Sophie de Tott painted a portrait of Ourika after her story began circulating among the social circles of Parisian salons. The Chevalier de Boufflers purchased Ourika as a gift for his aristocratic aunt, Madame de Beauvau, after feeling pity for the vulnerable child, who otherwise would have been bound to a life of slave labor in the colonies. In Tott's portrait, as shown in Figure 5, Ourika is the main subject, which is a clear divergence from the compositional norms of aristocratic portraiture. Tott depicts her in Oriental dress, partially bare-breasted, kneeling, holding a wreath of flowers over a marble bust of her benefactor—the gesture emulating the iconography of Nike, goddess of victory—touching his chin affectionately, and meeting the viewers' gaze with a sweet smile. Tott's saccharine portrait of Ourika may suggest that her interaction with the young black sitter was a pleasant one, signaling a change in the way black women were represented in French culture—a change brought by sympathy and humanity. Even while kneeling, Ourika's head rises higher than the portrait bust. Her more prominent hierarchical position in the composition, her smile, and her crowning of the bust may further suggest that she is expressing an appreciative attitude towards the Chevalier de Boufflers since she was able to grow up in an aristocratic home instead of the slave colonies.

The novelist Claire de Duras wrote *Ourika* in 1823, offering a fictional portrayal of Ourika's experiences in France as she navigates life within the aristocratic sphere. Inspired by and based loosely on Ourika's legacy from the 1790's, the novel is the first to have a black female protagonist written in first-person



Figure 5. Sophie de Tott, *Ourika*, 1793, detail, oil on canvas, private collection.

perspective, which allows readers to empathize with her on a deeper level. In the novel, Ourika grows up in the home of a French aristocrat named Madame de B and excels at absorbing the many facets of aristocratic life. She was charming, pretty, and kind—traits that resonate with the agreeable qualities that Tott depicted in her portrait of actual Ourika from 1793. Duras envisions Ourika as an educated young woman who partakes in the conventional female pastimes of elite culture: engaging in modes of fashion, learning multiple languages, and receiving dance lessons. Perhaps the Enlightenment conventions for upper class white women applied to Ourika, too, such that her worth is composed of her appearance, behavior, charm, and duties to the family. However, she remains in blissful ignorance of her blackness until she overhears her mistress and her friend talk about her unfortunate “condition.” As Ourika learned to her detriment, there was an additional set of limitations that black women experienced that white women did not, because white culture in France reinforced implicit 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, the preoccupation of white women over courtship, wifehood, and motherhood were objectives that Ourika would never experience because of these deeply engrained racial barriers working against her.

Ourika comes to terms with the systematic obstacles that inhibit her from realizing her true potential, regardless of the amount of talent and wit she possesses. Obstacles such as her inability to earn her own money and to marry a white man of her own class were contributors to her turmoil. She may have been raised like 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 is filled with anguish, Duras created a compelling black female protagonist with personality, intelligence, depth of character, and a narrative that points out aspects of systematic racism—an exceptional feat that challenged existing conventions of black female representation in revolutionary France.

Black Venus

Much more sympathetic, multifaceted, and compelling representations of black women also emerged throughout the 1790's. They challenged existing representations, which were often pejorative, derogatory, and based on cultural stereotypes. Like Claire de Duras with *Ourika*, Isabelle de Charrière was an author who explored themes of isolation, self-doubt, and systemic racial barriers, expounding upon the conventions for black female representation. Her short piece entitled *Constance's Story*, an unpublished elaboration of her novel *Three Women* (1798), details the tragic story of Bianca, the favored slave of an aristocrat named Madame del Fonte in Saint Domingue. She keeps Bianca a secret from her nephew, Victor, in fear that she would lose her to him, but he eventually encounters Bianca while she is 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.⁴

Thereafter, Victor insists that Madame del Fonte give Bianca to him. He states 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 insatiable actresses begin spending a lot of time with Victor in his house. They demand Bianca serve them, thinking that she is a slave, and Bianca immediately suspects Victor of infidelity. A helpless conformist in the company of his friends, Victor fails to put an end to the actresses'

harassment of Bianca. His inaction causes Bianca to lash out, and their story culminates 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 Bianca from those two actresses because he might have feared that society would shun him if they were to discover his illicit romance with her. 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 slaves, and the fact that they did not quite belong to any class—cultural conditions that rang true in *Ourika* as well. Yet, having pointed out such cultural restrictions, Charrière still presents her black female protagonist as a beautiful, charming, and emotionally profound woman. Charrière's evocation of the goddess of love, beauty, and sex in her description of Bianca starkly contrasts "Hottentot" imagery, which may also suggest how Marie-Guillemine 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. It had been six years since the first abolition of slavery when Benoist painted this portrait, but instead of this being a progressive time in which black women could begin their lives as legal French citizens, it was a time of political unrest that led up to the eventual reinstatement of slavery in 1804. This turbulent political atmosphere certainly fueled the controversy surrounding the portrait's debut. 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, olive green backdrop contrasts the sitter's dark, smooth skin. She is wearing a crisp, white draped garment that she bundles up around her stomach, just beneath 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 black and white in 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."⁵ The sitter is still viewed by this critic as a hideous creature, even though it is a humanizing, beautiful, and therefore unprecedented painting of a black woman. The chance of such criticism did not stop Benoist from elegantly executing her sitter's likeness on canvas, portraying her in the



Figure 6. Raphael, *La Fornarina*, 1518-1520, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

neoclassical style with graceful, 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 extraordinary image does not portray her attending an aristocratic woman, posing like a compositional or aesthetic prop, wearing 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* (1518-1520), as shown in Figure 6, to construct a similar composition for her portrait. 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."⁶

Conclusion

After analyzing the varying constructions of blackness 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 ideologies of race in revolutionary France shaped their experiences. Perhaps Benoist, Tott, Duras, and Charrière created these humanizing, sympathetic representations of black women because feminists in the 18th century often made common cause with slaves in attempt to categorize the plight of womankind as its own form of slavery.⁷ Their works nonetheless offer some insight—however mediated—into the kinds of experiences black women might have had that otherwise would not have been documented or preserved. The close readings revealed that although black women were granted freedom, they could not prosper as independent citizens; they faced lifelong institutional obstacles that prevented them from contributing their voice to French society; they were plagued by the color of their skin, even in the eyes of those who loved them; and they live on in French art history as a kaleidoscope of paradoxical visions of their blackness produced by white Europeans 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. Despite the system that refused to acknowledge, respect, and protect them—the system that exploited the most vulnerable—they survived.

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Endnotes

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

There has been a lot of ink spilled about Benoist's portrait. 18th and 19th century French art historians have offered their varying interpretations of this complex artwork: Mechtild Fend, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, James Smalls, Helen Weston, and Anne Lafont have written essays on this painting.

² 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.

³ Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Who is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Nègresse*," *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 325.

⁴ Isabelle de Charrière, "Constance's Story," *The Nobleman and Other Romances*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2012), 288.

⁵ Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Who is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Nègresse*," *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 335.

⁶ *Ibid*, 329.

⁷ 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)