



RESISTANCE: ain't I a woman?

A History of Black Female Representation & The Aesthetics of the Female Body in Western Art History

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FORWARD

The goal of our exhibit was to compare the portrayal of the black female subject in contrast to white women in Western art and literature throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The exhibition comprises a variety of mediums - prints, etchings, and watercolors by various European and American artists stemming from the colonial period until the twenty-first century. The subjects range from emancipated African women, African American women, European women, and white female European mythical figures. This study investigates the complex relationship between race, gender, class and the politics of representation. *RESISTANCE: ain't I a woman?* provides a framework to analyze how these barriers have intersected to systematically subordinate the black woman's identity.

The exhibition traces representations of Eurocentrism and the reinforcement of the civilized-uncivilized dualism. This dualism has legitimized stereotypes of black womanhood and sexuality stemming from the colonial and neocolonial which have greatly disadvantaged black women due to their perceived 'scientific' closeness to their 'animalistic' nature. We also included the image of the emancipated black mother and her children to highlight the stigma behind black motherhood. The black matriarch figure was often used to promote the increase of the slave population and the institution of slavery, therefore justifying slavery. We argue that the black mother was historically devalued compared to the white mother, as the black mother is depicted in a primitive and barbaric way. The dualistic emphasis on black women's promiscuity in contrast to the images of the white women which represent Eurocentric ideals of beauty, womanhood, femininity and civilization as they were fully clothed in all the images.

The images of whiteness are also associated with superiority, refinement and tenderness. The European women in the illustrations were presented in consistently donned elaborate outfits, reflecting the ultimate feminine ideals. The clothing, settings and props in the images signal dominance and reflect the extreme conservatism permeated throughout European life during the colonial era, which contrasts with the dichotomous themes and colonial sexual politics black women were dealt with. It is also worth noting that the white women in the images were housewives who never worked, while black women were forced to work. This reality of this is depicted in the images displayed in this exhibition, as black women were forced to work as spectacles for freak show attractions or low-wage agricultural workers and slaves.

This exhibition also aims to challenge imperialism and transfigure the viewer's perception of black women during the slave-trade. The role of the white woman's labor participation in comparison to the black woman's differs due to the "double legacy of slavery". The exhibition explores themes of black women's resistance informed through intersectional feminist perspectives, while remembering the racial legacies of those who suffered at the hands of slavery, and how it enhanced sexism.

Many European countries have been reluctant to acknowledge the history and horrors of the slave trade, so by comparing and contrasting images of black female subjects, such as Sara Baartman, with images of white women from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the connections between racism, desire and disgust become more clear. Sara Baartman has been a significant figure in the narrative of black resistance, as the public exhibitions that presented her body as a scientific spectacle illustrate the coercive commodification of the black body.

RESISTANCE: ain't I a woman? reveals how visual art, theatre and literature were used as a means to justify slavery and racial superiority, further alienating black women. Our resources were very limited and all the images are from the SFU library database, since the SFU special collections and the library database didn't have any works featuring Black women from the colonial and postcolonial era. "*ain't I a woman*", a quote from Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and emancipated slave, criticizes the exclusion of black women by white feminists in the women's suffrage movement. This quote also inspired black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's who coined the term "intersectionality". Crenshaw claims: "When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect women's experiences and women's aspirations do not include or speak to black women, black women must ask, "ain't we women?"".

We were inspired to focus on the portrayal of black women since we can all relate to systematic prejudice as we are a group of black and brown individuals. The three of us experience racial discrimination and have found ourselves confronted with racial biases and fighting against institutionalized colonial dynamics. Relationships between class, gender, race and sexuality structure the experiences of our lives as we face distinct disadvantages. Some of us also deal with anti-blackness firsthand, which is why we are passionate about calling out anti-black racism and racial injustices in both neo-colonial and colonial times. Furthermore, the sexual objectification and commodification of the Black female body throughout history in the arts and the mainstream media draws for broader implications of pedagogy. We tried to focus on the civilized-uncivilized dualism to depict how black women are judged more severely for expressing their sexuality in comparison to white women, yet black women's sexuality has been deeply pathologized. The black subjects in the exhibition were never granted autonomy over

their bodies, let alone their aesthetic experience. We understand that some of these images will make the audience feel uncomfortable, and that's okay as we aim to acknowledge the white gaze and also challenge it.

