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**“What’s to be said” for Laure:  
Reconceptualizing the Maidservant  
in Manet’s *Olympia***

by Emma Jacobs

Women’s Studies 301-302 Senior Thesis

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**Part I**  
**Laure in Paris: “De-Orientalizing”**  
**Imperialism and Objectivity**

## I. Introduction

At the Salon held at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1865, a painting entitled *Olympia* (painted in 1863, fig. 1) by Édouard Manet was denounced as a travesty. The work, a nude somewhat in the manner of an odalisque, was regarded as morally and aesthetically offensive. Critical disgust rained down on both the painting and the artist. The work inspired so much contempt that it had to be moved from its relatively low placement on the Académie wall and rehung much higher in order avoid threats of physical violence from revolted visitors.<sup>1</sup> Critics found much to detest in the work: the color of the nude's skin, the flatness of the work's picture plane, the supposedly inelegant hand of the painter, and the grotesque and aggressive sexuality of the work's main figure, further symbolized so crudely by a stretching black cat. Curiously, the other principal figure of the work—the black maidservant of the nude—is largely absent from contemporary critical discourse, fixated as it was on the ostensible offenses of the nude's body.

*Olympia* has since been canonized as the work that marked the birth of modern painting. It is the subject of countless critiques and articles, all of which analyze and speculate on its art historical significance without reaching a consensus as to its “true” meaning: is *Olympia* important because its lack of illusionistic depth heralded the flatness that would come to characterize so much of twentieth-century modern painting? Or is the work remarkable because the intense and autonomous gaze of its subject challenges the voyeuristic male gaze and thus abnegates the genre of the classically painted nude? What all art historians do seem to agree on is that *Olympia*—in its composition, subject matter,

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<sup>1</sup> George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954), 73.

and form—is the epitome of a (oftentimes ill-defined) concept of both artistic and social “modernity.” As Charles Baudelaire, poet, art critic, and dear friend of Manet’s, defined it in 1863 (the same year of *Olympia*’s creation), modernity is the “ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”<sup>2</sup> If this indeed is the meaning of word, *Olympia* herself surely meets the criteria; depicted as a prostitute in a contemporary Parisian brothel, the nude *Olympia* is understood concurrently as a timeless, yet specific emblem of modernity. But what of the maidservant? The narrow focus of critical and academic attention on the figure of *Olympia* alone has almost completely obscured the only other figure in the painting. Critical outrage over the perceived repugnance of *Olympia* sometimes encompassed the figure of the maidservant; contemporary caricatures like those of Bertall, Cham and G. Randon (figs. 2) refigure her as a grotesque and racist “Mammy” stereotype, both domestic and sexual in her exaggerated acquiescence. Some critics ignored the maidservant entirely, or expressed astonishment over her presence, as the Romantic writer Théophile Gautier wondered plainly, “What’s to be said for the Negress who brings a bunch of flowers wrapped in paper, or for the black cat which leaves its dirty footprints on the bed?”<sup>3</sup>

This question has rarely been given a satisfactory answer since it was first posed, as twentieth-century academics have often seen the figure of the maidservant as a vestige of Orientalist tropes or—perhaps worse—have jettisoned her entirely from their discussions of the work in the belief that she is nothing more than a meaningless formal

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977), 96.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Hamilton, 75.

element. The former argument is perhaps best summarized by cultural historian Sander Gilman, whose analysis of the maidservant places her within the context of the nineteenth-century “scientific” fascination with the sexual organs of those denoted as racial “Others.” Gilman reads the figure as an “emblem of illness,” betraying “Manet’s debt to the pathological model of sexuality present during the late nineteenth-century,” that defined black female sexuality as animalistic, excessive, and primitive in contrast to the white norm.<sup>4</sup> She is also, perhaps less perniciously, understood as a mere trope; art historian T.J. Clark disregards the maid figure as being “compliant,” “inert,” and “formulaic, a mere painted sign for Woman in one of her states.”<sup>5</sup> The latter argument—that of the maidservant’s formal function and symbolic hollowness—was and has been the refuge of Manet’s advocates, nineteenth- and twentieth-century alike. Contemporary critic and novelist Emile Zola, another friend of Manet’s, attempted to parse the meaning of the figure in a dismissive way in an address to the painter: “To you a picture is simply a pretext for analysis.... You wanted black patches, and you placed a Negress and a cat in a corner. What does it all mean? You hardly know, and neither do I.”<sup>6</sup> Written two years after the work’s premiere at the Salon, Zola’s explanation of *Olympia*’s subject matter as a mere excuse for an aesthetic gesture reads as curious apologism, an utter refusal to interpret the socio-political ramifications of Manet’s work.

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<sup>4</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 101-02.

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Clark, “Olympia’s Choice,” in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 79-146, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: Volume IV: From the American Revolution to World War I, Part 2: Black Models and White Myths: New Edition*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012), 164.

Whether critics and academics think Olympia's maid provides a racial/sexual counterpoint to the work's eponymous figure, or serves as classical, Oriental set dressing for the painting's generic template of the Salon nude, or as a mere tonal "patch," their contrasting views of the work still nonetheless agree on the relative unimportance or stereotypical character of this figure. And yet, present in both Zola's and Gautier's criticism of this work is a question borne of outright confusion: "What could this work, or the maid herself, possibly *mean*?" It is my aim in this thesis to answer that question by situating the figure of the maid—who is often referred to as Laure or Laura after the woman who mostly likely modeled for her—within the socio-historical context of nineteenth-century Paris at the time of the work's creation. I will attempt to follow the lead of feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, whose analyses of the figure of Laure argue that she is a figure of "de-Orientalizing power."<sup>7</sup>

I wish to prove that—much as T.J. Clark and other scholars have argued that the controversy surrounding the painting stemmed from its bald display of Olympia's class and commercial sexuality—the antagonistic critical response to the work came in no small part from the figure of Laure, whose sensitive and humane depiction, compared with the enigmatic aggressiveness of Olympia, cast a critical eye on French colonial and imperial practices through its references to both Orientalist tropes and the new pseudo-scientific study of physiognomy. Furthermore, Manet's work draws commonalities between the class and presumed sexualities of both of its figures, establishing boundaries between notions of Self and the Other, only to collapse these borders and thus subvert the

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<sup>7</sup> Griselda Pollock, "A Tale of Three Women: Seeing in the Dark, Seeing Double, at Least, with Manet," in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 247-315, 285.

viewer's understanding of racial hierarchies. Read through the lens of these overlapping referents, *Olympia* can be understood as a comment on nineteenth-century anxieties over race, class, prostitution, colonialism, objectivity, miscegenation and hybridity, and possibly even lesbian sexuality. I would thus like to propose that Laure is key not only to understanding *Olympia* as an aesthetically or socially cohesive work but also to the work's very claim of modernity, as Laure is a multi-faceted and oftentimes contradictory symbol of modernity in her own right.

