

**Theater, Feminism,
and Abolition:
Olympe de Gouges'
*Black Slavery***

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Introduction

Perhaps it is unsurprising that on July 20, 1793, playwright Olympe de Gouges was arrested and beheaded at the start of one of the most explosive and violent moments of the French Revolution. Olympe de Gouges is often invoked in contemporary accounts as a militant feminist and abolitionist who incessantly published works challenging the traditional social order and its hierarchies. For almost a decade in the late 18th century, Gouges was a symbol of public controversy as she fearlessly published and disseminated her political views in public pamphlets and plays throughout Paris. As Gouges gained public notoriety, she was subject to criticism as she openly published works when French women were expected to go unpublished, write under pseudonyms, or avoid writing entirely.¹ Gouges' public visibility as a French woman contributed to her vilification, but the content of her writings was also threatening as she vehemently opposed the sexist and racist conditions governing the lives of French women and enslaved people in France's colonies. Most significantly, in 1789, actors performed Gouges' play *L'esclavage des Noirs* (Black Slavery), a play that denounced the patriarchy and the institution of slavery, which swiftly made Gouges subject to violent reprisal.

The cause of Gouges' arrest, however, was not legally attributed to her visibility in public life as a woman or *Black Slavery*, but rather to the fact that in 1793 she had published copies of a pamphlet *Toxicodindronn, Combat à mort des trois governments* (Three Governments' Battle To Death), which demanded the populace vote on a form of government: monarchy, federalism or

republicanism. She dangerously published this during a revolutionary moment when a new radical wing in France came to political power called the Montagnards club. The Montagnards were leftist republicans who wanted to execute the King, destroy the monarchy, and forge a unitary republic. On September 5, 1793, the Montagnards, led by Maximilien Robespierre, unleashed the "Reign of Terror" and systematically executed and repressed traitors of the Revolution, anyone accused of royalism. Thus, Gouges was legally tried and accused of treason because her pamphlet proposed monarchy as an alternative to a republican form of government. Amidst the Terror's craze, the Montagnards brought Gouges in front of the Revolutionary Tribunal, who conducted her show trial in front of public audiences in France.

During Gouges' show trial, she defended herself by citing her writings as evidence of support for the Republic. Here, Gouges invoked her play *Black Slavery*. This was a profound moment because her claims to republican patriotism were derived from the invocation of a play rooted in abolition and condemning the patriarchy.² In this way, the play encapsulated Gouges' voice and beliefs about the contradictions of the French monarchy and Enlightenment ideals. Gouges' play, *Black Slavery*, was performed in 1789³ and was particularly controversial because it justified the slave revolts occurring in Saint Domingue (today Haiti) against the French colonists. At this time, Saint Domingue was France's most lucrative colony, producing more than two-fifths of the world's sugar and over half its coffee.⁴ As

¹ Janie Vanpee, "Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges," *Theatre Journal* 51, no. 1 (1999): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.1999.0018>.

² *Ibid.*, 47-49.

³ Marie Josephine Diamond, "The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges," *Feminist Issues* 14, no. 1 (March 1994): 3-23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685649>.

⁴ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 173.

various groups revolted, the threat of enslaved people's emancipation produced fear in France about the fragility of maintaining economic and social control over its wealthiest colony. The heightened tensions surrounding the issue of slavery and the continued oppression of marginalized genders in the late 1780s makes Gouges' *Black Slavery* a critical play to examine the understudied interconnectedness between abolition and French women's gender activism in late-18th-century France.

Among the Age of Revolutions' historiographies, the French and American Revolution are extensively researched and celebrated, while the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) is narrated in distinctly "racialized" ways that categorize it as subordinate. For example, contemporary historian Marlene Daut writes how one popular conspiracy was that the Haitian Revolution was the vengeance of mixed-race free people of color revolting against their neglectful white fathers instead of an antislavery revolution for liberty.⁵ These kinds of historical narratives minimized how and why enslaved people overthrew French colonial power, abolished slavery, and spawned Haiti as a free independent Republic.⁶ Also, in situating Olympe de Gouges among other prominent women during the

French Revolution, she is often primarily invoked exclusively as an early feminist because of her most famous work, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen*. Scholars such as Joan Wallach Scott and Wendy C. Nielsen neglect how Gouges' fight for women's equality in France was also tied to her Saint Domingue abolitionist work. This reflects a broader tendency of narratives of the French Revolution to exclude the impact of the Haitian Revolution on its ideals.⁷ Examining Olympe de Gouges and her writings challenges this discourse by demonstrating how the struggles for racial justice in Saint Domingue in the late 18th century shaped her advocacy for women's equality during the French Revolution. *Black Slavery* encapsulates how Gouges deconstructed existing gender hierarchies by binding the movement for French women's equality with abolition through condemning institutional power, incorporating queer relationality, and reinscribing the code of "natural rights."