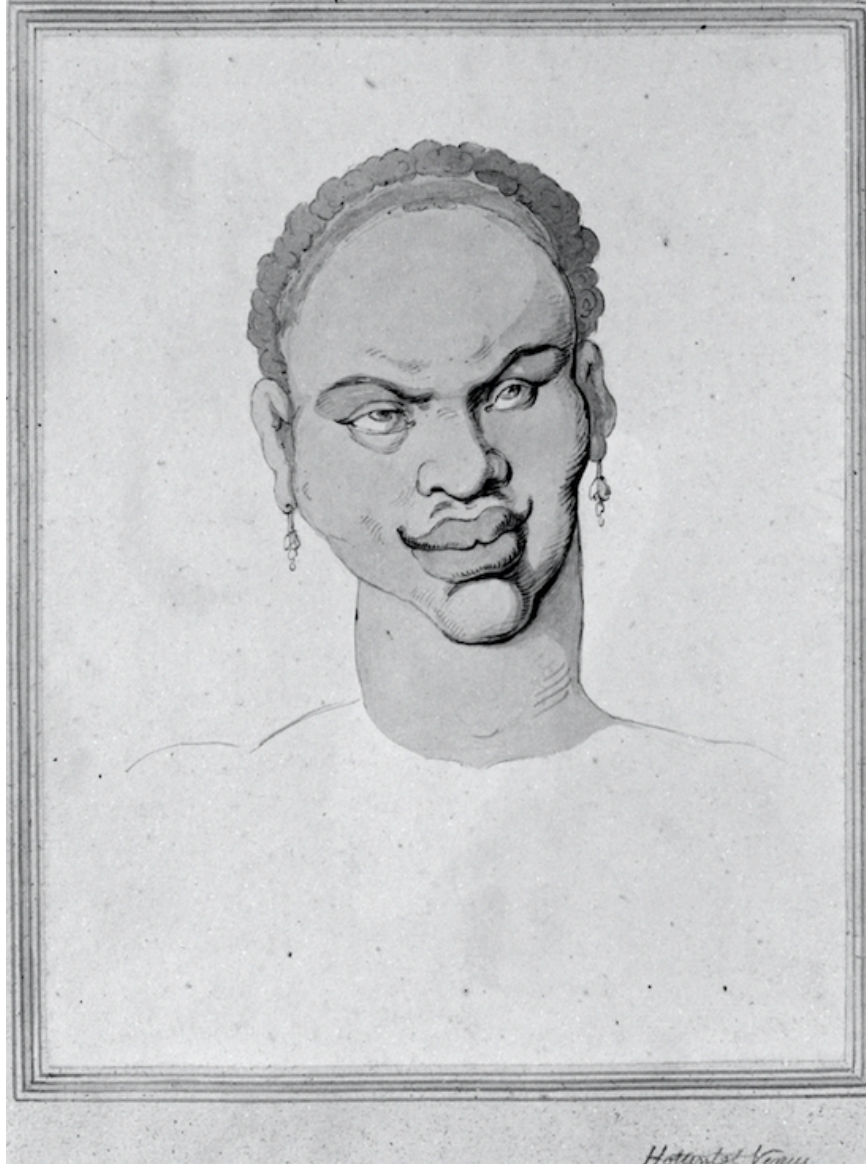
The idea for the exhibition came from seeing the book *A voyage round the world with Captain James Cook in H.M.S. Resolution* at the SFU special collections during our class visit. We decided to join forces as we realized all three of us wanted to curate an exhibition that focused on the portrayal of women of color, particularly black women, throughout the colonial era. By curating this exhibition, we aim to moralize and humanize each black female subject and directly confront the viewer. The accompanying didactics provide commentary to redraw biased notions and stereotypes about black women. Featuring seven illustrations of various models, the exhibition proposes that decolonizing art history cannot be complete until we examine colonial discourse around the representation of black womanhood and the black female body.

IMAGES AND EXTENDED LABELS



Love and beauty—Sartjee the Hottentot Venus, 1811
Print: etching and hand-coloured

The satirical print illustrates Sarah Baartman, a South African woman known by the colonial moniker Hottentot Venus, depicted in a way that exaggerates her features, resulting in excessive development of fat around her buttocks. Baartman was brought to Europe from South Africa by a British doctor, who recruited her under deceitful pretenses. Baartman was displayed in various freak show attractions during the nineteenth century as comedic fodder for the European gaze. The hypersexual portrayal of Baartman's South African features was used to justify the 'primitive' essence of the African woman, a technique that was used for the 'sake of science' and tied to practices of "othering". In the image, a baby cupid sits on her back side saying "take care of your hearts." Along with these illustrations, is the written message below that reads: "N.B. She was the first female ever came over to this Country- & was exhibited at Mr. Wigley's Rooms in Spring Gardens Cockspur St."



Thomas Rowlandson

Drawing. Portrait of Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus (died 1815)
Ink and watercolour on paper

This portrait depicts Sarah Baartman, from *Love and beauty—Sartjee the Hottentot Venus*, 1811. However, rather than promoting the objectification of Baartman's frequently exaggerated body, the artist focuses on her face. Rowlandson deliberately distorted Baartman's profile; illustrating ungainly facial features, oversized lips and an elongated neck. During this era, black females were frequently rendered in caricatures that were reductive and dehumanizing.