## II. Colonialism, Orientalism, Voyeurism, and Tourism

On its surface, *Olympia*'s composition and subject matter owes much to the genre of Orientalist paintings that were popular during the nineteenth-century. These exoticizing paintings usually followed a certain template: nude white women—assumed to be either Western tourists, light-skinned royal concubines, or victims of the much-feared practice of “white slavery”—were depicted in unnamed “Oriental” locations, surrounded by Islamic architecture, and attended to or bathed by black women who were either slaves or women native to the mysterious country. Works depicting similar subjects by French Academic and Neoclassical painters such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Eugène Delacroix were regularly exhibited at the Paris Salon, to much critical acclaim. Critics often lauded such works for their purported “accuracy” and “realism,” as the tight brushwork and detailed painting style ascribed to the artistic imperatives of the Academic style.<sup>8</sup> But as feminist art historian Linda Nochlin points out, this critical focus on painterly “accuracy” functioned as a defense of

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 33-59.



the supposedly “objective reality” of the Orient depicted in these paintings, a reality which positioned France as a more advanced and thus superior civilization. Thus, as Nochlin states, these works did not “[reflect] a ready-made reality” but in fact “produc[ed] meanings,” as do all works of art.<sup>9</sup>

The work of artists like Ingres and Gérôme thus revitalized and reframed the classical nude genre within the contemporary context of France’s imperialistic endeavors in North Africa, all the while presenting racialized Others as “objectively” inferior, and thus helping to justify French colonial expansion. Couched in a visual language of distance and realism, these works implicitly posited a French “Self” just outside of the picture plane, a “Self” whose civilized attitude and metropolitan lifestyle—the bourgeoisie told themselves—safe-guarded it against the primitive “Others” depicted in these works. In this way, nineteenth-century French concepts of nationhood and identity were reliant on and reified by the depiction of Orientalist “Others,” an iconography only made possible by the possession of French imperial properties.<sup>10</sup> As Nochlin points out, a work like Gérôme’s *The Slave Market* (circa 1866, fig. 3) allowed for nineteenth-century French viewers to engage in “simultaneous lip-licking and tongue-clicking.” The ostensibly objective depiction of an “actual practice” of slavery in some far-off country in the Near East allowed for French viewers to assert their moral superiority (as France had legally abolished slavery in 1848) while, at the same moment, revealed the extent of their territorial possession and power over the lives of these Others, here figured through the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>10</sup> This is the core argument of Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979), now considered a groundbreaking work in the field.

sexually available and powerless body of a white female slave.<sup>11</sup> Though this female slave is, in fact, white enough to provoke the desired response of moral dominance, Gérôme uses the hand gestures of the prospective buyer to emphasize her sharp features and dark hair, physiognomic features that mark her as undeniably Other. Though his brushstrokes and stylistic choices may be invisible, Gérôme's investment in the interlocking ideologies of colonial possession, cultural and racial superiority, and sexual voyeurism could not be clearer.

Women of color are frequent presences in Orientalist works, if only as pictorial devices that further underscore the racial superiority of white viewers. In works such as *Odalisque* or *Esther* by François-Léon Benouville (1844), *The Moorish Bath* by Gérôme (1870), *The Turkish Bath* by Ingres (1862), and *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* by Eugène Delacroix (1834), black women seem only to provide a tonal, and thus ideological, counterpart to their white masters. Indeed, the black women in these works are often slaves or servants whose social subordination is literalized and justified by the artists through a dependence on physiognomic types. In Benouville's *Odalisque* (fig. 4), for example, the black servant's facial features are almost comically pointed, giving her a sharp, rodent-like look. Her eyes, too, are painted as small slits, and her right hand is shown raised towards the white women, her fingers oddly contorted. This figure, we presume, is leering at her white mistress. Benouville is attempting to direct the viewer's gaze to the more lovely figure both through the fact of the black women's own unsightly features and through the physical gestures of the latter's gaze and peculiar, pointing hand. Indeed, this painting illustrates a passage from the Biblical story of Esther in which the

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<sup>11</sup> Nochlin, 44.

queen's servants give her the news of the decree to kill all the Jews in her kingdom. Esther's servant, as depicted by Benouville here, is thus a harbinger of death. It is clear, then, that this figure serves only to cast into relief the beauty of the white woman through aesthetic and tonal—and thus ideological—contrast.<sup>12</sup> As art historian Griselda Pollock notes, this artistic device serves to mark blackness as Otherness while whiteness remains, to a large extent, “invisible,” and thus the norm or standard.<sup>13</sup> This “invisibility” of whiteness serves much the same function as Nochlin's meditations on the “invisibility” of Gérôme's brushstrokes: the colonial superiority posited by both Gérôme's *The Slave Market* and Benouville's *Odalisque* dictate that their underlying mechanisms remain hidden, lest these works expose the true dependence of the French white bourgeoisie on these black or marked Others for the formation of the French “Self.”

It is clear, then, that the notions of voyeurism are essential to the dependence of Orientalist art on colonialism and thus to the genre's successful operation. Supposedly “objective” depictions of these exotic locales could only come from direct observation, made possible by French imperial expansion. Artists like Eugène Delacroix traveled to French colonies in North Africa such as Algeria and Morocco in order to have “real” experiences and gather visual evidence for their art.<sup>14</sup> This supposed reliance on observable fact lent credence to an artistic endeavor that might otherwise appear salacious, and bolstered the traditional—and inoffensive—style of Academic painting. Contemporary critics greatly admired this apparent indebtedness to reality, as an

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<sup>12</sup> Françoise Cachin, Charles S. Moffett, and Juliet Wilson Bareau, *Manet: 1832-1883* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), 180.

<sup>13</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits: 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Honour, 151-154.