Olympe de Gouges' Background

Olympe de Gouges is the pen name for Marie Gouze, born in 1748 in Southern France.⁸ A formative part of Gouges' life involved contemplating her parentage because though her legal father was a butcher, rumors circulated about Gouges' "illegitimacy" by reports of

her mother having an affair with a popular playwright who was the Marquis de Pompignan. As a teenager, Gouges was forced into a marriage to an elderly associate of her legal father, had a son, and grew to deeply resent the institution of marriage, which prevented her

⁵Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 4.

⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

⁷Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 100.

⁸Kathleen Kuiper, "Olympe de Gouges," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Olympe-de-Gouges>.

from getting a divorce, but she was soon widowed. Free from the constraints of marriage, ambitious but practically illiterate, Gouges adopted the pen name “Olympe de Gouges” and left for Paris where she actively propagated the rumors that her father was the Marquis as a strategy to bind her lineage to a notable playwright to gain access into elite circles. Paris during the 1780s was a metropolitan cultural center where intellectuals gathered to ponder Enlightenment philosophy in theaters, coffee houses, and salons. Gouges surrounded herself with aristocrats, philosophers, and writers in places of debate as a courtesan to several of the most prominent men of the high society. Through the salons, Gouges gained access to education in contemporary political and literary issues in salons; over time, she developed into a writer and outspoken opponent of slavery who became a member of the abolitionist group, *Société des Amis des Noirs* (Society of the Friends of Blacks).⁹

As a playwright, Olympe de Gouges wrote *Black Slavery*, the revised play originally entitled *Zamore et Miza*.¹⁰ The new version, which would not be performed until 1789, follows two parallel lives: the mistreatment of an abandoned illegitimate daughter named Sophie, and the abuse of a pair of runaway enslaved people named Zamor and Mirza, who had to escape because Zamor was condemned to death for killing a slave overseer who had tried to rape Mirza. Their stories are interwoven when Zamor saves Sophie from dying in a shipwreck on her travels in the French colonies where she was looking for her long lost father. Later, Zamor is recaptured, and numerous slave revolts break out, but Sophie repays Zamor for saving her life by pleading for his life and

preventing him from being executed in front of the colonial governor, who ultimately is revealed to be her father.¹¹ This tale was an immediate threat to the status quo, and Gouges faced tremendous obstacles getting her play performed.

Olympe de Gouges sought to get her play performed at the Comédie-Française (the French national theater). Gaining prominence in the 1760s, the Comédie-Française was a theatre company that offered a venue to new aspiring writers and playwrights hoping to gain fame in the literary world. To gain access to this space required significant social and material capital to contact the theatre company members, lawyers, printers, writers, and audiences. French women had limited access to this kind of capital, and, independent of an outside backer or male supervisor, it was difficult for white women to enter this space; between 1761 and the start of the French Revolution (1789), the royal troupe staged only nine plays by female writers.¹² Beyond access to capital, in the late eighteenth-century European women were denied access to political or public social life because the state advocated for the domestication of French women. White French women were excluded from citizenship, expected to be modest and quiet, and, according to the eighteenth-century French actor Fabre d'Églantine, be “the tender cares owing to infancy, household details, the sweet anxieties of maternity.”¹³ These deeply sexist systems made it challenging for women writers to attain public success. Gouges defied these conventions and flaunted herself and her beliefs throughout her texts, and negotiated initial access into this space through her connection to elite circles as a mistress.

⁹ Marie Josephine Diamond, “The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges,” *Feminist Issues* 14, no. 1 (March 1994): 3–5, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685649>.

¹⁰ Gregory S. Brown, “The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 384, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2001.0019>.⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Marie Josephine Diamond, “The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges,” *Feminist Issues* 14, no. 1 (March 1994): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685649>.

¹² Gregory S. Brown, “The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 385, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2001.0019>.

¹³ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 178-179.

Though the Comédie-Française accepted her play, the troupe incessantly postponed the performance of *Black Slavery* and expressed fear and censorship of its plot due to their slave-owning interests.¹⁴ Gouges was repeatedly attacked and insulted by actors and directors of the Comédie-Française. In response, Gouges turned to the public instead to judge her work and published public letters, essays, and memorandums that chronicled the abuses of the Comédie-Française. It took her years of persistence and propaganda to overcome the company's resistance to *Black Slavery* until it was performed in 1789.¹⁵ The reception of Gouges' work was plagued by deep misogyny. Critics denounced the play as treasonous, and accusations circulated that she had not written the play.¹⁶ Gouges' public visibility and commitment to writing about white women's equality and abolition became a transgressive and unimaginable act; *Black Slavery* posed an immense threat to both the gendered order and France's dedication to imposing colonial slavery. Therefore, it is precisely Gouges' outspoken nature and her intertwining of antislavery

