Reclaiming Female and Racial Agency: The Story of Dido Elizabeth Belle via Portrait and Film

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Author Bio
Madison Blonquist is an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University. She is completing coursework for a BA in music, BA in humanities, and an art history minor and is scheduled to graduate in June 2018. While at BYU, Madison has had several opportunities to learn outside of the classroom. In the summer of 2013, she participated in the Pembroke-King’s Programme at Cambridge University in England. Since returning home from an LDS mission in New York City in 2015, Madison has been a recipient of the Reid Nibley Scholarship, the Film and Digital Media Fund, and an ORCA grant. She is currently working as a curatorial assistant at the Brigham Young Museum of Art and hopes to one day be able to secure a position as an art curator.

Abstract
This paper explores the complex relationship between artists and their subjects, particularly with regard to race and gender. Using Niki Saint-Phalle’s definition of “truthful representation,” I consider the issues that race and gender pose to this ideal using the story of Dido Elizabeth Belle, an eighteenth-century aristocratic woman of mixed race. The intriguing life of Dido Elizabeth Belle is especially relevant to today’s evolving definition of intersectional feminism. Her portrait Painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her Cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1779, formerly attributed to Johann Zoffany) challenges the idea of “truthful representation” because it was presumably painted by a white male. However, in 2014, Amma Asante, a female director of African descent, was inspired by the work and felt compelled to direct a film (Belle) highlighting the significance of Dido’s life and even changing features of the original portrait. This contrast between the male-produced painting and the female-directed film is analyzed and critiqued within a current feminist context. In order to provide additional comparisons to Dido’s representation, two other works are considered: namely Portrait d’une nègresse (1800) by Marie-Guillaume Benoist and Hagar (1875) by Edmonia Lewis.
Reclaiming Female and Racial Agency: The Story of Dido Elizabeth Belle via Portrait and Film

Madison Blonquist

In her exploration of Niki Saint-Phalle’s definition of femininity, Catherine Dossin wrote, “[Since] Saint-Phalle believed there were heretofore no real images of women, only those created by and for men, she made it her redeeming mission to create artworks for and about women and their real, mostly painful experiences.” While at the core of Saint-Phalle’s work is the idea of truthful representation, it is important to remember that her concept of femininity was based on her experience as a white, French woman, whose work flourished during the era of second wave feminism.

The third wave feminist perspective, by contrast, has acknowledged that femininity cannot be defined and generalized by white women alone. The intersectionality posed by gender, sex, race, and background is crucial to a fuller perspective. Today, feminist artists and historians have taken the concept of “truthful representation” further and qualified it by acknowledging that femininity cannot be defined and generalized by white women alone. This third wave feminist perspective acknowledges the intersectionality posed by gender, sex, race, and economic background. This context has invited new conversations about how these facets interact in the art world. The Painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her Cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray provides an interesting case study for this type of intersectional feminism because it depicts the representation of both women and race.

The portrait was presumably painted by a white male and, as a result, does not align with a feminist ideal. Two other paintings—Marie-Guillelmine Benoist’s Portrait d’une négresse (1880) and Edmonia

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1 Niki Saint-Phalle was a feminist artist best known for her feminist work in the 1960s.
3 See Figure 1.
4 See Figure 2.
Lewis’ *Hagar* (1875)—were created within a hundred years of Dido and Elizabeth’s portrait and within reach of representational accuracy. However, it wasn’t until the film *Belle* was released in 2014 that director Amma Asante was able to reclaim Dido’s story as both a woman and a person of African descent. I hope to demonstrate how both the painting of Dido and the film it inspired enable female and racial agency through their representations of Dido Elizabeth Belle, a black aristocratic woman in eighteenth-century British society.

In order to better understand artistic choices made by artists and directors alike, it is first important to understand their subjects. Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay (1761–1804) was the illegitimate daughter of Captain Sir John Lindsay and Maria Bell, an African slave whom he had rescued from a Spanish ship. While we don’t know what happened to her mother, Dido’s father made arrangements in 1765 for her to live with her great-uncle, Lord Mansfield, and to be a companion and playmate to her cousin Elizabeth Murray. At Kenwood Manor, she enjoyed many of the same privileges as her white, upper-class contemporaries. For example, there are records of her receiving expensive medical treatments and sleeping in comfortable quarters. She was even given an allowance of £30 per year and received a thorough education. Despite her mixed-race and illegitimate status, her father’s obituary in 1788 described her as “his natural daughter, a Mulatto . . . whose amiable disposition and accomplishments have gained her the highest respect from all [Lord Mansfield’s] relations and visitants.” Upon his death, Captain Lindsay left Dido £1,000 in his will. This enabled her to be extremely independent, both as a woman and as a person of color living in eighteenth-century England.