American critic observed of Gérôme in 1873: "...it is alleged that he never paints a picture without the most patient and exhaustive preliminary studies of every matter connected with his subject. In the accessories of costume, furniture, etc. it is invariably his aim to attain the utmost possible exactness."<sup>15</sup> If it is the inextricable link between Orientalist art and colonial tourism that allows the former to be understood as "objective" and "real," it is that same relationship that reframes the dichotomy between the "Self" and the "Other" as part of a process of modernization. As art historian Griselda Pollock states:

What else is it but tourism that takes us to the place of the 'other' and subjects it to our 'othering' gaze, where we are geographically distant from home, but also ideologically distanced from the 'other' despite actual proximity. Tourism is, of course, an extension of the very economic and ideological process of metropolitanization.<sup>16</sup>

She notes not only that such tourism only became possible with the advent of leisure time and disposable income for the upper-middle class due to the industry of city life—"metropolitanization"—but also that it is, in fact, the gaze of the French "Self" that "modernizes" the supposed "Others," turning them into both a spectacle and a fetish. It is thus the very act of looking/gazing—and thus, making or viewing art—that creates the Self/Other binary and, therefore, calls into being the notion of a modern metropolis that serves as the civilized counterpoint to the "primitive" Orient. Moreover, Pollock remarks that "the fact of work, wage relations, commodity production, colonialism or imperialism are made irrelevant to the desired meaning of the scene" rendered by the Orientalist artist.<sup>17</sup> Class and its accompanying mechanisms—that which makes colonial tourism

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Nochlin, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

even possible—has no place in the voyeuristic fantasy of the colonialist or Orientalist artist and his desire for an “objective”—yet completely ahistorical—work of art. As French historian Herman Lebovics succinctly observes on the “reciprocally potentializing” connection between artistic modernism and colonialism, “... no French colonialism, no aesthetic modernism; no aesthetic modernism, no empire building.”<sup>18</sup>

### **i. Manet and Orientalism**

It is no secret that Manet was interested in Orientalist tropes; his affinity for the work of Ingres, in particular, is well documented and led him to sketch or paint multiple works inspired by the older artist.<sup>19</sup> Art historian Theodore Reff, among others, points to Ingres’s infamous *Large Odalisque* as a possible source for *Olympia*, noting the similarity of their composition with regards to the genre of the reclining nude.<sup>20</sup> Similarities have been drawn, too, between *Olympia* and the works listed above (though some of them postdate Manet’s work), with Benouville’s *Odalisque* being noted in particular due to its slight inversion of *Olympia*’s composition: the black slave here is the partially nude figure with the white woman being fully clothed.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the common subject matter of a black woman attending a white woman, there are visual

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<sup>18</sup> Herman Lebovics, “Modernism, Colonialism, and Cultural Hybridity,” in *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution*, ed. Pascal Blanchard, Sandrine Lemaire, Nicolas Bancel, and Dominic Thomas, trans. Alexis Pernsteiner (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2014), 388-98, 388.

<sup>19</sup> See Françoise Cachin, Charles S. Moffett, and Juliet Wilson Bareau, *Manet: 1832-1883* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983) and Theodore Reff, *Manet: Olympia* (New York: Viking, 1977). Drawings like *The Woman with the Cat* (1862-63?) and *Odalisque* (1862-1868) are thought to be reworkings of the composition of *Olympia*. Paintings like *La Sultana* (1871) also display his life-long fascination with Spanish and “Middle Eastern” themes.

<sup>20</sup> Reff, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Cachin et al., 180.

motifs throughout *Olympia* that are lifted directly from Orientalist works—*Olympia*'s slippers and bangle, the patterned shawl draped across the bed, and Laure's braided head-wrap. It is not only these pictorial tropes that are obvious references to the genre, but also the larger theme of voyeurism inherent to the function of the painting, which ostensibly serves the same purpose here as it does in Orientalist art. Just as many Orientalist works depicted sexually available women as a testament to the possessive power of white male colonialists, so, too, does *Olympia*. Women in the Orientalist genre were almost always depicted in a harem and so, too, are *Olympia* and Laure, painted as they are in a brothel, the harem's Parisian complement.

Given that Manet also took up the position of colonial tourist during his lifetime, aspects of *Olympia* may perhaps seem to be recapitulations of Orientalist themes. Certainly, that is the opinion of many twentieth-century art historians and Manet biographers, especially with regards to the figure of Laure. George Heard Hamilton, for instance, remarks that Laure symbolizes "one of the rare instances where a pictorial image bears some reference to Manet's earlier experience in Rio de Janeiro," a comment that references a sailing expedition Manet embarked on to Brazil as a teenager.<sup>22</sup> Manet's letters home during this trip in 1848 reveal an investment in tourism and voyeurism equal to that of his Orientalist contemporaries. He remarks that the city is "rather ugly" but that it has a "special attraction for the artist" due to the diverse racial makeup of the population.<sup>23</sup> He goes on to describe the mixed-race population: "In general, that portion is hideous apart from a few exceptions among the Negresses and mulatto women; almost

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<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted and translated in Honour, 207.

all of the latter are pretty.”<sup>24</sup> Here, a young Manet, even before he is fully formed as an artist, is already expressing the colonizing mechanism of modernization; his statement on the importance of the city for an artist is immediately followed by a comment on the aesthetic appearance of women of color, as if he has already grasped their purpose in reifying a dominant colonialist narrative of the Self. Making literal this tenuous relationship, Manet alternates praise and repulsion in his letters to his mother and his cousin, calling some women beautiful and some ugly. He states that all of the black people in the city are slaves and writes of the slave market he witnesses as a “spectacle revolting for us,” articulating the French moral superiority to the primitive practices of foreigners so crucial to Orientalist ideology—ironically, in the same year that slavery was officially banned in all of France’s territories.<sup>25</sup>

## ii. Scientific Racism and Laure in Paris

In light of Manet’s colonial travels and remarks, it seems important to discuss the position of people of color in the context of the French metropolis—namely Paris—in order to properly understand both the figure of Laure in *Olympia* and the woman who modeled for her. French historian William B. Cohen claims that there were between one and five thousand people of color—both slaves and freedmen—residing in France during the eighteenth-century before legislation in 1764 barred the entry of more people of color

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>25</sup> Édouard Manet, *Lettres de Jeunesse* (Paris: Rouart, 1928), 52. The original French is: “...j’ai vu un marché d’esclaves, c’est un spectacle assez révoltant pour nous;...” I am grateful to Filippa Olsson Skalin for help with all French translations.

and sent slaves back to the colonies.<sup>26</sup> This legislature was later overturned in 1818 and, in 1848, France officially abolished slavery—once and for all—in all of its territories and granted residents of Caribbean colonies French citizenship, legally allowing them to enter France proper.<sup>27</sup> French historians Pascal Blanchard, Eric Deroo, and Gilles Manceron note that there was some influx of students of color from the Caribbean but that these people coming from former colonies precluded a discussion of “immigration,” as these people were technically French citizens after the abolition of slavery.<sup>28</sup> But Blanchard et al. also admit that there were few black people in Paris as a whole in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century—after the creation of *Olympia*—and those that were brought to Paris who were not citizens entered either the domestic service as servants or entertainment industries as circus or music-hall performers.<sup>29</sup> Historians and critical race theorists Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully also note that black women were few in the first two decades of the nineteenth-century in Paris and that, between the thirteen hundred and two thousand people legally recognized as black or mixed race in the entire country of France, the vast majority were men who were servants or former soldiers.<sup>30</sup> But there seems to be very little scholarly research available about the immigration—if that is even the correct term—of women of color from French colonies into Paris during the mid to

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<sup>26</sup> William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), 111.

