



Student Works

2021-02-12

Ladylike in the Extreme: The Propogandism of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Britain's "African Princess"

Megan Orr

Brigham Young University, megan.a.orr@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Orr, Megan, "Ladylike in the Extreme: The Propogandism of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Britain's "African Princess"" (2021). *Student Works*. 307.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/307>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Works by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

LADYLIKE IN THE EXTREME

*The Propagandism of Britain's African Princess and Her
Subsequent Erasure*

Megan Orr

*Harold B. Lee Library Research Grant Report
Brigham Young University*

M.T. Anderson's 2008 novel *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* explores the life of its titular character, a young African man raised with the finest education available in Boston in the late 18th century. Octavian is mentored by Mr. Gitney, an abolitionist whose mission is to prove the African race to be as intellectually capable as European, provided proper education and training. This work of fiction sees Octavian navigating the hazardous world of existing as an educated black man estranged from his past and seeking for a place in Revolutionary America, where his visage and viability are constantly under scrutiny. Anderson's work rocked the literary world, earning high praise and a place in practically every educational institution across the country.

Given the popularity of this fictitious account, it is strange to consider the relatively unknown story of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Octavian's living counterpart across the Atlantic. As a child orphan of African wars, she was given to British sailors and taken back to England, where she was presented to Queen Victoria and become Her Majesty's goddaughter. She was highly praised for her wit and intelligence, circulating in the highest circles of the Victorian milieu. Well-known in the nineteenth century, her story has been largely overlooked and nearly erased entirely, existing at most in footnotes in histories of the era.

I suggest that her temporary popularity and subsequent abrupt absence exposes her position as a pawn in British hands. Fetishized as "Britain's African Princess", Bonetta's life played out as a paradigmatic microcosm of propaganda for Victorian Britain in establishing its place as the foremost developed country in the world at the end of the nineteenth century. Whether by her own will or the hands of the press, once Bonetta's story had played out on the public stage and demonstrated the best of Britain, her usefulness was no longer needed, and she was dropped from history.

To understand the legitimacy of these bold claims, it is necessary to first understand the cultural and political motivations that propelled Victorian Britain. Victorian Britain was a time of unrelenting optimism. Heralding in ages of industry and technology never before seen on such a scale, nineteenth century Britain had some reason to envision itself at the helm of a great ship of progress. The era had begun the century with oil lamps and horse-drawn carriages, and now saw steam-powered trains and electricity. To the Victorians, all things were possible and boundaries were more obstacles than impossibilities. German author Antje Wulff notes that, "To modern eyes, the high-flying optimism exhibited by nearly all Victorian thinkers and does alike might often seem a little naïve at best. It was, however, the central characteristic of the age, and to a large degree, it constituted the ideological framework of a nation that, by its enormous scientific technological, commercial, and political achievements, was almost inevitably led to believe that anything might indeed be possible."¹

With the confidence of unbridled optimism and the momentum of substantial progress, the Victorian age confronted abolition, taking it up as its clarion call. In 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act criminalized slavery across the United Kingdom. It was the result of tireless efforts put forth by the Anti-Slavery Society, a group of like-minded British abolitionists. Once it passed, they set their sights on spreading abolition across the world.

The Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London, where hundreds of abolitionists and political leaders from around the world gathered to discuss. Britain, bolstered by previous abolition efforts, saw itself as primed to take the helm. British speakers declared the need for "immediate and entire Abolition by the overthrow of slavery."² The importance of the event is demonstrated further as the opening remarks were given by none other than Prince Albert himself. He declared, "I have been induced to preside at the meeting of this Society from a conviction of

¹ Wulff, Antje. *Problems of the Victorian Age as Reflected in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Alfred Tennyson*. Norderstedt, Germany: Grin Verlag, 2003, 2.

² *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention Called by the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London, from Friday, June 12th, to Tuesday, June 23rd, 1840*. London: British and Foreign Anti-slavery Society., 1841, vi.

its paramount importance to the great interests of humanity and justice... I sincerely trust that this great country will not relax in its efforts until it has finally and forever put an end to that state of things so repugnant to the principles of Christianity and to the best feelings of our nature.”³ The cause of abolition was quickly and inextricably woven into the moral fabric of Victorian society. It became a defining aspect of Victorian identity. As BBC historian David Olusoga states, “Abolition changed how the Victorians saw themselves... they saw Britain as the moral leader of the world, and they turned their attentions to ending slavery everywhere. For them, this was to be the great Victorian moral mission.”⁴ With the wind of conviction filling their sails, British sailors set out to sever ties with slave traders across the world.