While she may have lived in rather fortunate circumstances, there is evidence that Dido faced discrimination throughout her life. There is a notoriously hostile account found in the diary of Thomas Hutchinson, an American loyalist who visited Kenwood. On August 29, 1779 (coincidentally, the same year that the portrait was finished), Hutchinson wrote:

> A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies and after coffee, walked with the company in the gardens, one of the young ladies having

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5 See Figure 3.
her arm within the other. She had a very high cap and her wool was much frizzled in her neck, but not enough to answer the large curls now in fashion. She is neither handsome nor genteel—pert enough. I knew her history before, but My Lord mentioned it again. Sir John Lindsay having taken her mother prisoner in a Spanish vessel, brought her to England where she was delivered of this girl, of which she was then with child, and which was taken care of by Lord M., and has been educated by his family. He calls her Dido, which I suppose is all the name she has. He knows he has been reproached for showing fondness for her—I dare say not criminal.9

This excerpt gives us insight into the reality of Dido’s everyday life. Evidently she was often not allowed to dine with her family but took her supper alone and joined them after for coffee. This dilemma of class and race is highlighted throughout the 2014 film adaptation; at one point, Dido asks Lord Mansfield, “How may I be too high in rank to dine with the servants and too low to dine with my family?”10 Despite her education, aristocratic upbringing, and the obvious endearment of her relatives demonstrated through her inheritance and domestic privileges, she still had to endure daily reminders of the limits her rank and race imposed on her daily life.

Many of these racial tensions are arguably reflected in Painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her Cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (Fig. 1). There is controversial scholarship about the symbolic connotations of the piece and for good reason: the work communicates a contradictory message. At first glance, it seems that there are elements of the painting that suggest equality and exalt the unique, albeit problematic, status of Dido Elizabeth Belle as a mulatto woman. Dido’s form is nearly level with Elizabeth’s, even though she was considered a “poor relation.”11 Because Dido’s figure is in a state of motion—she’s leaning forward and her blue shawl flows behind her—our eyes are immediately drawn to her angled form, as opposed to Elizabeth’s regal, stationary posture, reminiscent of queens. Some have suggested that Elizabeth’s outstretched arm is indicative of affection and closeness, as though she is drawing Dido near.

Although the implication of Dido’s hand gesture has been heavily debated by scholars, Mario Valdes, a US historian of the African diaspora, has optimistically suggested that instead of simply pointing out her

9 Ibid., 5.
10 Damian Jones and Misan Sagay, Belle, directed by Amma Asante, (2014; Buckinghamshire: Pinewood Pictures, 2014), DVD.
skin color, the pose is an allusion to the Hindu iconography of Krishna, paralleling the relationship between signaling the common humanity of the two girls. “There is a sculpture that shows Krishna in a similar pose and a story that he was once slapped by a female deity for taking on the appearance of her sister and her husband,” Valdes explains. When this sister tried to console him, he smiled, pointed to his bruised cheek, and exclaimed: ‘She has shown that all three of us are one and the same.’ What Dido’s pose apparently proclaims, therefore, is that she and her cousin share the same humanity and innate worthiness.”

Aside from the symbolic connotations of the piece, there are also some interesting things happening in the realm of femininity. Both subjects, as women, confront the viewer directly, taking control of the viewer’s gaze. While their expressions are not burdened with questionable implications, they are nonetheless, striking. Both Dido and Elizabeth smile, as if sharing a joke. Perhaps this is a positive feature, indicative of their close relationship as cousins.

However, some of these same features can also be interpreted inversely. For example, it could be argued that there is almost a sense of restriction in Elizabeth’s arm, as if she is preventing Dido from reaching her destination. The azure shawl that flows between the two women is reminiscent of the Venus scarf motif, which furthers the feeling of limitation and could be seen as a sophisticated means of control. Elizabeth also holds an emblem of her class: a book, symbolic of education and refinement. This, along with her courtly pose, hearkens back to medieval depictions of saintly women poring over their book of hours. Dido, on the other hand, holds a platter of luxurious imported fruits. This iconography carries with it a lot of baggage: the Fall (with its implications of the impurity of women and dark-skinned people becoming a cursed race), British colonization and trade, even the expression “on a silver platter” comes to mind with the implications of women being consumables. It is significant that while Elizabeth is stationary with a book in her hand—playing a passive female role—Dido is actively engaged in a task that would have been associated with servitude.