<sup>27</sup> Pascal Blanchard, Eric Deroo, and Gilles Manceron, *Le Paris Noir* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2001), 16. France had originally abolished slavery in 1794 before reestablishing it in the West Indies in 1802. Napoleon abolished the slave trade in 1815, while slavery itself was not officially abolished as a practice until 1848. I here used 1848 as the ultimate date for the abolition of slavery for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), 121.



late nineteenth-century, when Manet produced the majority of his work. Thus, the claim by many art historians that, as George Heard Hamilton states about Laure, “in the Paris of 1865 a Negro woman was still an exotic figure, reminiscent of strange lands and climates warmer than the Ile de France” seems plausible.<sup>31</sup>

As Hamilton’s statement reveals, the rampant popularity of Orientalism in France during this period meanings that any person of color living in Paris at this time would have been subject to the accompanying connotations of such a colonialist ideology. Furthermore, a scientific theory of racial superiority arose during this time, and was given new prominence by the encounter between white Europeans and a South African woman named Sara Baartman in the early nineteenth-century. Also derisively known as the “Hottentot Venus” due to her pronounced buttocks, Baartman was brought by Dutch colonists to Europe in order to be presented partially nude as a sideshow spectacle. She arrived in Paris in 1814 where she was medically examined by Georges Cuvier, whose analysis of her body type helped to bolster the nineteenth-century understanding of black female sexuality as pathologically animalistic and primitive. Sander Gilman argues that “Sarah Baartman’s genitalia and buttocks summarized her essence for the nineteenth-century viewer,” an essence which bespoke the ostensibly excessive sexuality of all women of color.<sup>32</sup> The theory of physiognomy, that the direct study of bodily appearances revealed the psychology or inherent qualities of a human being, reached an apex in this form of scientific racism, in which the different body types of African peoples were seen as “objective” proof of their inferiority to whites. The white population of Paris paid to gape at Baartman, in order to see with their own eyes the differences of

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<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Gilman, 88.

her body. Supposedly “objective” or “direct” observation served here, as it did in Orientalist art, as a means through which the French “Self” could reassert its superiority and modernity over the bizarre primitiveness of the “Other.” Indeed, the view of Orientalism as being implicitly connected to these notions of direct observation is apparent in the words of the American critic who, repeating the praise of other critics, referred to Gérôme as a “scientific picture maker.”<sup>33</sup> If Orientalist art achieved a nationalistic purpose through the medium of looking, so, too, did this “scientific” theory of racial superiority. As biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling observes, Cuvier’s obsession with “revealing” the secrets of Baartman’s body lay in his anxieties about the state of French nationhood, perhaps exacerbated by the recent French Revolution or, even more terrifying, the slave uprising in the Haitian colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791.<sup>34</sup> Baartman—and the bodies of all other black women in France at this time—were deployed as indisputable physical evidence against which the fact of white civilization could assert its own power in the face of shifting social dynamics.

It is in this social milieu that Laure, the model, lived, the unspoken “Other” in the Parisian world of French “Self.” Although her origins are unknown, Griselda Pollock speculates that she was an Afro-Caribbean woman from the colony of Martinique who was either brought or immigrated to Paris in order to work as a servant or maid.<sup>35</sup> Manet, in his journals, referred to her as “Laure, a very beautiful negress,” and recorded her

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Nochlin, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race, and Nation: Comparative Anatomy of ‘Hottentot’ Women in Europe, 1815-1817,” in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 19-48, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 21-23.

address.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that she was probably a professional model, appearing as she does in multiple paintings from the period. One such painting is *Le baiser enfantin* or *The Childlike Kiss* by Jacques-Eugène Feyen (1865, fig. 5). Exhibited alongside *Olympia* at the very same Salon in 1865, Feyen's work also shares with Manet's—and the Orientalist works previously discussed—the core subject matter of a white woman and her black servant. But in Feyen's painting, unlike in Orientalist art, the two women are firmly positioned in nineteenth-century France; art historian Sheldon Cheek notes that the costume of the white woman situates the family in the French region of Alsace.<sup>37</sup> Laure's costume, however, consists of both a plain blue uniform with a white collar and a bright yellow head kerchief with matching pendant earrings, the combination of which signify her position as a servant and possible immigrant from the French-occupied West Indies.<sup>38</sup> The headwrap and the earrings thus stand in contrast to the subdued outfit of the white mother, both in tone and in cultural significance; Laure is, through these two iconographic elements, made to symbolize the exoticism figured by all people of color in nineteenth-century France. Her Otherness, too, is marked through the composition of her body, as her head and left knee point away from her white charges and their mother.<sup>39</sup> And yet, Feyen subsumes Laure's Otherness and ambivalent relationship to the white bourgeoisie into the larger composition: her movement away from the family is balanced both by the child she is swinging over her right hip and the mother leaning forward to

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<sup>36</sup> A. Tabarant, *Manet Et Ses Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 79. The original French is: “Cette négresse, nous avons pu l'identifier grâce à notre Carnet de notes de Manet (1862). Il porte en effet cette mention: « Laure, très belle négresse, rue Vintimille, 11, au 3° ».”

<sup>37</sup> Sheldon Cheek, “Laura, the Black Model Who Graced the Art of 19th-Century France,” *The Root*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

look at her children; the colors of her red and yellow garments are bright but not vivid enough to cause visual disjunction against the simple hues of the white family's clothes; her gaze redirects the viewer to the focal point of the painting—the inoffensive, kissing children. Moreover, the two women are depicted caring for children in a picturesque and Academic style, an artistic move that speaks to Feyen's belief in the conservative values of the Republican family—values that emphasized the role of the mother only insofar as she shaped her children into upright subjects of the nation. *Kiss* therefore resolves the issue of race that was so prescient at the time of the work's creation by recruiting a woman of color to act as an "Other," yes, but a largely harmless one helping to uphold the proper ideals of the French nation. Feyen here seems to claim that the "Other" can be brought home to the French "Self," can be observed and made to symbolize the foreign without the necessity of tourism abroad—though anxiety and ambivalence still, it seems, shine through the gaps between the painter's invisible brushstrokes.