Once such sailor was Captain Frederick Edwyn Forbes, a staunch abolitionist who set sail on the *HMS Bonetta* in 1847. Forbes’s personal record of his journeys declares his intention “to illustrate the dreadful slave hunts and ravages... and to bring prominently before the British public the sacred service they are rendering their fellow-men, in prosecuting their increased efforts to allay those fearful horrors.”⁵ Though the Slavery Abolition Act had been passed more than a decade before, its implementation was a lengthy process.

Three years into his travels, Forbes made port at the African kingdom of Dahomey, in present-day Nigeria. The ruler, King Gezo, was a notorious slave-trader, gaining power and prestige through brutal conquests of neighboring kingdoms. In his recounts of his travels, Captain Forbes nicknames him the “African Nero.”⁶ In conference with the king, Forbes attempted to persuade Gezo to end the slave trade in his country. While these efforts were unsuccessful, Gezo did entrust a number of gifts to the captain and his crew, including, “a rich country cloth, a captive girl, a caboccer’s stool, ten heads of

cowries, [and] one keg of rum.”⁷ It appears that the captain may have inquired of the girl previously, asking for her as a gift, though whether for the Queen or for himself it is not clear. The child, a Yoruba girl named Ina, whose parents had been killed and who apparently a child slave of the palace (Fig. 1). She boards the ship with the rest of the crew and makes the return trip to England during which Forbes becomes quite taken with her. The girl, who Forbes had baptized on the boat and christened Sarah Forbes Bonetta, was approximately eight years old. While the captain’s heartstrings were likely tugged, he does not hide another reason for his interest in the child. He recounts:

“For her age, supposed to be eight years, she is a perfect genius; she now speaks English well, and has a great talent for music. She has won the affections, with but few exceptions, of all those who have known her, by her docile and amiable conduct, which nothing can exceed. She is far in advance of any white child of her age, in aptness of learning, and strength of mind and affection; and with her, being an excellent specimen of the negro race, might be tested the capability of the intellect of the Black: it being generally and erroneously supposed that... though the negro child may be clever, the adult will be dull and stupid.”⁸

Captain Forbes, a staunch abolitionist with clear objectives in his travels, clearly took hold of an immense opportunity not only to exercise compassion, but to further the abolitionist cause. With the perfect vehicle dropped right in his lap, it is not unlikely that Captain Forbes grasped the opportunity to disprove many of the racial stereotypes that perpetuated slavery across the world. If successful, Forbes could not only further the abolition moral mission, but prove the superiority of British society in lifting a young,

³ Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilization of Africa. *The Friend of Africa*. London: J.W. Parker, Oxford Press, 1841, 59.

⁴ “Queen Victoria’s African Protegee.” *Black and British: A Forgotten History, Moral Mission*. London, England, UK: BBC Two, November 26, 2016.

⁵ Forbes, Frederick. *Dahomey and the Dahomans: Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at His Capital, in the Year 1849 and 1850* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851), iv

⁶ Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, 113.

⁷ Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, 192.

⁸ Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, 208.

African slave girl to the heights of civility. In addition to the cause of abolition, the nineteenth century saw the height of the British empire and demonstrating the superiority of British society was paramount to justifying its imperialist efforts.