Another striking and controversial feature is the clothing of the two women. Elizabeth is dressed in what would have been elegant, but

13 This is a motif in art history that references Venus restraining her son, Cupid, by wrapping him in her scarf.
standard, garb for an aristocratic woman: a formal dress with a stiff bodice and full skirts. Dido, on the other hand, appears to be wearing a costume of flowing satin that lacks the bodice boning and full skirts of her cousin. In order to compensate for Dido’s low rank and questionable race, the artist has deliberately decided to exoticize Dido and sell her as a sort of dark beauty. The large pearls, dangling earrings, and turban especially could be seen as a nod to the colonization of India.

This fetish with the desirable foreigner is perpetuated by Dido’s placement. Elizabeth is rooted to a bench and closer to the forest, a representation of the natural world. But Dido, with a mysterious charm, moves beyond her cousin, in the literal background of the frame, into the light of the outside world in a contrastingly unstable position. Could this reflect her need to be tamed or, by extension, chained? Even her eyes communicate a sense of wildness and unpredictability. During the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon for the upper class to keep “body servants,” small children typically from the West Indies who “were regarded and treated as exotic playthings or status symbols by their aristocratic or rich owners.”

Taking all these details into consideration, it is difficult to ignore the social and political undertones that make this more than just a family portrait.

Because of the complexity of this representation of the black female figure, it is helpful to compare it to other similar works. Just as Niki Saint-Phalle believed, it is difficult for the artist to truthfully portray the subject if they are detached from it by gender and race. Painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her Cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray was originally, but no longer, attributed to the famous painter Johann Zoffany. Although he is no longer associated with this work, it is fairly safe to assume that this portrait was created by another white male, as men typically dominated the field of painting. This difference in gender and the artist’s perceptions of both women and race would have inevitably influenced his representational choices.

Both figures are idealized—even Dido’s features favor her “better half,” or her father’s side. She has been de-Africanized, her features made to look more European and ultra-feminized with her flowing gown. Elizabeth, too, has been “airbrushed,” and flawlessly embodies the classic eighteenth-century British beauty of pale, perfect skin with cherry-red lips and rosy cheeks. A scathing but important exchange between two young suitors in the film Belle brings this mentality to the forefront.

Oliver Ashford, after meeting Dido, remarks to his brother James, “She is intriguing, is she not?” James seethes, “I find her repulsive.” “Well, I suppose she is . . . if you find a most rare and exotic flower so,” Oliver responds. James snaps, “One does not make a wife of the rare and exotic, Oliver. One samples it on the cotton fields of the Indies . . . Then [finds] a pure English rose to decorate one’s home.” Unfortunately, James’ mindset was one shared by most eighteenth-century upper-class gentlemen. The women were aware of this too. Later in the film, Elizabeth’s character comments to Dido:

Aren’t you quietly relieved that you shan’t be at the caprice of some silly sir and his fortune? The rest of us haven’t a choice—not a chance of inheritance if we have brothers, and forbidden from any activity that allows us to support ourselves. We are but their property.\textsuperscript{15}

This was the conundrum that faced Dido during her lifetime and an issue that third wave feminism grapples with today. In some respects, Elizabeth was at the mercy of men, just as African slaves were at the mercy of their masters. The fact that this is a male depiction of two women, one black and one white, adds another layer of complexity to this intriguing representation.

Another portrait worth mentioning in comparison was completed just two decades after Elizabeth and Dido’s. Marie-Guillaume Benoist’s Portrait d’une nègresse (Fig. 2) was finished in 1800, shortly after the emancipation decree of 1794, which temporarily liberated slaves in French colonies and abolished slavery. Even though slavery was reinstated by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, Benoist’s painting is nevertheless a slightly more heroic and celebratory representation of the black female form. Another aspect that sets this painting apart from the portrait of Dido and Elizabeth is the fact that it was created by a white woman. Still separated by race, but no longer distanced by sex, Benoist was able to represent yet another perspective. There are several generic interpretations of this piece, but one that has been contested by scholar James Smalls in his article “Slavery is a Woman” is that the subject is an allegory for the liberation of women.\textsuperscript{16} Just as the slaves had been freed from their masters, many women hoped to be freed from the restrictions of the patriarchy. This portrait has all of the makings of an allegorical figure: a female, bare-chested, draped in pure white with accents of blue

\textsuperscript{15} Jones and Sagay, \textit{Belle}, DVD.
\textsuperscript{16} James Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: Race, Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s Portrait d’une nègresse (1800),” \textit{The Art History Archive}. 
and red—all of which exude patriotism and nationalistic fervor. She is not fetishized in the same way that other male representations of black women are, but she is still idealized, albeit in an allegorical way. Her pose is commanding and her gaze is heroic. We may never know what Benoist truly meant to convey with her curious Portrait d’une négresse, but she was able to take one step closer to “truthful” representation simply by being a woman herself.

