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Bodies on Display: Poetry, Violence and the Feminine in Baudelaire and Mallarmé

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**Debarati Sanyal**

***Bodies on Display:  
Poetry, violence and the feminine  
in Baudelaire and Mallarmé***



University of California, Berkeley  
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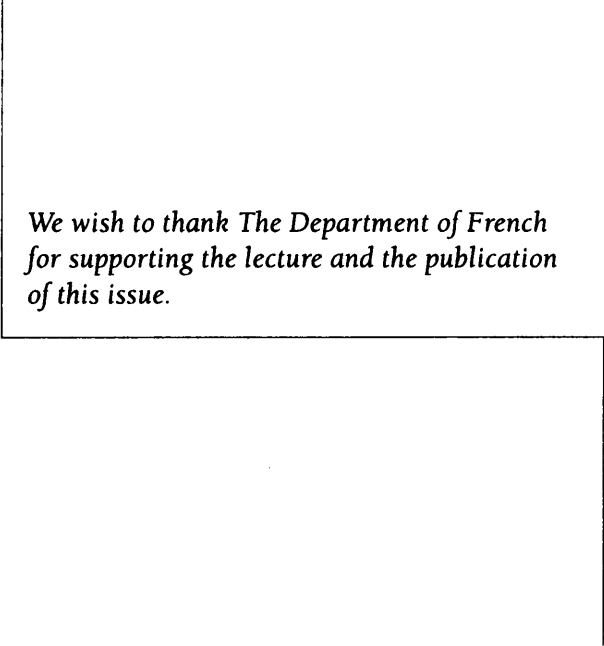
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


## PREFACE

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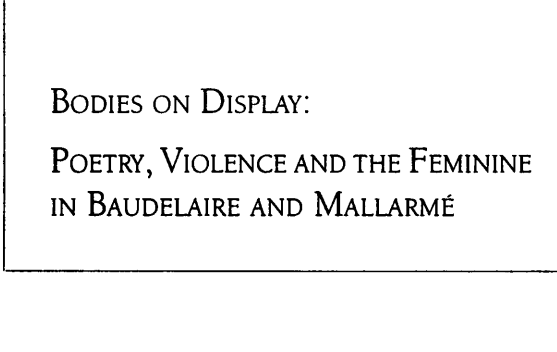
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BODIES ON DISPLAY:

POETRY, VIOLENCE AND THE FEMININE  
IN BAUDELAIRE AND MALLARMÉ






In what appears to be one of the defining gestures of literary modernism, Baudelaire declares that “La poésie ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de déchéance, s’assimiler à la science ou à la morale. Elle n’a pas la Vérité pour objet. Elle n’a qu’Elle-même.” This withdrawal of poetry from the public domain, its redefinition as constituting its own object of reflection (“*elle n’a qu’Elle-même*”), seems to usher in a formalist programme of aesthetic autonomy that will find one of its most compelling illustrations in the hermetic texts of Stéphane Mallarmé. Or so goes one of the dominant narratives of modernism and modernity.

In this paper, I wish to reconsider this juncture in literary history, one that appears to inaugurate poetry’s drift away from reference, history, and material culture. I will suggest that the modernism defined by Baudelaire and Mallarmé is far less of a withdrawal from the social, political and economic spheres than we might imagine. In fact, the very gesture of withdrawing poetry from these public spheres, paradoxically, is what opens up these poets’ texts to their surrounding context and situates them in a broader field of cultural productions. Rather than retreating into a kind of disembodied formalism, the poems I shall read with you return obsessively to the materiality and significance of the body—and particularly, the female body—*through* a reflection on their representational practice. These are poems in which ‘baring the body’ also constitutes a ‘laying bare’ of poetry, in a double exposure that opens the poem up to its historical moment and to the bodies within it. Both Baudelaire and Mallarmé, in their spectacular displays of the female body, suggest that there exists an intimate

relationship between the representation of such bodies, and a violence that operates at aesthetic and historical levels. Indeed, I will argue that violence itself becomes a vehicle for the inscription of competing contexts (aesthetic, economic, ideological and so forth) within the poem itself. In what follows, then, I take violence to mean a particular way of conceptualizing a represented object—one that diminishes or reifies this object—in a manner that resonates against underlying sets of cultural assumptions.

Baudelaire is notorious for engaging in a sort of representational violence against women. His declaration that 'La femme est naturelle, donc abominable' (I:677) is a case in point, and will serve as the launching pad for my discussion today. The notion of woman as a regressive, instinctual organism participates in a broader cultural disquiet about the female body, a fascinated repugnance for the unthinking materiality that this body represents. And this repugnance is perhaps not unrelated to the ambivalence felt by authors such as Baudelaire, along with Gautier, Flaubert, Huysmans and others, towards the post-revolutionary historical scene, the *marée montante de la démocratie*. Sartre, Benjamin, Bourdieu and others have traced how transformations in the social field of 19th century Paris inform the retreat of the literary *avant garde* from its surrounding culture: the Second Empire's dislocation of class struggle, the acceleration of urban renovation, industrialism, the dizzying spectacles of commodity culture and the overwhelming jostle of crowds, of *bodies*, in the streets of Haussmanized Paris. . . In such a context, the turn to literary formalism and to pure poetry could be read as an evacuation of the social content itself, a declaration of autonomy from its degraded materialism, but also, its materiality.