### **III. *Olympia*, Orientalism, and Laure**

Despite his own ambivalence about the people of color he saw as a youth in Rio de Janeiro, Manet, in *Olympia*, attempts to subvert precisely the Orientalist tropes he found so fascinating. Though the work indeed refers to common stereotypes, the interesting elements of *Olympia* are not found in its apparent recapitulation of colonialist race relations and objectifying voyeurism, but in the ways it deviates from and rejects these norms. *Olympia*, though referentially Orientalist in its subject and composition, is unrelentingly (and, at the time, controversially) modern in a markedly different way. *Olympia* is depicted not in a far-removed exotic country which functions to mask the

sexuality of the work, but in an unmistakably French and contemporary brothel. Her form is not that of a nude concubine in a harem, but that of a naked French prostitute with which contemporary viewers would have been all too familiar. In discarding the foreign setting of Orientalist works, Manet thus deliberately rejects the very element of the genre that lends it respectability, insisting instead on *Olympia*'s visibility and contemporaneous Parisian relevance through her unabashed "nakedness."<sup>40</sup> As Hamilton remarked about the contrast between Orientalist works and *Olympia*:

[In Orientalism] some slight allusion to a place and time other than the present, or some conspicuous reticence had lain like a slight veil of idealization between the unclad form and the spectator. An averted glance, a fold of drapery, or a Turkish pillow was sufficient to establish the propriety of the subject. *Olympia* ignored such advantages. She was, in 1863, incontrovertibly there.<sup>41</sup>

*Olympia*'s lack of a "veil of idealization" in its frank modeling of the figure and the refusal of Olympia herself to avert her gaze and thus establish her "propriety" are, in Hamilton's view, the elements that signify both the work's and the subject's presence and, thus, their shocking modernity. It is the lack of spatial, temporal, and ideological distance essential to Nochlin's notion of Orientalism that Manet refutes with his painting, dismissing entirely any pretension of objectivity or cultural superiority. But Nochlin, when comparing Gérôme's *The Slave Market* with Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873) also points to Manet's entirely different style of painting as an indication of his subversion of Salon Orientalism, noting his "rejection of the myth of stylistic transparency in a painting depicting erotic commercial transactions."<sup>42</sup> The same can be said of *Olympia*, whose lack of illusionistic depth, visible and blurry brushstrokes, and

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<sup>40</sup> Clark, 79-146.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Nochlin, 47.

inconsistent use of line makes any claim to objective realism in the Academic style implausible. The frustration of critics present at the Salon of 1865 attests to the subversive nature of Manet's stylistic departure, as the artist's treatment of line, depth, and color was often their primary concern. One critic, Ernest Chesneau, remarked that Manet's work displayed "an almost childish ignorance of the fundamentals of drawing," while another, Geronte, compared Manet's use of color to "sour grapes, harsh and acid," that "penetrates the eye like the saw of a surgeon penetrating flesh."<sup>43</sup> Manet's manner of painting clearly heralded for critics his disinterest in the slick surfaces and timeless settings of Salon Orientalism. Their outrage at his preference of the opaque over ostensible artistic "transparency" indicates more than mere aesthetic disturbances, however; they belie an intense anxiety about the contemporary setting of the work's main figures, no longer distant or exotic but uncomfortably and vibrantly present. This linkage is perhaps best illustrated by the critic Jules Clarétie, whose confused fury is palpable even as he connects Manet's use of color with his disgust over the work's contemporaneity: "What is this Odalisque with a yellow stomach, a base model picked up I know not where, who represents Olympia? Olympia? What Olympia? A courtesan no doubt."<sup>44</sup>

### **i. Laure in *Olympia's* Paris**

But if twentieth-century critics were quick to understand the power of *Olympia's* modernity as stemming from its rejection of Orientalism due to its contemporary setting

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<sup>43</sup> Chesneau quoted in Hamilton, 72. Geronte quoted in Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1996), 331.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, 73.

and modern painting style, they were less willing to see Laure as playing a similar “de-Orientalizing” role. As previously stated, she has been historically understood as just another trivial trapping of the Orientalist genre that only the figure of Olympia herself successfully subverts. Laure was often grouped together by critics—both past and present—with the black cat at the foot of Olympia’s bed. The previously noted quotations from Zola, in which he refers to both Laure and the cat as “tonal patches,” and the astonished comment by Gautier both mention Laure and the cat in the same breath. They are seen as analogous signs; both are, as the critic Postwer says, “*black messengers*.”<sup>45</sup> Even twentieth-century critics, when they do speak of Laure, make the same connection. They believe both Laure and the black cat were understood as references to Charles Baudelaire, whose affair with the possibly biracial Jeanne Duval was as well known as his poetic imagery of feline sexuality.<sup>46</sup> Baudelaire’s poems in his infamous collection *The Flowers of Evil* were filled with images of “negresses,” “Creoles,” and “mulattos,” both sexual and deadly. In the poem, “The Swan,” for example, he remarks “I think of a negress, wasted, consumptive, trudging the mud, wild eyed, looking for faraway palms of glorious Africa behind an immense wall of fog.”<sup>47</sup> The critical joining of Laure with the erotically-charged image of the cat assumes that Manet’s intention was to code the black woman as an Orientalist representation of primitive, exotic sexuality, repeated by Baudelaire as both a symbol of fecundity and fatality. These connotations of racialized sexuality were made explicit by Sander Gilman, who implies that it is Laure’s very presence that lends Olympia her apparently vulgar sexuality. Gilman understands Laure

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Clark, 87. Emphasis in original.