and anti-patriarchy in *Black Slavery* that made the play and Gouges herself subject to such harsh criticism. Worth noting, however, is that though Gouges attempted to join these movements, she was not an intersectional, anti-racist feminist. Though she was a member of the Society of the Friends of Blacks and advocated for abolition in Saint Domingue, her antislavery rhetoric in *Black Slavery* often emerged through the grammar of white saviorism. Nonetheless, analyzing *Black Slavery* remains of critical importance because it was revolutionary at the time and encapsulates how French women, namely Gouges, envisioned a new order at the intersections of both the French and Haitian Revolution. Gouges used *Black Slavery* to destabilize the old regime's traditional gender logics by connecting this movement with abolition by condemning institutional structures, discussing queer relations, and reconceptualizing the laws of nature.

L'esclavage des Noirs (*Black Slavery*)

In analyzing *Black Slavery* and identifying how Gouges interwove French women and enslaved people's oppressions, this analysis is not designed to suggest that the respective sufferings were comparable. Throughout premodern Europe, European women writers, in particular, called themselves

"slaves," in reference to colonial slavery, to represent their particular subjection by the patriarchy;¹⁷ however, this discursive move does represent the distinct forms of racialized, gendered, and spatialized terror experienced by Black enslaved people. In recognition that white European women

¹⁴ Marie Josephine Diamond, "The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges," *Feminist Issues* 14, no. 1 (March 1994): 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685649>.

¹⁵ Janie Vanpee, "Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges," *Theatre Journal* 51, no. 1 (1999): 54 <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.1999.0018>.

¹⁶ Doris Y. Kadish et al., eds., *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*, Translation Studies 2 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 65.

¹⁷ Karen Offen, "How (and Why) the Analogy of Marriage with Slavery Provided the Springboard for Women's Rights Demands in France, 1640-1848," in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Stewart (Yale University Press, 2007), 57-60 <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300115932.003.0004>.

dangerously appropriated this term, it raises questions about how slavery was understood, in Olympe de Gouges' case, through a French lens. Though Gouges does not deem French women "slaves," she invokes a slavery analogy to place them in conversation with each other. How did Gouges' understanding of personhood and equality invite her to interconnect

French women's subordination with that of enslaved people's racialized marginalization? The first salient way to understand how and why Gouges unified these disparate struggles is through her critique of institutional state power.

Institutional Power

In Gouges' *Black Slavery*, she imagined, in part, a utopic world, in which the monarchy is equitable and just; notably, *Black Slavery* did not propose to eliminate the monarchy but to make it more democratic. Gouges presented this society by condemning existing institutional structures, namely marriage and slavery institutions. In tracing the ideological comparison of the oppression of white women and slavery in France during its revolution, the most distinct slavery analogy emerged around the issue of marriage. By mid-18th-century France, the secular marriage contract was an abusive mode of control in which French wives functioned as property under their husbands' power, often forced into marriage by their fathers with no option for divorce. With impunity, French husbands inhibited their wives' mobility, prevented them from owning property, performed physical and sexual punishment, and publicly destroyed women's reputations.¹⁸

Women denounced marriage for eliminating their sense of personhood by situating it alongside enslaved people's lack of liberty. In *Black Slavery*, Gouges appealed to French women and Black enslaved people's "non-liberation" because she identified unity through abusive patriarchal figures: husband and male slaveholder. *Black Slavery* features a monologue of Madame de Saint-Frémont, who is the wife of the colonial governor. The governor, Monsieur de Saint-Frémont, is the biological father of the "illegitimate" Sophie, and Zamor's slaveholder. In this monologue, Madame de Saint-Frémont, in anguish, laments about her husband committing to Zamor's execution due to societal pressure rather than pardoning him out of empathy. At the same time, she describes the deep distress she feels by her husband's stubbornness and the sorrow of relieving him of a sadness, the cause of which she cannot discern. Madame de Saint-Frémont cries,

My husband would happily pardon Zamor despite the fact that he proclaimed his arrest along with that of poor Mirza who must die beside her lover. Alas! The expectation of their punishment throws me into the deepest sadness. I was not born to be happy! I am adored by my spouse in vain: my love cannot conquer the melancholy that consumes him....¹⁹

¹⁸ Karen Offen, "How (and Why) the Analogy of Marriage with Slavery Provided the Springboard for Women's Rights Demands in France, 1640–1848," in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Stewart (Yale University Press, 2007), 59–62. <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300115932.003.0004>.

¹⁹ Olympe De Gouges, "*L'esclavage Des Noirs, or Black Slavery*," Rev. ed., 1792, Translated by Clarissa Palmer (April 2020): 12.