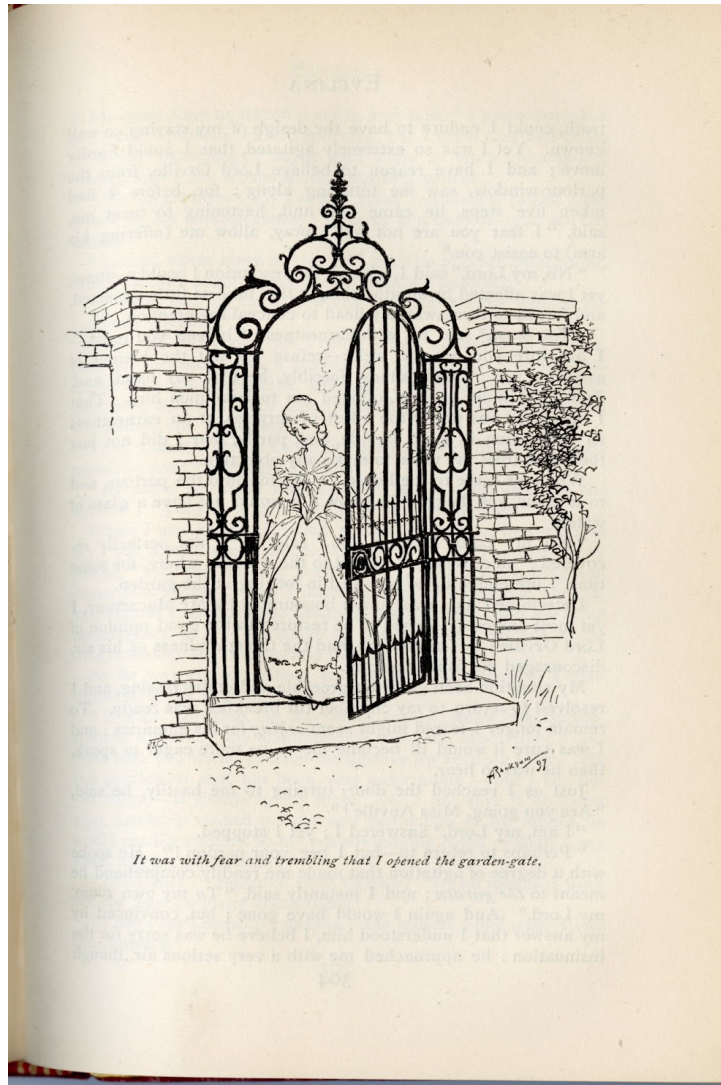
Bayard Taylor
Colored individuals along the road side, 1844-1865
Pen, ink and ink wash

This drawing depicts an enslaved African woman and her three children in the background. The image and accompanying text represent how Europeans perceived African women; inferior, backwards and barbaric. The portrayal of African women as matriarchs was also used to justify slavery, as it was commonly promoted by slaveholders since the slave trade relied on black women to reproduce future slaves. The text featured in the drawing is a dialogue from the African woman that reads: "Oh I so glad you come, 'massa says he wish you were in da bottom of the sea- -but you ain't in da bottom of the sea. You are here- -Oh I so glad to see you."



**The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Museum Purchase
*"The Virginia Planters Best Tobacco" advertisement***

This illustration depicts a tobacco advertisement promoted in the western world. In the foreground of the image stands a white man wielding his dominance over the enslaved African women as they harvest tobacco. The women here are partially nude, consequently presenting them as hypersexual, deviant, "exotic" women.



Hugh Thomas (1817)
Watercolour on paper
Print from "Evelina" by Fanny Bureau

The image displays the protagonist of the popular late seventeenth century novel "Evelina", who was also commonly referred to as "the history of a young woman's entrance into society". The woman is depicted at a moment where she is in distress as a result of a "falling out" with her love interest. It is important to note that light hearted fiction depicting the lives of young upper class women was very popular in the late 18th and 19th century. Also, in this era, the portrayal of these white, colonial women were generally painted in a pure, angelic manner even when the character might have been seen doing mischievous things.



Hugh Thomas (1817)
Watercolour on paper
Print from "Emma" by Jane Austen

This image and the print from "Evelina" by Fanny Bureau have been selected from two books that contain popular tropes that depicted upper-class English women and the lives that they led. The lives of these women heavily contrasted the lives of black women during this era, and this caused the depiction of them to also contrast. As these white women were members of the upper-class society, they were commonly pictured as strong characters, but not strong enough to subvert a man.



Figure 6

William Morris (1894)
Ink on Paper

This image is a popular illustration from the author William Morris' book series "The Witch in the Woods". The character here is meant to be perceived as a heroine and in the typical manner that heroines were portrayed, as a mystical being. Along with the characteristics of a witch, the woman is made to look very beautiful and portrays the standards of beauty during this era. The woman in this image has a slender build and very soft features commonly attributed to white, colonial women. Her serene and gentle physical attributes contribute to the feeling of otherworldliness that the viewers are meant to perceive from her.

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