<sup>46</sup> Hamilton, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Keith Waldrop (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006), 116.

as an “emblem of illness” and death, heightening the foul diseased body of Olympia through mere pictorial proximity. Gilman is also quick to note the connection between a fear of miscegenation that was the subtext of all scientific theories of race during the nineteenth-century and the ostensible social ill that was prostitution. Gilman states that the “late nineteenth-century perception of the prostitute merged with that of the black,” implying that the widespread belief was that both interracial or excessive racialized sexuality and prostitution would lead to the downfall of civilization and they were, at heart, understood as interchangeable.<sup>48</sup>

Gilman’s thesis would certainly explain the Salon critics who expressed an intense dismay at the color of Olympia’s skin. Often referred to as “yellow,” she is also shown literally blackened with soot in contemporary caricatures (figs. 2), iconographically signaling the relationship between blackness, filth, low class, and illness. It would also explain the critics, like Amédée Cantaloube, who called Olympia a “female gorilla,” collapsing (perhaps unconsciously) the stereotypical signs of hypersexual blackness ostensibly represented by Laure and the representational sign of Olympia’s body.<sup>49</sup> T.J. Clark suggests the key to *Olympia*’s modernity lies not only in the contemporary setting of the work, but also the eponymous figure’s class status; he writes that Olympia’s class is depicted “nowhere but in her body.”<sup>50</sup> But in this critical response, the bodies of Laure and Olympia are flattened, made into one sign of horrid sexuality. This anxiety over the perceived relationship between blackness, “objectively” inferior body-types, and uncontrollable sexuality may also help explain why a critic calling

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<sup>48</sup> Gilman, 99.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Clark, 94

<sup>50</sup> Clark, 146.



himself “Ego” called Laure a “hideous Negress” or why the caricaturist G. Randon depicted Laure’s face with almost duck-like exaggerated features, exemplifying what he must have assumed was her racial, physiognomic stupidity (figs. 2).<sup>51</sup>

Gilman’s argument, however, is ultimately an oversimplification, as he mistakes the critical (mis)readings of Manet’s work for the work itself. Laure is trapped into a role of “Otherness” in these critical interpretations, one that presumes her sexuality and body type with no real referent in actual painting. Readings of Laure either as a reiteration of the imperialistic race relations enacted by Orientalism or a degraded and over-sexed racist stereotype seem to be based more in the connotations or biases of critics—then and now—than in any of Manet’s artistic choices. Though Manet compositionally aligns Laure with the cat on the right side of the canvas, they do not share any other formal elements. The color of Laure’s skin shares no hues with that of the cat, nor is she depicted with any of the stereotypical physical “attributes” of black women that were thought to connote their ostensibly voracious sexual appetites, epitomized in the nineteenth-century imagination by the “Hottentot Venus.” The current critical assumption that Manet has depicted Laure’s body as ample or otherwise stereotypically “sexual” have no grounds in the painting itself: the viewer can see no part of Laure other than her face and right hand. Manet pays close attention to her facial features in his portrait of her; they bear no resemblance to the exaggerated racist grins shown in contemporary caricatures. Nor is Laure a mere Baudelairean symbol made manifest; she bears no resemblance to the black figures of death or sex that haunt *The Flowers of Evil*. Furthermore, she is depicted as fully clothed, a far cry from the nude or partially exposed

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<sup>51</sup> Ego quoted in Clark, 96.

bodies of women of color that litter Orientalist paintings, of which the servant in Benouville's *Odalisque* is merely one example. As Postwer observes, even as he collapsed Laure and the black cat in their "blackness," Laure seemed to him, "a Negress who has nothing about her that recalls the amorous night...."<sup>52</sup> Perhaps Postwer's criticism can be read as a display of disappointment, as he may have indeed desired that Laure have more in common with the salaciously displayed bodies of black women that frequently adorned the Salon walls. The very fact that Manet has depicted Laure clothed may be understood as a comment on the nineteenth-century fascination with "objective" racial superiority and sexual voyeurism: she is both fully clothed and refuses to return the gaze of the viewer. Like Olympia's hand that clamps over her own genitals, Laure's costume purposefully denies the viewer access to her body and thus refutes any further attempts at "objective" Orientalist looking.

## ii. Laure and Cultural Hybridity

As previously stated, the origins of Laure the model are largely unknown. What is clear is that she not only appeared in other works by Manet's contemporaries, but also in other works by Manet himself—all firmly situated in modern, nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>53</sup> In one such work, *Children in the Tuileries Gardens* (ca. 1861-2, fig. 6)—Manet's preliminary composition for the work that would eventually become *Music in the*

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Clark, 87. Postwer is here referring to the short poem by Zacharie Astruc that accompanied the presentation of *Olympia* in the Salon.

<sup>53</sup> There is some debate in scholarly circles whether another black woman—maybe Laure—appears in a study for Manet's somewhat allegorical work, *The Surprised Nymph* (1860-61). I am unconvinced by this connection, as the skin of the nymph's servant does not seem particularly dark nor is she wearing any sort of headwrap, as Laure is in all of Manet's other portraits. It is impossible to know who this figure was, as she was elided from the final painting. See Cachin, 86 and Reff, 93.

*Tuileries* (1862)—a figure dressed identically to Laure in *Olympia* stands (or sits) at the far right-hand side of the painting holding a hoop. She is presumably the nursemaid of the white girl sitting indifferently in front of her, and the hoop she holds may be a game for the child. The supposed deference to her unnoticing white mistress makes Laure's iconography in this work remarkably similar to the one she holds in *Olympia*, and her loose pink dress and salmon-colored headwrap also indicate continuity with the later work. But unlike in *Olympia*, Laure's position in *Tuileries* seems tenuous; she is here butting up against the right edge of the canvas, the left side of her body completely cut off by the work's frame. Moreover, the dark tones and the shadows engulf her left shoulder give the impression that the woman is vanishing from the work entirely. Perhaps this is an indication of Laure's precarious place in French society, a possible immigrant whose employment by the white bourgeoisie, as figured through her oblivious white charge, is perpetually fraught or unstable. Regardless of her symbolic significance in this small study, Laure does not appear in the final *Music in the Tuileries*; perhaps Manet did not want such an unusual or possibly exotic figure in scene of contemporary bourgeoisie leisure. Perhaps Manet did not yet know how to fully express the modernity Laure signified in a scene in which good class standing is an unspoken imperative.

Though Manet elided her from his final composition set in the Tuileries Gardens, Laure evidently stayed in his mind. A few years after painting *Children in the Tuileries Gardens*, Manet made a small portrait study of Laure also known as *Portrait of Laure* or *La Nègresse* (ca. 1862-3, fig. 7). Often thought of as a study for *Olympia* because of the unfinished quality of its background, this work can also be understood as an individual and specific portrait in its own right. Unlike *Children*, whose function as a study

precluded Manet from painting the faces of his subjects, *Portrait* pays important attention to the specificity of Laure's facial features. She is shown smiling slightly and facing the viewer with an open and soft expression. Hugh Honour notes that this work contributes much to our understanding of the relationship between Manet and Laure, as Laure's calm expression indicates that she and Manet share some sort of "mutual understanding," further evincing both her individuality and "charm."<sup>54</sup> Laure here is not a mere type or placeholder for a generic notion of black identity or servant-hood in nineteenth-century Paris as she may have been in *Children*. Instead, Manet is here attentive to her full identity as a black woman living in France: the artist's rendering of both her face and the two distinct elements of her costume—the headwrap and dress—compound to create an intensely specific image of a historical person. Though Honour notes that her dress and jewelry "set her in the shady social milieu of artist's models," and thus indicate little about her class within the narrative of the portrait (besides her financial need to pose for Manet at all), her outfit is actually crucial in establishing Laure's position in her temporal context. The headwrap on a black woman is a common sign in Orientalist works and usually serves as a de facto symbol of exotic "Otherness," as is evidenced by its appearance in both Feyen's and Benouville's paintings.