Given poetry's apparent retreat from the public domain in this context, the body, and the female body in particular, serves as a compelling figure for the natural—that is to say, *given*—material that poetry either banishes or 'refigures' into form. For Baudelaire, a woman who has not been transfigured through artifice, be it fashion or cosmetics, becomes the very incarnation of unredeemed materiality (*naturelle, donc abominable*). Her aesthetic incarnation, however, proves poetry's power to capture matter and to redeem it as form. In the context of aesthetic production, woman may be cast as the metonymic *matière* of the social content, the "mud" that will be turned into "gold"—or the Mallarmean flower that, once uttered, becomes that which is absent from all bouquets. This alternative definition of woman, not as "natural" but as "figural," is neatly conveyed in Baudelaire's declaration that "La femme est fatalement suggestive; elle vit d'une autre vie que la sienne propre; elle vit spirituellement dans les imaginations qu'elle hante et qu'elle féconde" (I: 399). Here, the category of "woman" is delivered from its material content and redefined as pure metaphor and muse, as a figure for the artistic process itself.


In the context of aesthetic production then, we may discern two diametrically opposed conceptions of the feminine: on the one hand, a body that is available to naturalist dissection, on the other, a body subject to symbolic irrealization. A woman's body is *naturelle, donc abominable* in Zola's *Nana* and her contagious sexuality, *fatalement suggestive* in Mallarmé's writings on dance, where the ballerina becomes an infinitely suggestive, mute, and disembodied figure for writing itself.

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The three poems I will be addressing today, however, dismantle the binarism that supports this cultural representation of gender by defining woman as *both* naturelle and fatalement suggestive, and by positing the female body as simultaneously matter and figure, as resistance to and catalyst for productions that are not only poetic, but also economic, sexual, and racial. Their reflection on the constitution of the female body thus reaches out into a broader reflection on the nature (and the price) of aesthetic and urban modernity. All three composed or published between 1862-1865, these poems belong to the still novel genre of prose poetry and, as such, firmly plant themselves in the prosaic ground of the *lieu commun*, the common place of contemporary cultural practices. Their exhibitions of female bodies are thus fully attuned to the spectacular displays of commodity culture during the Second Empire (its *Expositions Universelles*, *grands boulevards*, *passages*, department stores and so forth). Baudelaire's "La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse" and Mallarmé's "Le Phénomène Futur" both unfold in the unlikely context of a fair, and cast the poet as a sort of sideshow barker. Baudelaire's "La Belle Dorothée" is an *invitation au voyage* that takes on the glossy promise of a cruise to tropical bliss. In all three texts, a female body is displayed and figured as 'natural' with varying degrees of violence, and in each case, violence is ironically deployed to reveal the hidden violences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the price exacted by urban, imperial, and colonial modernity.



Baudelaire's 'La Femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse' describes a poet who, exasperated by his mistress's languid



complaints and affected femininity, decides to teach her the meaning of real suffering by taking her to a streetfair, where for the modest sum of '2 sous', spectators may watch a savage woman in a cage as she tears into live animals and is beaten by her husband and keeper. After briefly meditating on the sorry state of conjugal mores, the poet turns to his mistress and reiterates his disgust for her "*précieuses pleurnicheries*", threatening either to beat her up like the savage woman or to throw her out the window like an empty bottle.

The poem initially appears to be a straightforward—if brutal—pedagogical experiment that will teach the mistress about her good fortune in the hands of her generous keeper by showing her the difference between real and simulated suffering. The savage woman's abjection (she's caged, beaten, starved, and then thrown to live animals) is opposed to the mistress's luxurious condition: she's stroked, petted, and fed dainty morsels of cooked meat. And yet, this *mise en scène* of class difference is complicated by a reflection on the very nature of femininity, one that raises questions of a different order altogether: what do these scenarios have in common? What bodily reality underlies these two performances of femininity and savagery? In other words, what is the "nature" of a woman? And how is the emergence of this "nature" conditioned by certain sanctioned forms of violence that are at once physical, rhetorical, and institutional?


Now, the alleged aim of the poem is to confront nature in all of its degraded animality (*la femme sauvage*) with its simulation (*la petite maitresse*). But nature and its simulation coalesce so perfectly in the savage woman's performance that it becomes impossible to distinguish

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between them: “voyez avec quelle voracité (non simulée peut-être) elle déchire des lapins vivants.” Either the savage woman is a consummate performer of savagery, or her natural instincts have been unleashed by the performance itself.

What binds these two women together, of course, is not their female nature so much as their status as performers. Both of them are, after all, engaged in parallel—if not contrasting—productions (of nature and its savagery, of culture and its affectation). These performances are not only parallel but continuous: the woman at the carnival apes the savagery of wild animals, her artificially bestial form vaguely imitates the mistress’s own body, and the mistress herself mimicks conventional attributes of femininity learned from novels (“toutes ces affectations apprises dans les livres”). So to ask that the mistress act more natural by showing her the woeful fate of her savage counterpart, the savage woman, is bound to fail, since the performance itself sends any stable notion of nature into a kind of imitative regress.

I should add here that to say these women are performers in no way suggests that they are granted agency over their performance. On the contrary, in both scenarios, the natural bodies of the women in question are ultimately constructed through a choreographed exercise of violence over which they do not have control. In both cases, a violent process of figuration produces—or attempts to produce—the natural state that is supposed to exist prior to figuration. The poet-figure unveils this paradoxical mechanism with great relish:



“Allons, un bon coup de baton pour la calmer! car elle darde des yeux terribles de convoitise sur la nourriture enlevée. Grand Dieu! Le baton n’est pas un baton de comédie, avez-vous entendu résonner la chair, malgré le poil postiche? Les yeux lui sortent de la tête, elle hurle plus *naturellement*. Dans sa rage, elle étincelle toute entière comme le fer qu’on bat.”


