

– Hypocrite Lecteur, – Mon Semblable, – Mon Frère!
– Hybrid Viewer, – My Difference, –Lorraine O’Grady!

by ANNE HIGONNET. 1996

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Both my mother and father insisted Baudelaire was theirs. Neither could let go, year after year, each claiming true ownership of those beloved volumes: the George Eliot, the Mallarmé, the Pléiade complete works edition of Baudelaire. My mother argued that her father’s money had paid for the books. My father argued that it had been his idea to buy them, and he needed them for his work. Finally, the issue was settled. I was awarded full custody.

The Baudelaire was mine. I treasured the book because it represented my family role: the mediator between differences. I also savored what was in the book because it represented difference itself, the difference that defined my cultural identity. I could understand those words, those poems. I was really French. I couldn’t forget the words had also been someone else’s, because scattered along the margins were my father’s elegantly penciled, cryptic marks. I wondered if inheritance justified erasing all traces of his reading, but filial piety overcame defiance.

When I first read Baudelaire as an adolescent, he seemed absolute. No compromises, no conformity—a call to leave, to be

elsewhere, *L'Invitation au voyage*. In graduate school, I wanted to buckle Baudelaire down to business, the business of being a French nineteenth specialist. In the Yale course catalog, alluringly outside my designated field of art history, I spotted a course title: Art Theory from Diderot to Baudelaire. Professor Paul de Man. I hadn't anticipated a seminar in which three hours could be devoted to one sentence. Everything I thought I knew about Baudelaire was turned back into words, into figures of speech, into the possibilities and impossibilities of language. De Man taught me how language would close in on itself, only always to rupture. My romantic investment in Baudelaire's freedom had given way to Baudelaire's professional potential only to give way in turn to an awareness that Baudelaire's language was at once free, limited, and limiting.

Like many of his students, I was taught the same lesson by de Man long after I had left his seminar, but again differently. After his death, it was revealed that at the start of his career he had contributed to magazines sympathetic with Nazi doctrine. Yes, language was always trying to close in on itself, trying, among other attempts, to shut out personal history; until someone found out, and named what words had left out. I was angry at myself. How could I have read those poems about Jeanne Duval so many times and not heard the meaning of lines like: "Vous feriez, à l'abri des ombreuses retraites,/ Germer mille sonnets dans le coeur des poètes,/ Que vos grands yeux rendraient plus soumis que vos noirs."¹ [beneath the shadows of our woodland glades you'd sow/ a thousand sonnets in the hearts of poets who'd own/ more fealty than your blacks to your great liquid eyes.²] or: "Je plongerais ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse/ Dans ce noire océan où l'autre es enfermé."³ [I'll plunge my head enamored of intoxication,/ in these black seas whose waves enclose another ocean.⁴] Taken apart from the language itself—which I admitted I couldn't do, but I was angry—lines like those were just the clichés of sexism and racism: the usual lines about otherness, escape from bourgeois responsibilities, sexual self-expression, intellectual sublimation of sensual raw material, etc., etc. And what about the literary criticism I had read for its biographical information about Baudelaire, never pausing to think about how it cast Duval as Baudelaire's other in order to prove the transcendence of his work? He was brilliant, she was stupid.

He was a pure spirit; she was sexual and venal. He turned a ridiculous relationship with her into his great art.

I had identified with Baudelaire and the French culture he stood for, but that wasn't possible any longer. I knew that as a woman I was part of what Baudelaire excluded. I knew that the strategy of formal integrity was itself a form of exclusion, whether active or passive, conscious or unconscious, on the part of the artist or the critic. Yet to deny Baudelaire—or the modern Western canon with which he so fully identified—was itself, also, a denial of history, including my own. The difference I had believed was wholly apart, an identity that, however marginally, promised a kind of integrity—like the French identity I claimed in high school—was always a process of extrusion threatened by resorption. I thought of Jacques Derrida, de Man's friend and defender, who insisted that what is inside the frame is always defined by what is outside. The frame, that essential concept of Western art—metaphor for integrity, for the aesthetic coherence that defines an art object—that constitutes all the objects authored by an individual into a coherent oeuvre (making plural objects into a singular noun), that defines the history of art as an academic field. Would it be possible to place myself not within any of those frames, but at some place on an edge? What if I believed in the canon, but differently, tracing how the Western canon has constituted itself as a process of closure against what it excluded, repeatedly successful and magnanimous, perpetually brutal and failing?

To situate myself on a ragged edge between he and she was not so hard. It quickly became easy to see the gendered assumptions on which Baudelaire rested. However much I had to relinquish a complete identification with Baudelaire, I could affirm I was among the women Baudelaire excluded. I had to rethink myself as a hybrid between an intellectual or professional identification with Baudelaire and a personal identification with Duval the woman, but neither component of the hybrid required me to identify with anything I could not call my own.

Then Lorraine O'Grady talked to me about writing this essay. I realized that I had heard the she and he of Baudelaire's assumptions but had never fully listened to the black and white

of them. Take for example these two sentences from a sort of Baudelaire-manual aimed at a general audience:

Jeanne Duval présentait tous les défauts que l'on dit être ceux des métisses. Sournoise, menteuse, débauchée, dépensière, alcoolique, et par surcroît ignorante et stupide, elle se fût peut-être trouvée mieux à sa place dans le monde de la prostitution que dans la compagnie des artistes.

[Jeanne Duval presented all the faults that are said to be of half-breeds. Surly, lying, debauched, spendthrift, alcoholic, and in addition ignorant and stupid, she would perhaps have been more in her place in the world of prostitution than in the company of artists.]⁵

No adjective, no metaphor was neglected to deprive Duval of the most basic humanity. In Baudelaire's poem she is an escape and the oblivion he longs for. In Baudelaire's history she even ceases to be what he said he lacked, becoming instead the fodder for his work. Seeing O'Grady's work on Baudelaire and Duval, I am faced with a Baudelaire from whom I recoil. Duval evokes the experience of a black woman whose suffering and degradation has obliterated identity, an experience incommensurable with anything I can say I know.