Yet in Manet's *Portrait*, Laure's brightly colored headwrap does not serve as a generic sign but instead denotes her specific racial and ethnic identity. The reds, greens, and golds of her headwrap serve as the only true colors in the painting, harmoniously melding into one another and creating a tonal balance with the bright white of her European dress. Moreover, the colors of this headdress could indicate Laure's affinity

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<sup>54</sup> Honour, 207.

with her country or colony of origin, as red, green, and gold were used widely in nations like Ethiopia as a color palette that indicated national sovereignty in the face of colonial oppression.<sup>55</sup> The contrast and yet harmony between the bright colors of the headwrap that could indicate her ancestry and the plain, white dress that demonstrates her place in contemporary French society situates Laure both in her current time and place at the same time that it speaks to her African roots—and, by extension, the legacy of French colonialism. In this intermixing of cultures and signs, Laure becomes an emblem of cultural hybridity and thus the modernity of nineteenth-century Paris.

As in her *Portrait*, Laure in *Olympia* is wearing a loose dress and a braided headwrap. Also as in her *Portrait*, Laure's headwrap here indicates her specific West Indian identity.<sup>56</sup> If the very fact of Laure's clothing indicates her refusal to submit to a voyeuristic, Orientalist gaze in *Olympia*, then it is also the style of the costume itself that demonstrates her hybridity and modernity. Griselda Pollock remarks that these two notions—hybridity and a decidedly un-Orientalist refusal to submit to study—are linked. Pollock notes that Laure in *Olympia* is dressed in an “overlarge, ill-fitting European dress which clothes a body which, in orientalist art, would have been both exposed and represented as the foil to the plump white woman's brilliant, and desired, flesh.”<sup>57</sup>

Pollock, as one of the few scholars who has understood Laure as an emblem of modernity

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<sup>55</sup> This color palette eventually became known as the Pan-African colors and is still used today in the national flags of many African and Caribbean countries. Though the Ethiopian flag that inspired this palette was not officially created until 1897, these colors were widely used in that country from the seventeenth-century onward. It is possible this palette spread from that nation to others that were subject to the slave trade, meaning that Laure might have been exposed to them even in the West Indies.

<sup>56</sup> See Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 21-3.

in her own right, notes, too, that Laure in *Olympia* is a “remarkable historical portrait of an Afro-Caribbean woman at work within a commodity economy.”<sup>58</sup> Pollock is here pointing out that—contrary to beliefs of Gilman and his followers—Laure’s physical features portray a specific woman. The subtle tone of her lips and the shape of her nose make clear that Manet, as he did in his *Portrait* of her, had a clear grasp of personality.

### iii. Laure, Olympia, Class, and Connection

If the key to Olympia’s modernity is in her body, as T.J. Clark suggests, then, as Pollock points out in her reference to Laure’s place in a commodity economy, such an assertion cannot then rightfully exclude Laure. Her identity, too, is written on her (costumed) body. To Pollock, Laure is Olympia’s equal, her “companion in their domestic service industry” who has been “displaced from her African home through colonial slavery and [is] now in wage slavery.”<sup>59</sup> She notes that the ill-fitting size of the dress suggests it could have come from a second hand store, perhaps a common uniform for servants.<sup>60</sup> The headwrap, especially, marks a specific ethnic identity that would have been denoted as a generic sign of the “Other” in Paris, and the snugness of the wrap on her head contrasted with the looseness of European dress indicates the hybridity—and, according to Pollock, displaced nature of Laure’s identity.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, headwraps hold an important position in the culture of the African diaspora; as art historian Helen Bradley Foster discusses, the headwrap was both a sign of slavery for nineteenth-century

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Pollock, “A Tale of Three Women,” 284 and 218.

<sup>61</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 21-22.

African-Americans and a symbol of their African ancestry and pride.<sup>62</sup> Pollock argues that Manet's use of color, too, allows Laure her humanity, presenting a complex critique of nineteenth-century ideologies at the same time that it recruits Laure into its project of modernity. Pollock notes in particular the subtle tones of the headwrap that give this works some of its "anti-Orientalist or *de-Orientalizing*" power: not a bright sign of the exotic, the muted but colorful headwrap still references Orientalist exoticism but "positions it *critically, differencing* the Orientalist politics of race, colonialism and sexuality."<sup>63</sup> Such a multivalent symbol further indicates Laure's hybridity and positions her as a modern figure. Her importance is thus parallel to Olympia's in regards to class, as they are both working-class women engaged in two different types of domestic labor for wages. Laure symbolizes—perhaps to an even greater extent than Olympia herself—the changing nature of class in modern Paris. Pollock agrees with Clark that the painting is about class, but she refines this claim to say that the work is about commodity and power, female bodies as capital, and "the sale of monetary rights to the usage of a body, of a social and gender 'other.'"<sup>64</sup> Pollock is here suggesting that perhaps the painting, through its juxtaposition of two working-class woman, draws attention to similarities between colonialism and prostitution; both prostitution and colonialism colonize and monetize the use of bodies, and give a "Self" capitalistic access to the body and services of an "Other."

Is it possible, then, to posit Olympia as a critique of such imperial continuities, between the buying and selling of bodies as "Others"? The connection between women

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<sup>62</sup> Helen Bradley Foster, "Crowning the Person," in *New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 272-315.

<sup>63</sup> Pollock, "A Tale of Three Women," 285. Emphasis in original.