Following this passage in which Madame de Saint-Frémont is distraught about her husband, the reader learns that the reason Monsieur de Saint-Frémont has been upset and causing Madame de Saint-Frémont distress is that he abandoned his first wife, whom he left with a daughter (Sophie) in a convent because his aristocratic family had not approved of her low social status.²⁰ Through the portrayal of Monsieur de Saint-Frémont as both a merciless husband and slaveholder, Gouges condemned the institutions of marriage and slavery. Gouges, here, introduced how slavery led to unnecessary punishment and excessive violence as with Zamor. Concurrently, the play outlines how marriage as binding contracts and forms of social capital punished French wives like Madame de Saint-Frémont in her emotional labor, and Monsieur's de Saint-Frémont's first wife, whom he was able to abandon with impunity. By connecting French women and enslaved people's plight under a shared patriarchal figure, Gouges aimed to provoke her French readers' empathy to encourage both proto-feminist and abolitionist attitudes. As a member of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*,²¹ part of Gouges' sympathy for abolition is derived from her recognition of how institutional power, like marriage (which she personally suffered) and slavery, subordinate and repress. Thus, the slavery-marriage analogy explains the influences upon Gouges' attitudes towards women and enslaved people. It also illustrates how she reproduced the metaphor herself in *Black Slavery* to serve her broader political purpose of emancipating women from the repression of marriage and enslaved people from the slave trade in Saint Domingue.

The monologue by Madame de Saint-Frémont and the reveal of Monsieur de Saint-Frémont's desertion of his first wife and their newborn reflects another form of institutional patriarchal authority that Gouges'

criticized: paternal tyranny. As described by the series editor of the 17th-century text *Paternal Tyranny* by Arcangela Tarabotti, paternal tyranny communicates the despotic authority of the father, "The father was the person who owned the household's property and, indeed, its human members. The *paterfamilias* had absolute power—including the power, rarely exercised, of life or death—over his wife, his children, and his slaves, as much as his cattle."²² By communicating how paternal tyranny holds supreme power over his wife, children, and enslaved people, this becomes a useful framework for understanding Monsieur de Saint-Frémont and what Gouges communicated through him. Through this frame, Gouges related white French women and enslaved peoples' subordination by looking at Monsieur de Saint-Frémont in other patriarchal terms: a slaveholding *governor* and father of an "illegitimate" daughter. To promote equality in France, Gouges fostered support from French women activists and abolitionists by joining the struggles by critiquing paternal tyranny.

In Gouges' trial, she cited *Black Slavery* as evidence of her Republican sentiments, and while she still advocated for a monarchy, she promoted rebuilding it on democratic ideals. Therefore, in this vision of a transformed society, Gouges attempted to dismantle paternal tyranny by proposing alternative power structures. One moment of this is when Monsieur de Saint-Frémont overcomes the legal pressures to execute Zamor and challenges the institution of colonial slavery by pardoning Zamor. The final line of the play ends with Monsieur de Saint-Frémont announcing to a group of enslaved people, among them Zamor and Mirza:

²⁰ Ibid., 13

²¹ Marie Josephine Diamond, "The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges," *Feminist Issues* 14, no. 1 (March 1994): 3–5, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685649>.

²² Arcangela Tarabotti and Letizia Panizza, *Paternal Tyranny*, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

“My friends, I have just granted you your pardon. Would that I could liberate all those of your kind, or at least temper their fate! Slaves, hear me: if ever your destiny changes, do not lose from sight a love for the common good which, until now, has been unknown to you... My friends, my children, let us celebrate the happy omen of this sweet liberty.”²³

In this utopian ending, Monsieur de Saint-Frémont frees Zamor in the name of liberty and rejects tyranny. In this way, Gouges portrayed Monsieur de Saint-Frémont, who represents the King of France and the “father of the colony,” through the language of “just fatherhood.” She communicated that a more democratic monarchy must be grounded in justice, which required the liberation of enslaved peoples from the chains of slavery. She made this appeal to abolitionists from her own abolitionist ideology and to gain their support for French women’s equality by incorporating the same notions of “just fatherhood” to discuss Monsieur de Saint-Frémont as a father to Sophie. When Monsieur de Saint-Frémont reconnects with Sophie, his “illegitimate” daughter whom he had abandoned, he embraces her, remarking, “recognise the voice of a father too long separated from you and your mother.”²⁴ Here, Gouges “corrected” the wrong of the unjust treatment of “illegitimate” children, which also emerged as personal retribution because of her own claims of illegitimacy. Regardless, by the end of the play, Monsieur de Saint-Frémont is portrayed as both a benevolent governor of enslaved people and a good father. Therefore, in *Black Slavery*, the plight of French women suffering from their fathers’ abuses was tied to the slave revolts protesting human bondage. While this portrayal is not radical in a contemporary sense, especially given that Monsieur de Saint-Frémont does not abol-

ish slavery entirely, it was revolutionary at the time because it was a departure from the traditions of the old paternal tyrannical regime.