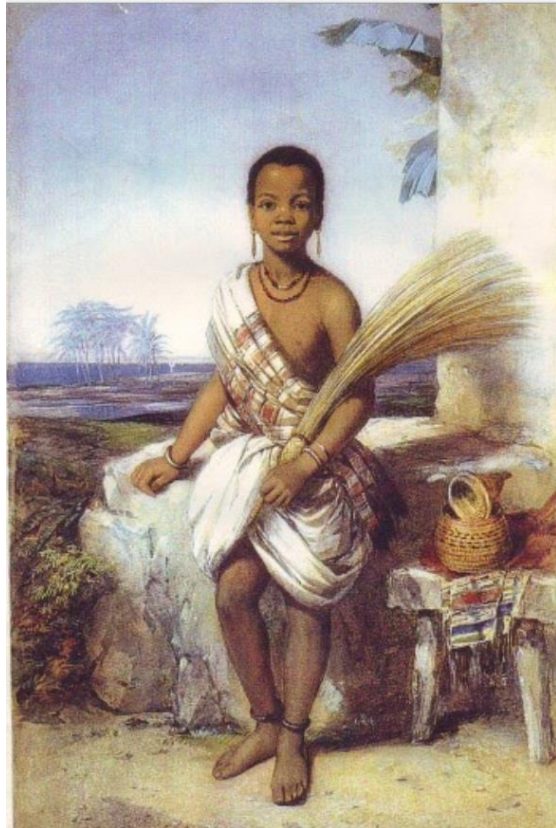


Figure 1. Omoba Aina, Illustration V, Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans: Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at His Capital, in the Year 1849 and 1850*

Captain Forbes and young Bonetta arrived in England in November of 1850, where the captain quickly presented the young child to the Queen. It is highly likely that the Queen understood the magnitude of the opportunity at her feet. An intelligent African girl, repackaged with a new name, was now at her complete disposal. Her Majesty recalls the day in her journal:

“we came home, found Albert still there, waiting for Forbes and a little negro girl who

he had brought back from the king of Dahomey. Her parents, and all of her relatives having been sacrificed. Captain Forbes saved her life by asking for her as a present. She is sharp & intelligent and speaks English. She was dressed as any other girl and when her bonnet was taken off, her little black woolly head and big earrings gave her the true negro type.”⁹

It is not unlikely that the Queen, a private supporter of the abolitionist cause and propagator of Victorian moral idealism and imperialism, saw this opportunity as two-fold: a charitable Christian expression of compassion to a young girl in need, and on the other hand, a blank mold onto which could be projected British superiority in civilization, education, and morality.

Her Majesty declared Bonetta her goddaughter, arranging for her education and living arrangements. Bonetta lived for a while with the Forbes family, and later with the Schoens who were close to the crown. From the few records of her childhood, it seems Bonetta was largely happy with her adoptive families, who called her ‘Sally’.

As a child, a developing illness rendered her terribly ill, and Her Majesty herself sent Sarah to a mission school in Sierra Leone, stating that “the climate of this country is often fatally hurtful to the health of African children.”¹⁰ Bonetta petitioned the Queen to allow her to return, preferring to be with her adopted family in England, and Her Majesty relented. This instance makes it clear that Bonetta’s ethnicity was never mitigated, but rather emphasized by those in her life as her race was constantly in the minds of those entrusted with her care. Upon returning to England, Bonetta was sent to live with another family, the Schoens, who were close to the Crown.

As an adolescent, Bonetta’s intelligence garnered significant admiration throughout the royal court. After one visit from Bonetta, Queen Victoria recalls in her diary, “After luncheon Sally Bonetta, the little African girl came with Mrs. Phipps... This is the 4th time I have seen the poor

⁹ Queen of Great Britain Victoria. *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection From Her Majesty's Correspondence Between the Years 1837 and 1861 (Complete)*. Library of Alexandria, 1907.

¹⁰ Ibid.

child, who is really an intelligent little thing,”¹¹ A portrait from 1856 depicts her at thirteen, seated facing the camera with her hands lightly clasped, elbow resting on a small side table (Fig. 2).

The table at her side has a basket in which a swatch of fabric has been delicately placed. Her hair is pulled back in a clean Victorian sweep with a small hair covering, while her dress is adorned with a lace collar and sleeves befitting a young woman of her age and family. Scrawled across the bottom of the page is “Sally Bonetta Forbes, a native of Abekouta.” Bonetta’s blackness and background was never hidden but was consistently highlighted. Her portrait, taken head-on, makes no attempt to mask her natural features, natural hair, or dark skin tone.



Figure 2. Bambridge, William. Sally [Sarah] Bonetta Forbes. 1856, albumen print. *Catalogue of Queen Victoria's Private Negatives Vol. III*, Royal Collections Trust, London

No personal journal of hers is known, at least publicly, and the few letters written in her hand express everyday concerns held by any other Victorian teenager. She was, for all intents and purposes, a well-established British woman who, if not for her African features, would be indistinguishable from any other high-class

Victorian woman. The carefully planned shaping of Sarah Forbes Bonetta as an intelligent black woman educated and schooled by British society had taken shape. Throughout her adolescence, Bonetta remained in the upper-crust of British society, speaking both English and French and charming all with her wit, intelligence, and musical aptitude. There are no clear records of racial attacks against her, or at least none that were entertained long enough to crest into the larger social view of her. By all accounts, Bonetta was praised as an intelligent, beautiful, capable young woman who had overcome a pitiable childhood by the grace of Her Majesty the Queen.