In this passage, the material body and its figuration, nature and its performance, are implicated in an extraordinarily complicated way, for it is *through* the theatrical blows inflicted by a real stick (masquerading as a fake one) that the woman’s naturalness—and her authenticating howls—are produced. In other words, it is through a hyperbolically artificial performance that the category of the natural comes into being: “elle hurle plus *naturellement*” (note the italics).

But we have yet another turn of the screw here, for the return to nature signalled by the woman’s howls of pain is immediately followed by what could arguably be seen as the woman’s resurrection as art: “avez-vous entendu résonner la chair...elle étincelle toute entière comme le fer qu’on bat.” The sheer violence of the blows, producing the natural body in all of its eloquence, also unleashes its aesthetic potential, its “resonance” and “scintillation.” The significance of this aestheticized image raises some questions, especially since it is only one in a poem that, after all, involves four artistic figures: two performers, a *metteur en scène* and a poet. How might the violence exercised on the savage woman’s body be akin to the violence of aesthetic production? More specifically, how does the aberrant figuration of

femininity at the fair suggest a parallel disfiguration in poetry?

The spectacular fate of the *femme sauvage* stages the violent effects through which her nature is materialized as savage: the husband-showman's blows have quite literally generated the "naturalness" of the body and its howls on stage. This ability to bring (or beat) a body into existence through the suspension of that body's referential status (is the wildwoman a woman? is the little mistress a beast?) is not unlike poetry's own suspension of reference. Its systematic confusion of literal and metaphoric registres is staged as the confusion between the body proper and its figurative guises. The very principle of *surnaturalisme* upon which Baudelaire founds the ideal of pure poetry is repeatedly described in his art criticism as the despotic enhancement of natural phenomena through a penetrating and almost alchemical alteration, one that releases these materials from their natural state and into their hyperbolic *surnaturel* and properly poetic incarnation. The blows that transform the savage woman's body into shimmering metal resonate with the very terms that Baudelaire, along with his Parnassien contemporaries such as Gautier, associate with poetic craft. Poetry is an *alchimie verbale* that sculpts and chisels resistant metals and minerals, forging a verbal artefact that is "belle come un rêve de pierre" ('La Beauté'). The streetfair's body undergoes just such a transfiguration—the wildwoman is fashioned and struck to embody a hyperbolic naturalness, a *surnaturalisme* which turns her into a species of art.

So it is possible to discern here a homology between the aesthetic process and the fairground performance, one




that suggests their shared violence towards the bodies they allegedly represent. The very process of poetic figuration—its transformation of bodies and materials—is paradoxically literalized as the beating of flesh into art. The fall of poetry into the public domain of mass entertainment is established from the outset in the ironic series of homologies, or *correspondances*, between the poet's domestic drama and the fairground's spectacle: the poet-entreteneur is as much a keeper and a showman as is his monstrous counterpart, the husband; the physical abuse of the savage woman doubles the poet's discursive abuse towards his mistress; both explicitly male subjects put commodified bodies on display, and both produce—or attempt to produce—an ideal of nature through the exercise of violence.

The poet's struggle with his recalcitrant mistress and muse is but one of several sites for the production of gender, others being the domestic sphere of the "petite maitresse" and its literary culture (the books that fail to teach her how to adequately perform her nature), the public sphere of working class fairs, and a much more vast administrative and juridical sphere, for, as the poet stresses with more than a touch of sadistic irony, the beating is legally sanctioned since, after all, the savage woman's keeper is her husband: "Il a enchaîné sa femme *légitime* comme une bête et il la montre dans les feubourgs, les jours de foire, avec la permission des magistrats, cela va sans dire." The baffling savagery of this scenario is but a parodic literalization of the institution of marriage, an institution that, thanks to the Napoleonic Code, turned women into their husbands' property, granting them the same legal status as that of minors and of the insane (and this would be yet another reason why the mistress is by far the more

fortunate of the two). Baudelaire's text thus unveils the ideological underpinnings of the "cela va sans dire," that is to say, the unspoken consensus that legitimates the display, diminishment, and punishment of women by their brutal husbands and keepers.

This vast network of mutually reinforcing determinations of gender and nature, however, still fail to fully domesticate the wild body on display. The poet's ostentatious effort to name this body is a case in point: "Ce *monstre* est un de ces *animaux* qu'on appelle généralement '*mon ange!*' c'est-à-dire *une femme*." The location of a natural female body is foiled by the very complexity of the body's production. The attempt to *raisonner la chair*, to reason the body—and not just to make it resonate—through the allegory of *la femme sauvage* spins out of control, since the body which is fashioned for private or public consumption is ultimately shown to be so riddled with artifice, so volatile, that the very categories that define and control it as a gendered, natural entity break down. Neither the carnival scene nor the poet's ironic admonition guarantees the containment of the *monstre* within the confines of the *démonstration*. And in disclosing the unstable ground of gender, the poem also sweeps away a host of related differences: the distinction between femininity and masculinity reveals a common monstrosity, the natural and artificial are put into an uneasy and reversible relationship, as are savagery and art, the bourgeois apartment collapses into the "feaubourg," the poetic struggle with the muse becomes a public beating to amuse.





This corrosion also unravels the closure of traditional literary forms, forms that fail to contain the body's contradictory productions. The citations that saturate the text—allusions to Marivaux's *Le Petit Maître Corrigé*, maxims such as “il ne faut pas manger tout son bien en un jour” (husband tells savage woman as she rips into a living chicken) and Lafontaine's fable, “Les grenouilles demandent un roi” are parodic references which underline the bankruptcy of these classical forms and proverbs, and the irrelevance of their appeal to communicable notions of *morale*, *mesure*, or *nature*. It is hardly surprising, then, that Baudelaire gave up his initial plan to compose “La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse” in verse. Indeed, no genre could be further from the closure of classical forms than prose poetry, a genre which in his preface to *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire situates at the very crossroads of urban modernity and its jostling bodies and discourses.