Olympe de Gouges demonstrated the violence of patriarchal structures of marriage and paternal tyranny by connecting them to paternal slaveholders’ violence. In this way, she attempted solidarity with enslaved people, particularly gesturing to enslaved people in Saint Domingue. In part, this reflects the ways the early revolts of the Haitian Revolution in the late 18th century held resonance in Revolutionary France. As French women fought against their disenfranchisement that was being enshrined by the Montagnards, they were also exposed to anti-colonial discourse spouted surrounding Saint Domingue’s uprisings. Gouges drawing comparisons between the patriarchal figures of husband, father, governor/King, and slaveholder demonstrates the influence of belonging to the Society of the Friends of Blacks who were advocating for Black colonial representation in France’s National Assembly in the late 18th century.²⁵ For example, in 1789, a notable Society of the Friends of the Blacks member, Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, objected to the inclusion of exclusively white Saint-Domingue delegates into the Assembly, declaring:

²³ Olympe De Gouges, “*L’esclavage Des Noirs, or Black Slavery*,” Rev. ed., 1792, Translated by Clarissa Palmer (April 2020): 25.

²⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁵ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 143, 173.

“You claim representation proportionate to the number of inhabitants. The free blacks are proprietors and taxpayers, and yet they have not been allowed to vote. And as for the slaves, either they are men or they are not; if the colonists consider them men, let them free them and make them electors and eligible for seats; if the contrary is the case, have we, in apportioning deputies according to the population of France, taken into consideration the number of our horses and mules?”²⁶

Here, Mirabeau pointed out the absurd contradictions of the Assembly, articulating the need for ideological consistency, and thus, abolition. In this articulation, Mirabeau argues for France’s responsibility to Black people in Saint Domingue to produce a more just political arena. This rhetoric is similar to that of Gouges, particularly as she calls for a

political world that rejects tyranny in all its forms, specifically slaveholders and tyrannical husbands and fathers. Gouges connected patriarchal institutions to support French women’s equality by entangling abolition; this demonstrated how abolitionist sentiments regarding Saint Domingue shaped her activism.

Queering Across the Atlantic

The second way Gouges attempted to tether French women and enslaved people’s abuses is through her literary *queering*. Understanding the modes of queer relationality present throughout Gouges’ work is to resist history’s heterosexist bias; Gouges included queer moments regarding fluid sexuality and her disruption of normative gendered and racialized violence. One distinct moment of antinormative *loving* is when Sophie and Mirza notice each other’s beauty, “SOPHIE, to Valère – Her candidness is enchanting; her gentle features are to her credit... / MIRZA – You are making fun of me, besides I am not the prettiest. But, tell me, are all French women as beautiful as you?”²⁷ In this way, Sophie and Mirza express a kind of desire and admiration for one another. Even if Gouges did not intend to communicate this as “lesbianism,” the moment is driven by intrigue and appreciation. As contemporary

feminist historian Judith Bennett writes, “And, indeed, might sexual practice be less determinative of lesbianism than *desire* for women, *primary love* for women (as in women-identified women), or even *political* commitment to women (especially as manifested in resistance to “compulsory heterosexuality.”²⁸ With Bennett’s proposal, readers can read this moment between Sophie and Mirza through the terminology of “lesbian-like” as a way to conceptualize these women’s dialogue as a mode of challenging the heteronormativity expected in France and its colonies. Therefore, Sophie and Mirza “resisted norms of feminine behavior.”²⁹ Additionally, this a queer act in that a white French aristocrat and an enslaved woman embrace each other; they exchange a moment of reflection and interracial acknowledgment, which was a radical act of the late 18th century. Thus, this quiet moment where