The highest point of Bonetta’s importance to Britain culminated in her wedding. While attending another nuptial, that of Queen Victoria’s daughter, Bonetta caught the eyes Captain James Davies, a wealthy African merchant from Sierra Leone who was thirteen years her senior. Davies, the son of freed slaves, had built a successful business in Lagos. Queen Victoria approved of the match and urged Bonetta to accept the man. She resisted at first, but at the Queen’s urging Bonetta relented and the two were wed. The Queen’s choice of Bonetta’s spouse clearly demonstrates that Bonetta’s race was constantly at the fore front of her life. As a highly educated, intelligent, charming young woman, Bonetta may have had a number of suitors, and had a few years more to secure one. However, it may be that the Queen saw an opportunity that could not be missed in uniting her African goddaughter with a wealthy African businessman. As BBC historian David Olusoga stated, the marriage symbolized “the perceived accomplishments of Britain’s civilizing mission.”¹²

The wedding of Sarah Bonetta Forbes to Captain James Davies supposedly showed the triumph of Britain over prejudice, and seemingly signaled the new age of Britain. Reports of the wedding were included in every major newspaper across the United Kingdom. From Cornish to Aberdeen, the event was hailed as a great cementing of Britain’s new age, celebrating the matrimonial affair. At her wedding, reports of Bonetta declared, “Of her personal qualities we may safely say she is one of the prettiest coloured

¹¹ Queen Victoria’s Journal, RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ (W), 11 of January 1851, Royal Collections Trust, London.

¹² David Olusoga. “Sarah Forbes Bonetta.” *The Essay*, November 20, 2019. BBC Sounds podcast, website, 17:59.

ladies we ever beheld. There is a distinct absence of that abruptness in the features often seen in the females of the African race, which gives the air of ferocity. She has eyes expressive tenderness and beaming with intelligence, whilst her whole deportment is ladylike in the extreme.”¹³ Carefully crafted by British hands, the public focus on Bonetta’s hyper-femininity demonstrates the racist attacks leveled against black women as nonfeminine and the dichotomy of white masculinity and black femininity in Victorian Britain.



Figure 3. Langridge, Joseph, Jr. Mrs Sarah Davies. 1862. Merrick & Co., Stationer's Hall, Brighton.

In “Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture”, Jennifer DeVere Brody posits black femininity as the antithesis of the white masculinity that had long characterized Britain. She explores various expressions of whiteness, blackness, masculinity and femininity in Victorian popular culture. In her dissection of blackface minstrelsy, Brody argues that in Victorian Britain, representations of black femininity were inventions of white men to further solidify their own whiteness and masculinity. As she argues, “white men make up the category white men by putting black women on.”¹⁴ While Bonetta’s black skin was natural, the performative parading of her black skin by white Brits transformed her from a black woman into a social construct of blackness. With the correlation of blackness with a lack of femininity, in order for Bonetta to be an effective illustration of British superiority, her femininity, as well as her intelligence, had to be reassured. These concerns finally culminated in Bonetta’s wedding portrait, taken just a few weeks after the event (Fig. X).

In newspapers heralding her wedding, as much attention was given to her whirlwind upbringing as to the wedding itself. In fact, accounts of her childhood doubled the size of the articles. Each account quotes heavily from Captain Forbes’ memoir, where he details the bloody King Gezo and his rescue of the young Sarah.

Bonetta perfectly fix both the Victorian feminine ideal and the Victorian exotic ideal. One of her portraits, taken shortly before her weddings, illustrates these ideals (Fig. 3). The heavy draped curtain and large column behind her echo the cloth of honor and Neoclassical monumental architecture that heralded great intelligence in traditional portraiture. As such, her race was both highlighted and excused. Newspaper reports of her wedding recount that Bonetta’s “knowledge and accomplishments make her an ornament for any society, and prove most satisfactorily the African mind capable of the highest intellectual attainments.”¹⁵

¹³ “Interesting Marriage at Brighton.” *Islington Gazette*, August 23, 1862.

¹⁴ Brody, Jennifer DeVere. *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 85.

¹⁵ “Interesting Marriage at Brighton.” *Islington Gazette*, August 23, 1862.