Situating the female body at the crossroads of poetic figuration and other cultural sites for its production, “La Femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse” offers an extraordinarily complex understanding of how poetic objects and social subjects are constituted and interpellated. The denaturalized body that emerges here is but one of many examples of Baudelaire's poetry reflecting upon the performative violence of its discourse. And we may perhaps discern more clearly how such self-reflexive elements, rather than withdrawing poetry from the public domain, as we might expect, in fact serve to situate poetry within this domain. This introjection of the social into the metapoetic moment is a gesture that completely destabilizes one of the central oppositions of modernism: the opposition between aesthetic self-


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reflexivity and social engagement. In texts such as this one, the laying bare of poetry (its self-reflexivity) is essential to laying bare the violence of accepted cultural practices. And by cultural practices here I mean the underlying sets of assumptions that make possible the equation between femininity and a materiality that is alternately malleable and regressively savage.

Now in this next section, I'd like to elucidate what some of these underlying sets of assumptions might be, by examining how Baudelaire's exhibition of femininity resonates with contemporary discourses that—in demonstrating women's proximity to nature and its regressive savagery—mapped female sexuality along evolutionary and racial axes. Let us return briefly to Baudelaire's exhibition of the savage:

Considérons bien, je vous prie, cette solide cage de fer derrière laquelle s'agite, hurlant comme un damné, secouant les barreaux comme un orang outang...imitant dans la perfection, tantôt les bonds circulaires des tigres, tantôt les dandinements stupides de l'ours blanc, ce monstre poilu dont la forme imite assez vaguement la votre.

The zoological registre, and particularly the allusion to the *orang outang*, recalls similar cultural displays of the female body in all of its spectacular otherness, such as the exhibition of the so-called Hottentot Venuses, that is to say, Xoi San bushwomen, in the fairs and salons of Paris and London earlier in the century, the most famous one being Saartje Baartman. We know that a nude Hottentot had been exhibited in the drawing room of the Duchesse du Barry as late as 1829. As for Bartman, her genitals were



committed to posterity by Cuvier's anatomical studies in 1817, as medical evidence of the African body's degraded, primitive sexuality. Significantly, Cuvier likened the Hottentot female—a member of the “lowest human species”—to the most evolved of apes, that is to say, the *orang outang*. These exhibitions of the African body, as Sander Gilman and others have argued, confirmed racist agendas by pointing out the distance between the savage dark bodies on display and those of their civilized, white—and clothed—spectators, between primitive abjection and civilized subjecthood.


But as the converging iconography of black female sexuality and prostitutes suggest, such pseudo-scientific representations of female sexuality later in the century became increasingly inflected and pathologized by race, in the form of racial categories invoked to describe the unbridled nature of female sexuality. This contamination of the civilized yet sexual female by her dark, savage sister is conveyed in Baudelaire's parallel between the savage woman and the little mistress, “ce monstre poilu, dont la forme imite assez vaguement la votre.” The Hottentot is but one example of this equation of degenerate female sexuality with blackness. We could think of Manet's *Nana*, whose protruding buttocks suggest the steatopygia for which the Hottentots were famed (recall Zola's *Nana*, whose “fameux coup de hanche” catapults her into fame at the *Théâtre des Variétés*), or Manet's *Olympia*, a courtesan whose sexuality is underscored by the black maidservant behind her.

To read Baudelaire's poem along with such contemporary racializations of female sexuality may not

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be so fanciful when we recall the poet's long-standing relationship with his Creole mistress, Jeanne Duval, the alleged source of his "Black Venus" poems (the black servant in Olympia is said to be inspired by her), and who remained associated with a dark, exotic, and even pathological sexuality in the minds of Baudelaire's contemporaries. Lautréamont, for instance, called Baudelaire "that morbid lover of the Hottentot Venus." It is also worth noting that Baudelaire's great uncle, Francois Levillant, was a naturalist whose travel journal, *Voyage dans l'intérieure de l'Afrique*, included descriptions of the Xoi San bushwomen referred to as 'Hottentots.' (The young Baudelaire requested that his mother send him a copy of it back in 1834).

Now the representation of sexuality through race and of race through sexuality found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century's fascination for the Black Venus or the Hottentot no doubt had something to do with the broader imperial enterprise of displaying the body of the 'other' in a context of accelerating colonial expansion. The human zoos, or ethnographic spectacles of the Jardin d'Acclimatation, for instance, displayed the bodies of various 'natives' amidst the garden's plants and caged animals—a display that finds its uncanny foreshadowing in Baudelaire's zoological depiction of the savage woman in a cage. Since its inaugural exhibition of Nubians and Eskimos in 1877, the Jardin d'Acclimatation staged thirty such displays of 'natives' from various parts of the world until the First World War. These exhibits established the genre for the "native villages" that proliferated over the next half-century, in the Expositions Universelles, and later, the Colonial Exhibitions. As Nicolas Bancel suggests, such spectacular displays of indigenious



bodies in their so-called native habitat helped to show the spoils of the empire, to figure and thereby domesticate—if not simply invent—the colonial subject and its place in the imperial design. While the exhibition of native peoples as *Tableaux Vivants* does not start happening until the Exposition Universelle of 1867 (a couple of years after Baudelaire's death), representatives of most nations of the British Empire were present at the Crystal Palace as early as 1851, forming an imperial *tableau vivant* of sorts. And a few years later, the Exposition Universelle of 1855 for which Baudelaire covers the Beaux Arts boasted the first separate “Imperial Pavilion” to stage the gains of the Empire, thus setting the vogue for the Colonial Palaces of future world fairs.