However, of all the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists, the most qualified to represent the black female form was Edmonia Lewis. She defied all sorts of racial odds as a half-African, half-Native American, free slave. Her 1875 sculpture of Hagar (Fig. 3) interacts with themes of female and racial agency. This piece is particularly interesting within the context of this discussion because of its Biblical narrative. Hagar is the Egyptian handmaiden (servant or slave) of Sarai, Abram’s wife. Because Sarai is unable to conceive, she offers Hagar to Abram to “obtain children” vicariously. Here we have Sarai, a woman, prescribing to patriarchal expectations of childbearing through Hagar, her slave. Lewis’s sculpture brilliantly represents these three tiers of social subservience: servant to master, woman to man, and man to God. Hagar stands forthrightly, but clasps her hands piously. Her features are idealized and symmetrical, reflecting the concept of inner beauty. Up to this point in history, Edmonia is perhaps the only person who was able to truthfully represent her race and her sisters.

One hundred and thirty years or so after Hagar was created, a bright female director of African descent was approached by a producer about making a film about this fascinating eighteenth-century double portrait. Amma Asante couldn’t resist the opportunity to reconstruct the story of Dido and engage with historical, artistic, and political issues in eighteenth-century England. She said in an interview about the film:

I hope what audiences take away from this film is that we people of color . . . have been many things in history, [that] we were more than servants. I hope that they take away from this what we have the ability to do and create and change when we have love and we show courage.17

Asante, like Niki Saint-Phalle, assumed a redeeming role by seeking to reveal a true representation of this mixed-race aristocratic woman in her 2014 film Belle.

Since the film was, after all, the source of inspiration, the painting itself is its own character in the film. There are a few scenes where Amma Asante portrays Dido confronting the idea of black female representation. The first is when she first sets foot, at a very young age, into the home of her relatives, Lord and Lady Mansfield. The young Dido looks up to see a painting in which a small black body servant stares adoringly up at his white master. This struggle to see herself in an aristocratic context is something that concerns her deeply throughout the film. So much so that when she sees Zoffany, the would-be artist, assembling a canvas in preparation for the portrait that Lord Mansfield has commissioned for Dido and Elizabeth, she is visibly disturbed. She is very nervous about how she might be portrayed; the next scene includes her conversation with Lord Mansfield about her concerns. When she asks where or how she will be portrayed in relation to Elizabeth, Lord Mansfield replies kindly, “By Elizabeth’s side, just as you always are.”

In addition to these two particular instances, there are scenes throughout the film that show her, obviously uncomfortable and nervous, sitting for the artist. However, when she catches a glimpse of the final product through the window, she is overwhelmed as she sees that she is portrayed not only next to Elizabeth but also slightly higher.

Amma Asante seems to have been well aware of the challenges surrounding female and racial representation. By including these scenes, she confronts the issue and pays homage to the work that started it all. At the same time, she acknowledges that some of the features of the painting are problematic in their interpretation. So, in the name of accurate storytelling and considering the feelings of a modern audience, what does Asante decide to do? She changes it; she changes the painting. The overall spirit is preserved: the palette, the positions, and the structure are all the same. However, poignant changes have been made in order to grant Dido her freedom, dignity, and position as a mulatto woman. The turban is gone. Dido’s form is more stable, standing upright rather than leaning. And, most noticeably, she is not pointing to her skin. Amma Asante, as an artist in her own right, has rewritten history and finally depicted Dido Elizabeth Belle’s truthful representation.

18 Jones and Sagay, Belle, DVD.
Illustrations

Figure 1
Painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her Cousin
Lady Elizabeth Murray c. 1779, oil

Figure 2
Marie-Guillelmine Benoist, Portrait d’une nègresse, 1800, oil, 65 x 81 cm
Figure 3
Edmonia Lewis, *Hagar*, 1875 marble, 52 5/8 x 15 1/4 x 17 1/8 in.
Bibliography