Bonetta's wedding was Victorian by all traditions, with the singular addition of bridesmaids and groomsmen of color. Newspapers recount the "four bridesmaids of dark colour... and four fair bridesmaids, two of whom were attired similar to their sister- African-bridesmaids... The African and English bridesmaids mingled in pleasing confusion." Bridesmaids wore crowns of apple-blossoms, a Victorian symbol of preference, and forget-me-nots, a symbol of true love. The bride and bridesmaids all wore white, a tradition established from Queen Victoria. The obvious adherence to Victorian customs and the pride at having African attendants further highlights the moral mission of the Victorian era: to abolish slavery by demonstrating the capability of the African race in civilized British society.

The union of Bonetta and Davies was heralded as the realization of Britain's progress in its moral mission. As one newspaper reported, "This wedding of two Anglicized, wealthy, well-connected Africans was proof of the successes that philanthropists and the missionary had over the prejudices of pride and blood." In the eyes of the Victorians, the wedding of Sarah Forbes Bonetta and Captain James Davies was the ultimate cumulative demonstration of the superior civilization of the British. This culminates in the visual messages of Bonetta's wedding portrait, taken a few weeks after the event in London (Fig. 4).

The photographer, Camille Silvy, was an aristocratic photographer in the fashionable quarter of London. Some of his notable sitters include Prince Albert, Lady Katherina Amberly, and Queen Emma Kalanikaumaka'amano Kaleleonālani Na'ea Rooke of Hawaii. Silvy's particular brand of photographer not only reproduced the sitter, but elevated their atmosphere to a lifestyle of class, beauty, and grace. *The Photographic News* declared him "the Winterhalter of portrait photography."¹⁶ Silvy's insistence on sumptuous props and backgrounds for his patrons ensured that each of his *carte-de-visite* produced illustrated its sitter as the most prestigious of Londoners.

In this portrait, Sarah stands at the center, oriented perpendicular to the camera while her

head and shoulders are turned toward the artist. She gazes coolly into the lens over her right shoulder. The frame is dominated by the swirling swatches of her light-colored wedding gown, done in the high society styles of the time. In her left hand she carries a lady's fan, resting her right hand on the back of a delicately spiraled chair. work that would befit her class as one close to the royal family. The lush Neoclassical painted background behind her is filled with rich foliage and lush blossoming flora. A monumental-scale Greek column looms stately over the scene.



Figure 4. Silvy, Camille. Mrs GPL Davies, Sarah Forbes Bonetta (Sarah Davies). Photograph. National Portrait Gallery. London.

Standard development processes were calibrated to develop pale white skin. Altering the process to develop darker skin tones required technical training and precision, both of which were found in Silvy's studio. This delicate

¹⁶ Gernsheim, Helmut. *A Concise History of Photography: Third Revised Edition*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1986, p.56.

handling of Bonetta's skin tone was of utmost importance in this photograph. The portrait lighting of the set illuminates Sarah's face, particularly her low brow, flat nose, and large lips. The light-colored dress and dark lace headdress again bring attention to her dark skin. Printed in an albumen print, her dark skin is emphasized by the medium itself. Even in photography, white men were constructing the presentation of blackness in Bonetta, pronouncing her race as the foundational argument for the demonstration of British superiority by declaring her intelligence and classical virtues. As historian David Olusoga stated, "Sarah and James are the poster children of the moral mission."¹⁷ They could be raised as supposed living evidence of the superiority of British society, not just in terms of education but in manner, conduct, intelligence, music, and all the values of the classical era.

Through the story of Bonetta and her portraits, Britain attempted to demonstrate to the world that despite prevailing anti-black beliefs, the life of Sarah Forbes Bonetta stood as indisputable evidence to the opposite.

Despite such a spotlight on the couple, following their relocation to Sierra Leone after the wedding they were seldom heard from, only making a handful of trips to England. Her Majesty did indeed have an enduring relationship with Bonetta that endured for the rest of the girl's life. She often received the family on their rare trip to the Isles, and Queen Victoria even became godmother and namesake to Bonetta's daughter, Victoria Davies. Sadly, Sarah Forbes Bonetta died young, passing away from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-seven. Captain Davies, her husband, erected a granite obelisk in West Lagos in her honor, where it declared, "In Memory of Princess Sarah Forbes Bonetta."¹⁸

Despite such attention and importance placed on the success of this woman during her lifetime, after her culmination as a successful African-British woman was proven and culminated in her marriage, Bonetta's story was largely left to fade away. After her marriage,

British records hardly mention Bonetta, with the next significant reference to her being to announce her death in 1880. In the meantime, Britain had achieved what it sought, and once she had served her purpose, and so in her adult life and even in death, Sarah Forbes Bonetta was largely forgotten in British history.