We can perhaps imagine what Baudelaire's reaction would have been had he strolled past the native displays of the later exhibitions and their fantasmagoria of industrial progress and imperial conquest. In his pages on the Arts Pavilion of 1855, the poet gave a scathing critique of the Paris Exhibitions' propagandistic display of French industrial progress and global conquest. For him, this national story of industrial and artistic evolution was a complete mystification that lulled its bourgeois public into a “credulous and fatuous” stupor, a stupor that announced France's imminent decline. Significantly, Baudelaire completely rejects the conflation of evolutionary accounts of the human species and historical accounts of progress, a conflation that was of course at the heart of the later native villages, with their displays of “primitive” bodies in “native” habitats en route to modernization. France's prosperous centrality, for the poet, was but a fleeting mirage with no promise of tomorrow, since intellectual and imaginative

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vitality are forces that migrate unpredictably across the globe (“la vitalité se déplace, elle va visiter d’autres territoires et d’autres races” II: 582 ).

Now just as Baudelaire is notorious for his general misogyny, some of his most celebrated poems exemplify the kind of exoticism we find in ethnographic spectacles and native villages a decade later in their idealized reification of dark bodies, tropical landscapes, and oriental behaviours (“la langoureuse Asie et la brulante Afrique” of the celebrated ‘La Chevelure’, for instance). But in this third section, I would like to complicate this take on Baudelaire’s exoticist misogyny by reading his prose poem “La Belle Dorotheé” against the concerns I’ve just outlined—against this context of evolutionary and imperial display, where the “native” and its habitat were exhibited as commodities offered up for France’s consumption, displays that sustained the image of historical progress so essential to the colonial project. How might the demystification of the body’s “nature” in Baudelaire’s poetry help us to reread such fictions of the racial and colonial body? How might Baudelaire, when situated in this context, offer a critical perspective on what Christopher Miller has eloquently called the “state-sponsored hallucinations” of the Empire?

In 1841, Baudelaire spent a few weeks in Réunion and Mauritius on his way to India, a journey that his stepfather, General Aupick, deemed necessary to cure him of his excesses in matters of sex and money and to steer him back on track. (We know how succesful that was...) Baudelaire did not make it beyond the Mascarene islands of the Indian Ocean before turning back, but his brief sojourn there presumably inspired poems such as “A une




Malabaraise”, “A une Dame Créole,” and the prose poem written 20 years later, “La Belle Dorothée” (which he refers to as a “souvenir de l’île Bourbon,” now Réunion). Like “La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse” (published in the same year, that is, 1862), “La Belle Dorothée” was initially conceived of in verse. In fact, it has a verse counterpart, *Bien Loin d’ici*, a steamy sonnet also referring to a ‘Dorothée’ and rehearsing a gamut of exoticist tropes through which Baudelaire hoped to show “l’idéal de la beauté noire”, or “l’idéal de la nature tropicale.” In “La Belle Dorothée”, however, Baudelaire was invested in representing the geographical and racial specificity of this tropical black body, as we can gather from his response to the editor of *La revue nationale et étrangère*, who must have balked at the provocative concreteness of Dorothée’s anatomical description. Baudelaire protests thus: “Croyez-vous réellement que *les formes de son corps*, ce soit la une expression équivalente à ‘son dos creux et sa gorge pointue’?—Surtout quand il est question de la race noire des côtes orientales?” (I:1333).

This desire to pin down the physical characteristics of a typical Creole female from the Mascarene Islands seems to place Baudelaire squarely in the exoticist, ethnographic camp that represented an eroticized colonial “other” in the sorts of exhibitions mentioned earlier. And indeed, at first glance, “La Belle Dorothée” seems to do just that. The poem depicts an emblematic “black Venus” evolving in her natural habitat. A splendid specimen exposed through violent contrasts of form and color, Dorothée indolently makes her way towards some unknown destination, against a glittering backdrop of sea, sun, and sand. The violence of this figure’s composition sharply contrasts with the

serene languor of her gait. Note the disquietingly erotic visual force of the pink dress slashing against her dark body: “une robe claire et rose qui *tranche vivement* sur les ténèbres de sa peau”, and the bloody shadow that a red parasol casts on her face. The color scheme echoes the saucy quatrain that Baudelaire had written that same year under Manet’s portrait of the part-Creole Spanish dancer, Lola de Valence: “Mais on voit scintiller en Lola de Valence/ Le charme inattendu d’un bjou rose et noir.” Dorothee is dramatically, even violently, eroticized. We are invited to a virtual peepshow as the breeze intermittently lifts up her skirt to reveal a superb, glistening leg, and exposes a foot that is so perfect, we are told, as to be equal to the white feet of the gods of classical statuary displayed in Europe’s museums. The parallel between museum figures and Dorothee is perhaps not fortuitous, for as she unfolds poetically before our eyes, she is already something of a *tableau vivant*, the living embodiment of a primitive golden age that mirrors the classical age enshrined in Europe’s museums. We thus see the spectacle of a body in motion, one that is as embedded in its natural habitat as her foot is faithfully—if briefly—imprinted on her native soil.

The lingering description of a black woman walking in the tropical heat, her head pulled back by the weight of her ‘enormous hair’ (*énorme chevelure*) strikes me as an uncanny foreshadowing of Felix-Louis Regnault’s chronophotographic study of a West African woman walking with a weight on her head. Regnault’s subjects were the Wolof performers at the 1895 Exposition Ethnologique. His studies of African bodies in motion (jumping, running, walking) as Fatima Tubin Rony has shown, functioned as a sort of evolutionary record






comparing the African's "natural," primitive, and authentic movements ("la marche primitive de l'humanité") to the stiffness of the constrictively civilized European body. Contemplating Dorothée's discursive unfolding in Baudelaire's poem as a spreading black stain along with Regnault's chronophotographic studies for me captures some of the implicit violence of our positions as readers as we visually consume the poetic description of this sample of "la race noire des côtes orientales."