To go back again to Baudelaire on O'Grady's terms requires by far the most difficult hybrid yet: not a grafting of the personal onto the professional, but of the unknown onto the known. It demands abandoning a model of inside and outside, fraught with fluctuations within space yet still one space which retains conceptual unity. To confront race demands a model in which hybridity is a perpetual mutation, in which identity never stabilizes or even oscillates, but repeatedly shears away, in which time forces change and forbids any return to origins. The more I think about O'Grady and Duval, the less sure I am about myself. Socially and historically, they are "black." But the more I think about this essay the more complicated their being black becomes to me, the more hybrid, divided and grafted within, and the more my being "white" seems correspondingly fictitious, like being

“French.” O’Grady often says: “Wherever I stand, I find I have to build a bridge to some other place.”

Like all of her previous work, O’Grady’s images of Baudelaire and Duval offer viewers only multiple vectors for identification, refusing either unity or opposition. *The Fir-Palm* (1991), for instance, grafts northern evergreen on southern trunk on human navel. The multiple pieces of her *Miscegenated Family Album* pair Egyptian sculpture with family photographs. Are the two types being compared, contrasted, likened or divided? Are these before or after, or what is and what should be? If so, which is which? In O’Grady’s latest work we again find histories old and new. Here Baudelaire is again, in the familiar guise of a canonical 1855 Nadar portrait photograph, a staple of mainstream photographic history and museum collections. And the image of Baudelaire is still endowed with his own words, writ large before him as well as small in his background. And now Duval too appears, next to Baudelaire, their images linked though not united by a double diptych format. She still does not represent herself, visually or textually; her image is a pen drawing he made, and the words that describe her are O’Grady’s. His image and his words are so reassuringly well-known; hers startle. Baudelaire already has a history; Duval does not. To go back to the same Baudelaire-manual: “La biographie de cette Jeanne Duval n’a jamais pu être écrite.” [The biography of this Jeanne Duval has never been able to be written.]⁶ Perhaps Duval’s biography couldn’t be written on Baudelaire’s terms. But O’Grady puts Duval back in the picture, another picture of history.

Duval’s and Baudelaire’s images are joined by Pablo Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* the painting that gave its author the same kind of place in history that *Les Fleurs du Mal* gave Baudelaire. Casting their computer-generated shadows on each other, Baudelaire and the *Demoiselles* or Duval and the *Demoiselles*, become layers in the same image. Baudelaire’s representation of Duval and Picasso’s representation of African art echo each other. Moreover, the color of both Baudelaire’s and Duval’s image is literally taken [from] the palette of the Picasso canvas, reclaimed through a computer program. The masterpieces that were supposed to be so individual become just

aspects of one history, the history of a canon constituting its oneness through exclusion and appropriation.

O'Grady's work can look like a compensatory act of retribution. Baudelaire's body and writing, once sedulously separated by the use of a device called Duval, are now reunited, while her body, once the discarded detritus of Baudelaire's poems, becomes the subject of O'Grady's inquiry. Duval not only appears, she appears on the same scale and with the same visual weight as does Baudelaire. The form itself of the diptych implies parity, reciprocity, exchange, a relationship between two separate yet linked entities.

O'Grady's work can look redemptively healing as well. Going behind the back of literary criticism, O'Grady takes Baudelaire at his word. She retrieves the need for Duval Baudelaire expressed and the likeness between them he acknowledged. This is the passage from Baudelaire's journals she shows me in her studio:

These two fallen creatures, who could still suffer, since a vestige of nobility remained with them, embraced impulsively, mingling, in the rain of their tears and kisses, regrets for the past with hopes, all too uncertain, for the future.⁷

She lets Baudelaire speak for himself, lets us read his words ourselves, paying homage to the form of his language, and also confident that his language itself will betray him, cracking under the pressure of exclusion, speaking what it intends to silence. Baudelaire's journal entry continues:

Through the night's blackness, he had looked behind him into the depths of the years, then he had thrown himself into the arms of his guilty lover, to recover there the pardon he was granting her.⁸

O'Grady's work lets us draw our own conclusions. She marshals images and words, color and letter-type, seeking a formal integrity that will let meanings loose. The work these meanings will accomplish she leaves to us. O'Grady does not try

to control uncontrollable meanings, to make sure we get a single point, to spell out a single intention. On the contrary, she joins many kinds of meanings together in a firmly constructed but open mesh, luring us into the unknown with what we thought we knew. The diptych form is not only doubled, but internally layered, the uncertainties lead in every direction. What is the surface and what is the substance? Where is the real thing? Whose side are we on? Whose word should we take? Has Duval been reinstated in history or is her erasure by Baudelaire only made more evident?

By the questions she poses and the answers she refuses to give, O'Grady confronts with the prisms of likeness and difference, with the identities we would like to claim whole but can only inherit in spliced shards. She posits no single entry into her work, and designates no single exit from it. Her work provides a place of multiple possibilities where you and I, from wherever we come, can alter our trajectories.

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "A Une Dame Crèole," *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

² Baudelaire, *Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil and Other Poems*, trans. by Francis Duke (New York Vantage Press, 1982), 98.

³ Baudelaire, "La Chevelure," *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

⁴ Baudelaire, *Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil...*, 39.

⁵ Pascal Pia, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1952 [1995]), 51, translation is my own.

⁶ Pia, *Baudelaire*, 50.

⁷ Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. by Christopher Isherwood [1930] (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1983), 42.

⁸ Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*.