²⁶ Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va., by the University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 99-100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸ Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (2000): 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Sophie and Mirza mirror each other with queer desire or appreciation contributes to Gouges' message. Gouges communicated the constraints of rigid sexuality and depicted an improved society that relied upon the unity of enslaved people and French women. In many ways, regardless of uncertainty around Gouges' sexual preferences, she herself can be read as lesbian-like defined by Bennett. Aligned with Bennett's characterization, Gouges' lifelong dedication to women's equality, condemnation of the institution of marriage, commitment to singleness, and exceptional public visibility were lesbian-like.³⁰ Consequently, the conditions governing the lives of Gouges' characters also reflect Gouges' interiority. Gouges not only incorporated queerness through the relationship between Sophie and Mirza, but also by subverting the violence of unyielding gender roles. Throughout *Black Slavery*, Gouges challenged the naturalization of the "union of man and woman" by rearticulating the categories of sexual and gendered differences. For example, Gouges redefined the terms of gender when Madame de Saint-Frémont gives her husband, Monsieur de Saint-Frémont, her last name.³¹ Also, a notable moment when Gouges connected French women to enslaved people via queerness is through Coraline. In *Black Slavery*, Coraline is a woman who, like Zamor and Mirza, is enslaved by the Saint-Frémonts. Coraline represents the primary revolutionary visionary who repeatedly defends slave revolts and discusses a world without hierarchy; Gouges used her to try to forge solidarity between French women's activism and abolition. Of note is that certainly, during the late 18th century, Black womanhood was not measured by the terms of white femininity, including docility, "piety and purity," and invisibility in the private, domesticated sphere. Women of African descent, such as Coraline,

were likened to beasts and wanton perversions of hypersexuality, meant to labor in the fields.³² Though Black and white womanhood had disparate racialized and gendered language, shared was the expectation of their subordination to white men and their broader social marginality, confined by normative constraints.

A moment that subverts this racial and gender norm is when Coraline speaks to another enslaved person, Azor, and boldly envisions a society based around free work with no enslaved people or enslavers. Azor responds to this proposition by dismissing Coraline, to which Coraline refutes, "Well, well, my poor boy, if you only knew what I know! I read in a certain Book that in order to be happy one had only to be free and to be a good Farmer. We lack only freedom. Let us be given it and you will see that there will be no more masters or slaves." As Coraline and Azor continue this discussion, Azor gets confused by Coraline's intelligence, so he concludes the conversation by declaring, "You speak like a man!"³³ In this instance, Azor characterizes Coraline's vocality as a "male" trait to preserve the rigid categories that produce a patriarchal logic. In a moment of confusion for Azor, Coraline's singleness and bold ideas challenge the normative gender expectations, which were presumed biological under the Age of Enlightenment's deterministic ontologies.³⁴ Coraline's demands for a transformed future served as a way for Gouges to provoke sympathy from other outspoken French women for Black enslaved women through the relatability of their thoughts being silenced or minimized.

Coraline's declaration is also queer as a mode of resistance to colonial slavery. In her insisting upon a world without slaveholding societies, she demon-

³⁰ Ibid, 15.

³¹ Doris Y. Kadish et al., eds., *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*, Translation Studies 2 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 73.

³² Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 159.

³³ Olympe De Gouges, "L'esclavage Des Noirs, or Black Slavery," Rev. ed., 1792, Translated by Clarissa Palmer (April 2020): 11.

³⁴ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), xvi.

strates what contemporary scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley calls "*Queer* in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths."³⁵ Using Tinsley's definition of *queer*, Coraline's insistence upon freedom and love for enslaved people is intensely provocative that reads as Black queerness.

Gouges incorporated queerness as an analytic to resist normative power. Specifically, Gouges highlighted Coraline's queerness, defined by her refusal to have her gender regulated and in her celebration of Black resistance. In this way, Coraline's intersectionality illuminates how regimes of normativity involving race, gender, and sexuality are constitutive. Thus, through Sophie, Mirza, and Coraline, Gouges captured how advocating for French women's rights in the 18th century, an act of antinormativity, relies upon defending other sites of queer antinormative movements, namely abolition.

Through this incorporation of literary *queering*, Gouges positions the French Revolution alongside the Haitian Revolution. Gouges uses this queer analytic to produce a literary work defined by antinormativity. *Black Slavery* has a climate of fluidity, in both erotic and racial terms, which reads as Gouges' response to the French Revolution and Haitian Revolution environments of increased rigidity of social categories. For example, with the arrival of the French Revolution, conservatives attacked the free love era that prefaced the Revolution. During the 1770s, elite men openly walked in public with their

mistresses, pornographic journals were popular, and sex was considered a natural, free expression. The French Revolution shattered this free love period as conservatives saw it as corrupting French society.³⁶ In Saint Domingue during the late 18th century, rigidity formed around racial classification. In the 1760s, white anxieties about the growing Creole identity in Saint Domingue led to the initiation of a segregationist legal order. By the late 1780s, French colonists had established an institutionalized proto-racial apartheid system that segregated enslaved people from free people of color and white planters, which fueled racial uprisings.³⁷ In this moment of severe gender and racial constraints in France and Saint Domingue, Gouges situated these revolutions together by demanding a new order that defied these normative categorizations. Thus, Gouges' incorporation of queer relationality connecting French women and enslaved people's rights is marked by racial and sexual flexibility; this reflects how Saint Domingue impacted her profeminist ideology, inspiring her to challenge the pervasive sexist *and* racist regimes.