Just as "La femme sauvage et la petite maitresse" linked aesthetic production with violence, here too the ethnographic and poetic are inextricably entwined. Dorothée is almost a parody of the luminous Baudelairean ideal of "correspondances," so seamlessly embedded in her habitat (the elements, her little shack by the sea) as to be virtually enshrined in her own analogy: "Elle s'avance ainsi, harmonieusement, heureuse de vivre et souriant d'un blanc sourire, comme si elle apercevait au loin dans l'espace un miroir reflétant sa démarche et sa beauté." This is precisely how Baudelaire's prose poem, "L'Invitation au voyage," describes its utopic destination: a land where the beloved would be framed in her own analogy and reflected in her own correspondence ("Ne serais-tu pas encadrée dans ton analogie, et ne pourrais-tu pas te mirer, pour parler comme les mystiques, dans ta propre correspondance?"). Yet, as this echo from the 1857 poem suggests, Dorothée is not so much framed by her landscape as she is by intertexts from the ideal poems of *Les Fleurs du mal* (this is the sort of moment Barbara Johnson would no doubt beautifully deconstruct to show how the poem prefigures its fate as cliché): "La Belle Dorothée" is an *invitation au voyage* in time and space taking us to a *vie antérieure*, where the

native, wearing her *bijoux sonores*, is fanned or languidly smokes in her idyllic shack by the sea, combing her heavy tresses as a stew of crabs sends its *parfum exotique* her way.

The subtle irony imbuing this picture-perfect scene gives way, however, to a brutal Baudelairean “chute,” or fall, into the historical conditions underlying this ideal racial and geographic body. As our unreliable narrator reveals at the poem’s conclusion Dorothée admired and cherished by all, would be perfectly happy if it weren’t for the fact that she must labour and save to buy back her eleven-year old sister, already pubescent and too lovely to remain safely in her master’s house. We may recall that Baudelaire called this poem a “souvenir de l’île Bourbon,” and that at the time of the poet’s visit in 1841, it was still a slave-owning, tobacco- and coffee-producing plantation culture several years away from abolition. Indolent, naïve, vain Dorothée, then, must laboriously pile “piastre sur piastre” to buy her sister’s freedom, and thereby save her from the prostitution that Dorothée herself—with all the freedom of her status as *affranchie*—is compelled to embrace. Baudelaire thus offers us a luminous ideal only to reveal its basis in an interlocking system of sexual and colonial violence.

Dorothée’s progress in the stupefying heat of a tropical noon, decked out as she is in silks and jewels, needs to be reread, then, not as a beatific communion with nature, but more prosaically, as a walk to the marketplace, where her tryst with the French officer will hopefully yield more than simple reports of Paris’ beautiful women and nightlife (“Infailliblement elle lui priera, la simple créature, de lui décrire le bal de l’Opéra, et lui demandera si on peut y




aller pieds nus...”). Where “La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse” posed the question of a woman’s productivity along with the production of gender (the savage woman as her husband’s capital, the mistress as the poet’s luxury), “La Belle Dorothée” complicates these matters by putting the body in the embedded economies of sexual *and* colonial labour. The poem’s final word (*écus*) unveils the animating force of both Dorothée’s and the island’s “progress.” If by the end of the poem, “la belle Dorothée” converts to “la bonne Dorothée,” this is not because of the goodness of her natural state (the *simple créature* as a *bon sauvage*), but rather, thanks to a conversion of body and soul, one that is as material as it is spiritual. The golden age offered up for our visual pleasure was always already an age of gold. And exile, it would seem, is the very condition of the native.

Baudelaire conjures up a tropicalist stereotype of native indolence, a world of noontime siestas from which all signs of labour are banished—except for Dorothée, ‘working it’ in the sun—only to dissolve the mirage and to expose its price. As I suggested earlier, the poem initially seems to give us a mascarene version of the “pays de cocagne,” the luxurious utopia described in ‘L’invitation au voyage,’ a utopia whose colonial underpinnings Baudelaire made quite explicit in the prose version “les trésors du monde y affluent comme dans la demeure d’un homme laborieux qui a bien mérité du monde entier.” In “La Belle Dorothée,” of course, the question of labour, and of the female colonial subject’s labour in particular, is completely elided. But as the French officer’s speculated reports on the beautiful balls of the Paris Opera might suggest, the flow of treasures will travel across the ocean and straight into the chests of the French capital.

“La Belle Dorothée” and its oscillation between idealization and kitsch, between *ekphrasis* and tourist-brochure, tells us something about how a foreign body—its racial and geopolitical alterity—is familiarized and consumed as a visual spectacle. Where “La femme sauvage et la petite maitresse” demystifies the violent production of femininity as matter and figure, or as beast and as commodity, “La Belle Dorothée” discloses the parallel violence and mystification of representing the black body as both primordial nature and as exotic commodity.