While it is easy to assume, not without reason, that this near erasure of Bonetta was simply a result of lack of use for the British Empire, it may be instead that Bonetta herself wielded more agency in this part of her life than any before. After more than ten years of every aspect of her life being carefully curated with hand-picked family, education, living arrangements, and social activities, Bonetta may have grasped the opportunity to escape the pedestal upon which she had been placed. Despite such popularity, there are no primary documents discovered thus far that indicate Bonetta's own opinion of her whirlwind life. Some generic letters and notes indicate her day-to-day activities, but as for her internal ponderings, we are left to speculate.

While the monument erected by her husband after her death heralds the esteemed view held of Bonetta, just one clue exists that provides insight into Bonetta's identity of herself. Just one word scrawled upon a legal document in Brighton holds the key that may unlock this woman's thoughts. Upon her marriage to Captain Davies, Bonetta signed the marriage certificate in Brighton on the 14th of August 1862. At the St. Nicholas Church, Bonetta and her husband stood together and signed their marriage certificate (Fig. 5). On the records of the church, beneath her husband's name, Bonetta signs her full name not as Sarah Forbes Bonetta, but instead as "Ina Sarah Forbes Bonetta." On the cusp of her new life, Bonetta signs her legal, permanent name with both her original African name and her given English one. It is the only recorded reference that Bonetta makes to her childhood in Africa. On this document, held safely in the archives of West Sussex, lies the solitary key to Bonetta's identity

¹⁷ "Queen Victoria's African Protegee." *Black and British: A Forgotten History, Moral Mission*. London, England, UK: BBC Two, November 26, 2016.

¹⁸ Elebute, Adeyemo. *The Life of James Pinson Labulo Davies: a Colossus of Victorian Lagos*. Lagos, Nigeria: Prestige, 2013, 138.

of herself. But with her near erasure from history, little care has been given to preserving her story, and so records of her life are scarce. It seems the full story of Bonetta will remain a difficult mystery to divulge in its entirety.

1862. Marriage solemnized at <i>St. Nicholas Church</i>				
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.
343	August 14	<i>James Vinson Sabulo Davies Ina Sarah Forbes fillage Bonetta</i>	33	Widower Spinster
Married in the <i>British Church</i> according to the Rites and Usages of the said Church.				
This Marriage was solemnized between us, <i>Sabulo Davies</i> and <i>Ina Sarah Forbes Bonetta</i>				

Figure 5. "England, Sussex, Parish Registers, 1538-1910," database, FamilySearch; The Keep, East Sussex Record Office; West Sussex County Record Office, Chichester.

It is only in very recent years that Bonetta's story has started to emerge, as historians and artists alike have conducted immense research efforts to rediscover people of color in Victorian Britain. Contemporary artists have found new inspirations from the revitalization of black stories in history, and female artists of color have especially resonated with the reemergence of Sarah Forbes Bonetta.

Nicholas Mirzoeff's work "The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality" asserts countervisuality as the power to seize control of visual rhetoric from the dominant power and reshape it. As Bonetta's femininity and blackness was constructed and performed by white hands, contemporary female artists of color have reclaimed her for themselves, refusing to indulge in the expected reading of the photographs and adopting instead a countervisual initiative that redistributes power from creator to recreator to subject.

Ayana V. Jackson, an African-American photographer and filmmaker, explores the historical fascination with Bonetta in her 2017 photographic series, "Dear Sarah", in which she explores the fetishization of black women in Victorian Britain. She addresses the stoic portraits of Sarah and represents them with vivid

reimaginings of herself at Bonetta. In re-sitting the portraits, Jackson frees Bonetta from being property of monarchs, and basks in her own presence with cool confidence. Her series follows the various names of Bonetta, "Ina", "Sally", "Stella", Sarah", "S. Bonetta", and "Sarah Forbes". Each portrait has a distinct energy and personality that is missing from the originals. As an African-American artist, Jackson resonated with the carefully curated Western identity she saw in Bonetta's portraits. She strips the images of Victorian paraphernalia and instead focuses entirely on the subject and her consciousness, redistributing the power of the image from the audience to the sitter (Fig. 6,7). About these works, Jackson states, "It's visual activism. It's using photography to fight photography."¹⁹



Figure 6. Jackson, Ayana V. "S. Bonetta" from Dear Sarah (2016). Archival pigment print on etching paper. Mariane Imbrahim.