³⁵ Ibid, 15. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 199. muse.jhu.edu/article/241316.

³⁶ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 33-35.

³⁷ Jeffery Lewis Stanley, "THE LANGUAGE OF RACE IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE AND SAINT DOMINGUE, 1789-1792," PhD diss., (University of Kentucky, 2016), 7.

Redefining “Natural Rights”

Lastly, Gouges critiqued existing gender hierarchies in *Black Slavery* by describing how the laws of nature that governed Enlightenment philosophy harmed French women and enslaved people. The Enlightenment brought forth empirical epistemologies that defined what was considered legitimate forms of knowledge production. Contemporary historian Londa Schiebinger describes the Enlightenment, “The expansive mood of the Enlightenment - the feeling that all men are by nature equal -- gave middle and lower class men, women, Jews, Africans, and West Indians living in Europe reason to believe that they, too, might begin to share the privileges heretofore reserved for elite European men. Optimism rested in part on the ambiguities inherent in the word “man” as used in revolutionary documents of the period.”³⁸ In this way, Schiebinger describes how the ambiguity surrounding who belonged to the category of “man” as defined by Enlightenment texts, such as the French Revolution’s *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, gave people the impression that the values of equality were universal; however, undisputed power and privilege were reserved for the white, elite, property-holding man.³⁹

Enlightenment philosophy was grounded in “natural law,” meaning that observable empirical logics from nature could discern the “truth” as defined by the immutable material world given by God.⁴⁰

Eighteenth-century politicians and scientists relied on the framework of revolutionary liberalism that produced natural rights about “man,” and therefore, needed to identify natural inequalities to justify the enslavement of Africans and women’s disenfranchisement. Consequently, during the Enlightenment, body politics was inextricably bound to the social order, with white women and Black people’s bodies, in particular, being examined and scrutinized to discern “natural” proof of their inferiority.⁴¹

In the eighteenth century, the emphasis upon body politics spawned a period of experimentalism, in which physicians, for example, examined and made deterministic conclusions about white women and Black people’s bodies.⁴² In this time, racial pseudosciences emerged analyzing the male African skull, for example, that presented a teleological system called the “chain of being,” which introduced the racist hierarchy of skulls “passing progressively from lowliest ape and Negro to loftiest Greek.”⁴³ African peoples were also likened to animals and savages through condemnations of Black women’s bodies. For example, Black women’s breasts and genitalia were grotesquely hypersexualized, violated, and described to be distortedly long as a “natural” indication of their savagery and sexual wantonness. Additionally, the sexual difference of white women in 18th century-Europe began to depart from ancient theories of sexuality such as the Aristotelian/Galenic

³⁸ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 144.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 144-146.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xii

⁴² Londa L. Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 4.

⁴³ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 149-150.

notion of humors; these transformed into materialistic medical views of the sexed body.⁴⁴ For example, by the late 18th century, the French Revolution's doctrine of sexual complementarity produced "republican motherhood" as a biological characteristic as described by historian Schiebinger, "This ideology appealed especially to middle-class women because it presented a positive image of the newly domesticated woman. The private, caring woman emerged as a foil to the public, rational man."⁴⁵ In this way, the French Revolution, coupled with the Enlightenment ideas, enmeshed scientific racism and scientific sexism into their society, which produced profoundly racist and sexist attitudes towards French women and Black people.

"The Governor needs to set the Colony an example. You do not know this accursed race, they would cut our throats without pity if the voice of humanity were to speak in their favour. This is what we must expect from Slaves, even those we have educated! They are born to be savage, to be tamed like animals. / SOPHIE – What a terrible prejudice. Nature did not make Slaves of them; they are human, like you."⁴⁶

In this quote, Sophie counteracts the racist Enlightenment ontologies adopted by the worker. She rebukes the worker by notably remarking that natural law did not make Black people "slaves" but, *instead*, "human." Sophie's insistence upon enslaved people's humanity in this dichotomy communicates how popular attitudes viewed enslaved people as biologically less-than or non-human beings. Gouges communicated how Nature governs truth in an expansive way that defended Zamor and other enslaved people through Sophie. Gouges frequently incorporated "Nature" in the play in terms of natural law defining enslaved people with positive traits including "brave," "kind,"⁴⁷ and "hardwork-

In her rise to fame, Gouges was surrounded by many Enlightenment thinkers, and many of the ideals of equality and freedom surfaced through her work. Though this racist and sexist epistemology shaped Gouges' writings, she tried to combat this by expanding the natural rights principles to include French women and enslaved people. Therefore, when *Black Slavery* was performed in 1789 as the French Revolution began and tensions boiled in Saint Domingue, the play reinscribed the code of "natural rights." For example, when one of the militant men working for Monsieur de Saint-Frémont recaptures Zamor, Sophie protests, to which he responds,

ing,"⁴⁸ Gouges, then, reinscribed "natural rights" with new meaning that included the humanity of enslaved people.