Francoise Lionnet has suggestively argued that Baudelaire’s inclusion of the word “cafrine” in this poem—a specifically Creole word for black women—reveals Baudelaire’s attunement to the specificity of the Mascarene Islands and their actual historical subjects. So she sees Baudelaire’s poetry “as one of the first places of the emergence of the native Creole woman’s voice.” I completely agree with her general argument that Baudelaire’s poetry does much more than collapse its subjects into rhetorical figures for “dark others of an exotic femininity” (Lionnet, 79), but whether he gives these subjects a voice through words such as “cafrine,” as Lionnet suggests, is less certain. In “La Pipe,” for instance (a mock-orientalist sonnet) “cafrine” describes the color of the talking pipe as it puffs tobacco, tobacco that may well have been harvested by a “cafrine” from the Bourbon Island’s plantations, but whose smoke conjures up the image of a cosy French rural cottage. The migration of the word “cafrine”—from the designation of a Creole subject to the description of a circulating object whose final destination is figured as



a countryside cottage—exemplifies how the alterity of the exotic is reified, circulated and consumed on the homeland. What I am suggesting, then, is that it may be too hopeful to turn to Baudelaire for the ‘voice of the other, and this is why in my readings I have focused on the construction of the body rather than the emergence of a subjectivity or voice. But what Baudelaire’s poetry does disclose—and this with unparalleled force—are the contours of this other’s reification, and the imbricated violences that make such bodies matter, produce, and signify.

Violence, here and elsewhere in Baudelaire’s poetry, becomes a figure for the inscription of several competing contexts within the poem, all of which are in tense dialogue with each other and with the process of making, reading, and contextualizing poetry. And it is precisely the collusion and the collision between different terms, such as nature, race, the body, commodity, femininity, figuration and so forth, it is this *correspondance* and *dissonance* that enables the poem to engage and unveil the competing ideological investments of its historical moment.




Mallarmé is often read as culminating the Baudelairean project of pure poetry, its evacuation of reference and autonomy from context. His famous declarations on poetry’s power to dissolve bodies and things into language are usually perceived as part of an idealist programme that banishes all signs of the body, materiality and history from the poem, inaugurating what we might call a sort of disembodied poetics.

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And yet, Mallarmé's fascination for bodies, and particularly for performing bodies, is amply documented in his writings on ballet, pantomime and fashion (*Crayonné au théâtre*, *La dernière mode*). Granted, these bodies are so intricately crafted, so "textual," in fact, that they could be read as simply perpetuating Baudelaire's legacy of representing femininity as pure figuration ("la femme est fatalement suggestive"). This view of the feminine seems particularly true of Mallarmé's writings on dance, where the body of the dancer is transformed into a purely semiotic surface. Indeed, for Mallarmé, dance was a form of corporeal writing, an expression that, like the poem, constituted its own reality, literally *embodying* what it signified. So performers such as La Cornalba, Rosita Mauri, and Loie Fuller are treated in these writings not as bodies, but as instances of thought in motion. It follows that for Mallarmé, the dancer is not a woman, but merely a sign. She does not dance, she produces poetry, and this poetry is located not in her body, but in the viewer's imagination:

A savoir que la danseuse *n'est pas une femme qui danse*, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu'elle *n'est pas une femme*, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur etc., et qu'elle ne danse pas, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis et d'élan, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu'il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction: poème dégagé de tout appareil de scribe. (Ballets, 1886).

We might assume, then, that Mallarmé is interested in such bodies only insofar as they can be dematerialized and recast as vehicles for semiotic play in the viewer's



imagination (a stance that is not free of misogyny, since the ballerina would be an infinitely suggestive *petite maîtresse*). But in the few minutes that remain, I'd like to tease out another possible perspective on Mallarmé's interest in the body as a series of productions rather than as an object of representation. When Mallarmé presents dance as a phenomenon that unfolds in the viewer's imagination, he suggests that what matters in dance or writing is not the representation of an object, but rather, the representation of this object's effect. This shift from the theatre on stage or page to the theatre of the mind is famously put in his letter to Cazalis regarding *Hérodiade*: "Ce que j'ai voulu faire c'est peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit." Now are we to understand this shift from the visual to the virtual, from what is displayed to what is experienced by the viewer, as a ploy to abolish the represented body, to dissolve it into language in order to resurrect it as pure ideal? Or could we read this shift as telling us something about the actual historical conditions of a body's construction, through desire, language and spectatorship? And if that were the case, could this in turn challenge the thoughtless consumption of the body in a culture of exhibition?


My final reading of Mallarmé's prose poem "Le Phénomène futur" will gesture in that direction. Significantly, this poem—steeped in Baudelairean imagery—is also the only piece by Mallarmé that Baudelaire is known to have commented on (although Mallarmé's text was not published until 1875, it was composed much earlier and circulated in literary circles). Baudelaire summarizes the poetic plot thus: "Un jeune écrivain a eu récemment une conception ingénieuse mais non

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absolument juste. Le monde va finir. L'humanité est décrépite. Un Barnum de l'avenir montre aux hommes dégradés de son temps une belle femme des anciens âges artificiellement conservée. 'Eh! quoi! disent-ils, l'humanité a pu être aussi belle que cela?' " Always the pessimist, Baudelaire then reproaches Mallarmé's faith in mankind's ability to recognize and mourn beauty: "L'homme dégradé s'admurerait et appellerait la beauté laideur."

