Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020. xix + 183 pp. (Paper US \$34.95)

In this attractively written, handsomely illustrated volume, historian Robin Mitchell discusses the lives and representations of three Black women in nineteenth-century France in the context of the devastating loss of France's most profitable colony at the time: Saint-Domingue. It is telling of the large-scale depression that that loss sank France into, that the French held on to this name for a very long time, instead of adopting "Haiti," the name embraced by the insurgents who staged the first successful Black anticolonial revolution.

While everyone knows about South African Sara Baartman, a.k.a. The Hottentot Venus, who was made into a traveling circus act and exhibited in London and Paris, the other two protagonists are much less well known. There is Ourika, frequently portrayed as a heartbreakingly beautiful Senegalese girl who, like other colonized peers, was "adopted" by a French noble family as a pet, a plaything, a status symbol. After her death at a very young age, she caused *Ourika mania* among French men and women, who donned clothes in colors supposedly inspired by Ourika; she became, as bell hooks put it in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), a prime example of "Eating the Other." Finally, there is the notorious Jeanne Duval, an actress, and allegedly prostitute, born in France, who was the lifelong mistress of poet laureate Charles Baudelaire, and who, according to many of his admirers and colleagues, caused his early death. Each of these women was tragic in her own right, deeply othered and sexualized; with only snippets of archival traces, we have no way of truly knowing them in their own words. It is ironic that we see them largely through the French imperial imagination, through paintings and drawings, fashion trends, exotic dishes, and theater plays, where they are ventriloquized, often in bad faith, as if subscribing to Royalist and elite opinions and applauding both slavery and strict class hierarchies.

The book offers a richly packed moving tableau of historical developments after the French Revolution in 1789 and the Haitian Revolution between 1791 and 1804, which, as C.L.R. James had already shown in *The Black Jacobins* (1938), deeply influenced and inspired each other. While the focus is on France and the ways it dealt with race, gender, and heteronormativity by sexually obsessing over the few Black women present there, Mitchell deftly places developments in the metropole in the context of those in its colonies. Foregrounding metropolitan "*Postcolonial Melancholia*" (Paul Gilroy, 2005), the deep-seated feelings of depression and anxiety that plagued the French after the monumental losses of their prize Caribbean colony and Napoleon's defeat at Water-

loo, this is a most valuable approach to France and its gendered, racialized, and sexualized regimes. In exemplary intersectional fashion, the study brings issues of race, gender, and sexuality to the fore, with regard to both the book's three protagonists and the French metropolitan population. It focuses special attention on the returning émigré(e)s who needed to be disciplined after often-prolonged stays in the colonies and reintegrated into the French fold.

Two final notes. First, I would like to see the study of France's racialized and gendered relations extended beyond Josephine Baker to include the exodus of twentieth-century African American writers such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin, who engaged in an ardent love affair with "raceless, color-blind" France, fleeing from a murderous, racially inflected United States. I wonder whether U.S. exceptionalism—the best in everything, even in the viciousness of its racialized system—might have blinded these men to the equally racially suffused, but different, French system. Secondly, it strikes me as significant that in postcolonial studies of empire that focus on Europe and its respective empires, it has, until recently, been U.S. scholars such as Alison Blakely (*Blacks in the Dutch World*, 1993) and Ann Laura Stoler (*Race and the Education of Desire*, 1995, and *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times*, 2016) who have put the relational approach on the agenda, to understand empire in one analytical field. The discourse that is still dominant on the continent, however, maintains that European histories were self-driven, taking place autonomously and independently, in isolation from developments in the colonies. *Vénus Noire*, apart from breaking this reader's heart, attests to the ongoing significance of the relational, intersectional approach in the study of European empire.

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