Noticeably, however, Gouges articulated this expanded epistemology as being derived from the enlightened French women. For example, she primarily advocated for inclusive "natural rights" through white characters like Sophie. Consequently, Gouges upheld her advocacy for French women's moral and epistemological integrity by relying upon narratives of white women protesting slavery in the name of "natural rights." In this way, the radical nature of Gouges' antislavery motivations is more timid in that she reproduced narratives of the white-savior com-

⁴⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁶ Olympe De Gouges, "L'esclavage Des Noirs, or Black Slavery," Rev. ed., 1792, Translated by Clarissa Palmer (April 2020): 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14

plex. Sophie, for example, believes she is destined to save Zamor from being executed and makes claims that she would “do anything to save them,”⁴⁹ risk even her life, using exaggerated language that portrays her as a kind of caricature. Thus, Gouges articulated that freedom for enslaved people comes not as a product of their own rebellion but more substantially from benevolent white figures. Therefore, in her critique of the traditional bounds of “natural rights,” Gouges’ intertwining of French women’s equality with abolition is minimized in that she reduces the efforts of enslaved peoples themselves, particularly at the precise moment in which enslaved people were revolting for freedom in Saint Domingue.

In the late 18th century, on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, Gouges’ *Black Slavery* brought the question of colonial slavery to the forefront in Paris. However, in her analysis of nature, Gouges’ consistent use of figures representing the white-savior complex contributed to a tradition of erasure via distortion, common among French scholars during the late 18th century. As articulated by the renowned Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot,

the Haitian Revolution was “silenced” in that, “The silencing of the Haitian Revolution is only a chapter within a narrative of global domination. It is part of the history of the West and it is likely to persist, even in attenuated form, as long as the history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world.”⁵⁰ Here, Trouillot is not speaking to the events being “silenced” in literal terms than he is identifying how the Haitian Revolution was narrated in specific racialized ways that muted the role of enslaved people in histories of the Age of Revolution. As Haitian scholar Marlene Daut describes, the reproduction of such narratives sheds light on a white supremacist ontology that could not imagine enslaved Africans and their descendants as capable of forming a strategy for envisioning and securing freedom.⁵¹ In this way, Gouges’ attempt to positively justify enslaved revolt in Saint Domingue, using an expanded definition of “natural rights,” incidentally subordinated the role of enslaved people’s liberation moment by perpetuating the white savior complex via the trope of “benevolent white womanhood.”

Conclusion

Gouges used *Black Slavery* to portray a more democratic world that entangled French women’s activism with enslaved rebellion during the Age of Enlightenment. Given Gouges’ acute suffering from patriarchal institutions and the influence of the *Société des Amis des Noirs* and the Haitian Revolution, her imagined future for a more republican monarchy and just soci-

ety relied upon intersecting notions of freedom. She incorporated French women’s movement in France with slave revolts in Saint Domingue with a critique of the institutions of marriage, paternal tyranny, and slavery while incorporating queer relationality and natural rights. By connecting the movement against women’s disenfranchisement with abolition, Gouges

⁴⁹ Ibid., 10

⁵⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015), 107.

⁵¹ Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 3.

placed the Haitian Revolution alongside the French Revolution, which challenged French supremacy. Admittedly, Gouges' writings were somewhat radical, but she frequently incorporated a narrative of the "white savior" and did not advocate for Saint Domingue's independence from France entirely. In this way, Gouges' work demonstrated her complicated understanding of race and gender that were influenced by some of the Enlightenment ideologies that she claimed to counteract. Though contemporary sensibilities demonstrate the limits to Gouges' radicalism, during the 18th century, *Black Slavery* threatened the French social order and France's rule over Saint Domingue. The Montagnards vehemently attacked Gouges, defamed her play, gave her a reputation as being "half-mad," and ultimately silenced her with execution.⁵² However, what might appear

to be Gouges' downfall can also be understood as a triumph, in that her creation of *Black Slavery* provides insights into a more nuanced understanding of French women's lives during the French Revolution. Gouges' proto-feminist and abolitionist writing took up space in a masculinist Revolutionary world that sought to dismiss the Haitian Revolution. While Gouges has long been recognized as a feminist hero, there remains room to seriously reckon with the ties between her feminist and queer anti-slavery rhetoric. Ultimately, Gouges' resilience captures French women's revolutionary capacities to invade popular consciousness, and though her analysis in *Black Slavery* was incomplete, she inspires the possibilities of intersectional and expansive solidarities.

⁵² Doris Y. Kadish et al., eds., *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*, Translation Studies 2 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 80.

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