Mallarmé's poem is set in a bleached out, crepuscular Baudelairean landscape sometime in the future. A Shower of Things Past ("Montreur de Choses Passées") claims to have in his tent a body that defies all description, a "femme d'autrefois," a glorious Venus emerged from the primordial sea with salt still clinging to her limbs. The living specimen of a bygone era of beauty, she has been preserved from the beginning of time by the miracle of science. As in Baudelaire's "La femme sauvage et la petite maitresse" and "La Belle Dorothée", an archaic, anachronistic female body is displayed—or rather, advertised—as a vestige of primeval nature. She is no less than the original matrix for an evolutionary chain that ends with collective decay. Significantly, this state of decay is not embodied by the men in the crowd, but by their wives—decrepit bald women of the future, whose diseased wombs carry the rotten fruits by which the world will perish. We thus once again see the feminine inscribed as the collective body's origin and end, its redemptive norm and pathological aberration. The blonde counterpart to Baudelaire's Black Venus, a kind of "Eve future avant la lettre," Mallarmé's female phenomenon is so utterly reified as an object of visual consumption, as something to be seen, that her own sight is located not in her jewel-like eyes, but as an





emanation from her very flesh (the tips of her breasts, to be exact): “et les yeux, semblables aux pierres rares! Ne valent pas ce regard qui sort de sa chaire heureuse: des seins levés comme s'ils étaient pleins d'un lait éternel, la pointe vers le ciel....” This is, at least, what the barker's titillating salespitch, his “boniment”, would have us believe.

Yet, just as the spectators crowd around the tent and the poem promises to deliver its splendid body—a *phénomène* is, after all, a thing to be seen—we encounter a blank space, an elision of the body (the famous Mallarmean *blanc*) and a description, instead, of its effect on the viewers. Our expectation of visual pleasure is thwarted as image is displaced by rhythm:

Quand tous auront contemplé la noble créature...les uns indifférents...mais d'autres navrés...les poètes de ce temps, sentant se rallumer leurs yeux éteints, s'achemineront vers leur lampe, le cerveau ivre un instant d'une gloire confuse, hantés du Rythme et dans l'oubli d'exister à une époque qui survit à la beauté.

Between anticipation and remembrance, between the salespitch and the review, then, the body is suppressed, its exhibition sealed off in the unlocatable time of the *futur antérieur*. Like Mallarmé's suppression of the dance in *Hérodiade* (which he was beginning at the time), what is represented here is not the thing—or the body—but the effect it produces on its viewers. And it is clear that what we have witnessed is not the body's display in its “ordinary” state, but rather, its verbal production as an exhibition piece that is saturated with economic, scientific, and cultural value: the myth of a vestigial Eve bathing in

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formaldehyde, conserved by science for profitable sideshows and to which only poets can attest.

Mallarmé, like Baudelaire, makes explicit the body's verbal construction as a commodity on display, as the repository for conflicting cultural inscriptions. This attention to the semiotic fashioning of bodies (be it through language, electricity, or clothing) should hardly surprise us from an author who single-handedly wrote 12 issues of a womens' magazine called *La dernière mode*. Rather than dissolving the body into the autotelic language of poetry, then, Mallarmé shows us what the "nature" of this body owes to such languages. I am suggesting here that Mallarmé's poetry is not so much engaged in obliterating or abolishing the body and reference as it is in reframing this reference and body within a broader field of cultural productions.

Of course Mallarmé and Baudelaire cannot be conflated in their attitudes towards the bodies staged in their poems. Where Baudelaire gives us a sort of hyperbolic rehearsal of the cultural processes through which bodies emerge, Mallarmé proceeds by ellipsis and elision. His irony is far gentler than Baudelaire's. And his meticulous attention to the body's semiotic potential does not seem invested in the sort of ideological critique that Baudelaire's works conduct. One formulation of the difference between them is that whereas Mallarmé's primary objective is to "peindre non la chose mais l'effet qu'elle produit," Baudelaire's objective is to "peindre non la chose mais l'effet qui l'a produite," to paint not the thing but the effect—or nexus of effects—that have produced that thing.



The poems I have read with you today, in presenting women's bodies as exhibition pieces, call into question the very nature and ground of these bodies. They point out, instead, the ideological investments that produce the feminine as "naturelle donc abominable" and as "fatalement suggestive." In showing such bodies in performance, Baudelaire and Mallarmé expose the conditions of a subject's emergence in the broader cultural field, and this at a time when a body's performance—its value, productivity, visibility and yield—were increasingly at stake. Now it is fascinating that this demystification of the body's emergence is conducted by literary figures usually said to remove poetry from social and historical concerns, and to inaugurate the aesthetic of self-reflexivity and autonomy that we generally associate with high modernism. I included the coda on Mallarmé in order to point towards another way of thinking about the beginnings of modernism, one that recognizes that the oppositions structuring traditional accounts (such as autonomy and engagement, self-reflexivity and reference, idealization and materiality) are themselves internally riven, and that consider the modernist turn as a reframing of reference rather than its abolition. The self-reflexivity that supposedly banishes history from Baudelaire and Mallarmé's poetry is exactly what lets history back in, since it is *because* of their acute attention to their representational modes that these poets unveil—from within—the forgotten and often violent transactions that produce poetic and cultural subjects.

Walter Benjamin once said that he wished to show how Baudelaire lay embedded in the 19th century, claiming

that the imprint left behind by the poet would stand out clear and intact like that of a stone. Yet, as his own writings on the poet attest, Baudelaire's poetry is as recalcitrant to historical embedding as his bodies are to allegorical closure. His imprint on, and by, the 19th century, while certainly more lasting than the imprint of Dorothée's bare foot on her native soil, shares some of that footprint's volatility. This is in part because his poetry imbricates so many different contexts at once (aesthetic, formal, historical, etc.), an imbrication that resists any one contextualization or embedding, and, in fact, questions the very groundedness of context. But, as I have been suggesting, it is precisely this imbrication of contexts that weaves poetry into a broader field of cultural practices and allows us to read and reread Baudelaire's poems, not as hieratic expressions of pure poetry, nor as symptomatic imprints of the shocks and contradictions of modernity, but as contestatory and self-contestatory pieces that unveil some of the hidden violences of his historical moment. And just as Baudelaire continually demands and resists new theoretical and historical embedding, his poetry also solicits a constant re-evaluation—and recontamination—of our own critical practice.

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