

Public Abstract

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This dissertation traces the evolution of the male mulatto in literature from his appearance in the early nineteenth century to his sudden disappearance in the late 1880's. In this dissertation I argue that the literary image of le mulâtre heralds the end of sentimental depictions of black masculinity in the late eighteenth century and anticipates the more complex and dynamic images of blackness that will be explored in the early twentieth century.

French writers in the eighteenth century were fascinated with human diversity and committed to the concept of the "universal man." As France established a thriving slave trade, the interest in human diversity naturally became connected with the ethics of slavery: if the concept of universal man was indeed accurate, how could one justify enslaving others? This train of thought resulted in a new form of literature that was very popular among the French salons of the Enlightenment: la littérature négrophile. Initiated by Antoine LaPlace's 1745 French translation of Aphra Behn's novel Ooronoko, enthusiasts of negrophile literature created a fiction that represented black individuals as noble, handsome or intelligent; however, they were devoid of personal agency.

This changed with the Saint-Domingue Revolution in 1791. For the first time, black individuals were seen as political actors who could and would claim agency for themselves. As French Romanticism flourished in the nineteenth century, another black figure came on the literary scene: the male mulatto. Seen as necessarily the child of a white father and black mother, the mulatto was the ultimate rebel; he combined African savagery, blood lust and sensuality with the intelligence sophistication of the white race. The African, excluded from the Hegelian concept of history, could not be portrayed as a person of agency. The mulatto, connected through his white father to the history of France, was could claim political and personal agency.

In the works that I examine in this dissertation, I explore how writers such as Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Honoré de Balzac and Madame Charles de Reybaud present le mulâtre as a marginalized but dynamic and complex figure. Le mulâtre struggles with Oedipal aggression, leads military revolts, seeks personal revenge and dares to seek and find romantic fulfillment in taboo relationships. This figure is much rarer than literary representations of the "pure-blooded" African, and seems to evoke a higher level of anxiety and tension in the texts where he appears. I explore the reasons for this anxiety, reasons ranging from the frightening memories of Saint-Domingue (for which the mulatto was blamed) to the fear of racial contamination among white colonial planters as interracial marriages became more common in the middle of the nineteenth century.

I conclude this dissertation by offering an explanation of le mulâtre's sudden disappearance from metropolitan French literature in the late 1880's. This disappearance, I argue, is the result of France's new colonial ambitions in the Third Republic, which created a space for the mulatto as a carrier of French culture. The disappearance of le mulâtre is connected, I have discovered, to the appearance of another group of mixed-race people: le bourgeoisie de couleur. This group would soon be severely criticized by negritude writers as those who were traitors to the black race in their efforts to embrace white French culture.

My research is based on literary analysis, historical research, critical race theory and gender studies. I believe that this project makes a significant contribution to the field of French literature in light of the current interest in the connection between race and Romantic literature and the growing field of masculinity studies.