¹⁹ Nguyen, Minh. "In 'Dear Sarah,' Ayana V Jackson Fights Photography with Photography." Seattle Weekly. Seattle Weekly, April 12, 2017.



Figure 7., Jackson, Ayana V. "Stella" from *Dear Sarah* (2016). Mariane Ibrahim.

British-Ghanaian artist Heather Agyepong also re-staged Bonetta's portraits (Fig. 8,9). Her photographic series "Too Many Blackamoors". Inspired by Bonetta's wedding portrait, Agyepong uses it as her vehicle in expressing her own personal experiences with racial trauma and racism in Europe, exploring limitations and identity. Her portraits more closely resemble the original photographs, using a swooping Victorian gown, heavy draping cloth, and even a delicately spiraled decorative chair. Her reimagining of Bonetta infused the portraits with life, agency, and the search for identity. She confronts the lack of multiplicity in depictions of black female narratives. Agyepong's series explores the

negative consequences of projecting stereotypes onto black female bodies.

Agyepong explains her inspiration, stating, "With Sarah as my template, the project attempts to illustrate the effects of such perceptual limitations."²⁰ The portraits engage in the ongoing quest for visibility that has erased so many women of color from history due to revisionist practices, eurocentrism, and racism. As Agyepong researched Bonetta's life she was struck by "the fantasy of the black woman, this person who doesn't bleed."²¹

By re-framing the works with absolute power as both artist and subject, Agyepong reveals the pains and anxieties of modern black women. Agyepong is also deeply cognizant of the frequent erasure of black female stories.

Figure 8. Agyepong, Heather. "Too Many Blackamoors #9" (2015). Commissioned by Autograph ABP.



²⁰ Peck, Patrice. "This Photo Series Explores The Complicated Representations Of Black Victorian Sarah Forbes Bonetta." OkayAfrica. OkayAfrica, October 2, 2017.

²¹ Baptiste, Kuba Shand. "Artist Spotlight: Heather Agyepong Shines a Light on Victorian Black Women: Gal-Dem." gal, September 24, 2018.

In creating these works, Agyepong mused, “uncovering the forgotten histories can only inspire us to reclaim and preserve our own stories to prevent the systemic erasure of the Black presence in Britain from continuing to the next generation.”²²

Works by artists like Jackson and Agyepong demonstrate the reclaiming of black histories and bodies by contemporary artists of



Figure 7. Agyepong, Heather. "Too Many Blackamoors #4" (2015). Comissioned by Autograph ABP.

color. The works of both artists re-frame Bonetta’s work and infuse their pieces with the agency that Bonetta was refused throughout her life. Their reclaiming of Bonetta as a historical figure also signals the resurgence and rediscovery of black stories in history and overlaps those preservation efforts with preserving the history of contemporary events.

The life of Sarah Forbes Bonetta was calibrated in a bid to prove the civilizing superiority of British society. She stood not as an agent but as a prop, passed around the world from British hand to British hand, her body and mind becoming a vessel for British propaganda, her beauty and intelligence claimed by Britain as its own brand of blackness. Her wedding portrait by Camille Silvy stands as the ultimate culmination of this message. Her blackness was inflated and perpetuated into a construct of blackness crafted by careful white hands. Her femineity was hyper-emphasizes to assuage fears that stemmed from racial stereotypes. Her treatment by her caretakers and the public were constantly centered on her race, culminating in her marriage to an African businessman hand-picked by Queen Victoria that seemed to symbolize a new beginning for the country without regard to the bride. As her usefulness had been proven it was almost immediately rendered unnecessary, and her story was left to be lost to history. Her recent resurgence sheds light on the trepidatious ground walked by people of color throughout history. Her recent resurgence has opened greater conversations of visual culture, especially in regard to depictions of women of color.

²² Peck, Patrice. “This Photo Series Explores The Complicated Representations Of Black Victorian Sarah Forbes Bonetta.” OkayAfrica. OkayAfrica, October 2, 2017.