<sup>64</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 35.

of colonial origin and prostitutes was clearly present in the mind of the nineteenth-century, if perhaps unconsciously. In his survey of Parisian prostitution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, social hygienist Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet made the connection explicit through allegory, remarking that prostitutes “[differ] as much in their morals, their tastes, and their habits from the society of their compatriots, as the latter differ from the nations of another hemisphere.”<sup>65</sup> The continuities of class between Olympia and Laure (one might even refer to the painting as a portrait of class solidarity) thus might be able to explain the responses of some of the Salon critics quoted above who understood Laure and Olympia as one unitary sign of racialized, classed, and degraded sexuality. Read alternatively, as an image of solidarity and continuity instead of one of disjunction, *Olympia* becomes a latent image of lesbian connection. Critics’ histrionic fear of Olympia’s sexuality as explored by T.J. Clark are perhaps cast in a new light in this analysis: the critical response reveals a fear of miscegenation and the blurring of racial hierarchies—the form of “hybridity” most feared in the nineteenth-century. As art historian Heather Dawkins found, the largest genre of pornographic photography or erotic imagery that drew censorship during this period depicted interracial lesbian scenes.<sup>66</sup> Both black women and prostitutes, according to the “science” of the time, were thought to engage often in “perverse” lesbian behavior, due perhaps to the perceived physiognomic differences or lower classes and thus amoral lifestyles of both groups.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, cultural theorist and artist Mieke Bal points out that Laure’s hand is holding the bouquet that has often been read as Olympia’s displaced

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<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990), 5.

<sup>66</sup> Referenced in Pollock, “A Tale of Three Women,” 314, n.116.

<sup>67</sup> See Gilman, 89 and 98 and Corbin, 84.



genitalia; more to the point, Laure's hand is positioned at the top corner of the triangular bouquet, in the "place where female pleasure is engendered."<sup>68</sup> Perhaps Bal sees this lust or lesbian connection evinced by the Laure's sidelong gaze towards Olympia or the subtle but sensual curling of her right pinky finger over the edge of bouquet's wrapping. To be sure, there is more elegance in Laure's visible hand than in the left hand of Olympia, likened in contemporary criticism to a "toad" due to its heavy shadows and foreshortening.<sup>69</sup> But literary critic Charles Bernheimer posits that Laure's possible lust for Olympia is in fact due to her position as a surrogate for the male viewer/voyeur, whose bouquet she dutifully delivers in "double subservience," and whose sexual gaze towards Olympia she embodies.<sup>70</sup> Bernheimer further suggests that it is this forced identification with a racial and sexual "Other" that contributes to the male anxiety over the work. In this way, *Olympia* suggests a collapsing of the Self and the Other, denying male viewers the critical, "objective" distance necessary for Orientalist objectification and forcing them into a paradigm in which their sexuality is both dismissed and figured through the "Other" they most detest.

While this last implication of Bernheimer's is indeed an appealing explanation of the critical reaction to the work that attempts to include Laure in the narrative, it unfortunately succumbs to the same line of reasoning as Gilman: that Laure serves a primarily sexual purpose. An image of class solidarity or lesbian affinity, however, need not be sexual; both Mieke Bal and Griselda Pollock propose that this image can be read

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<sup>68</sup> Mieke Bal, "His Master's Eye," in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: U of California, 1993), 379-404, 399.

<sup>69</sup> Criticism quoted in Reff, 58.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Bernheimer, "Manet's Olympia: The Figuration of a Scandal," *Poetics Today* 10:2 (Summer 1989): 255-77, 271. It should be noted this article was intended as a direct response to T.J. Clark's first article on *Olympia*.

as one of mere modern friendship instead of pseudo-erotic fantasy, perhaps falling somewhere on the “lesbian continuum” proposed by feminist theorist Adrienne Rich.<sup>71</sup> A study of female “physiology” entitled *Ces dames* by journalist Auguste-Jean-Marie Vermorel published three years before *Olympia*’s creation reflects on a white courtesan’s relationship to her servant, observing that the courtesan “shared everything” with her and “loved her dearly.”<sup>72</sup> And when the French writing duo the Goncourt brothers made notes for one of their novels, they thought to “make the prostitute’s friend a Negress,”—though in the finished book this character is a prostitute herself.<sup>73</sup> If friendships between white prostitutes and their black serving women—or co-workers, as is the case in the Goncourt novel—were indeed commonplace, latent notions of class solidarity and female companionship in Manet’s painting bubble to the surface. *Olympia* thus overturns the unspoken rule of Orientalism as posed by Pollock in her meditation on tourism that “work” and “wage relations” remain “irrelevant” to the work. Class relations instead become one of the work’s main subjects.

And yet there is most certainly a disjunction in *Olympia*, one that is impossible to ignore: Laure looks at Olympia and Olympia looks away. If the possibility of bridging racial gaps only comes from points of physical contact between different races, as suggested by art historian Rozanne Stringer, then what do we make of Laure and

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<sup>71</sup> Pollock, “A Tale of Three Women,” 302 and Bal, “His Master’s Eye,” 399-400. See also Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 23-75.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Phyllis A. Floyd, “The Puzzle of Olympia,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 3.1 (Spring 2004).

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Reff, 95.

Olympia, each seemingly isolated in a plane of their own, with no contact whatsoever?<sup>74</sup> This racial conflict is perhaps further reified by the gold border that separates the brown wall in the left background of the work from the green curtain on the right. This line runs right between Olympia and Laure, perhaps dramatizing their separation from each other. The tonal contrasts in *Olympia* that so startled the critics also seem to work to a similar effect; Zola remarked that the work contained only “two violent tints, each contending with the other.”<sup>75</sup> These tints, we presume, are light and dark, Olympia’s skin and Laure’s, “violently” clashing and contradicting each other at the same time they co-exist. *Olympia*, unlike Feytaud’s *The Childlike Kiss*, offers neither a cohesive compositional grouping to reify its ideology nor, at first glance, a subdued color palette through which to articulate its complex message on nineteenth-century race relations. As Zola’s criticism unintentionally illustrates, there is something very wrong between the women in *Olympia*, one that, through the tones and composition of the work, could read as a racialized sort of palpable distance or “violent” conflict.

But there is conflict alongside continuity in *Olympia*. In addition to the shared symbolic class of the two figures, their commonalities are represented pictorially, as the vertical figure of Laure complements the horizontal pose of Olympia and creates a visual balance that is central to the overall composition. There is also a small tonal passage in the painting that hints at the possibility of resolution: where Olympia’s right foot loses its slipper, a minuscule triangle of Laure’s pink dress peaks through the gap. For a moment,

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<sup>74</sup> See Rozanne M. Stringer, “Hybrid Zones: Representations of Race in Late Nineteenth-Century French Visual Culture,” dissertation (U of Kansas, 2011), 132-191, for her discussion of *La Toilette* by Frédéric Bazille. It is believed by some historians that Laure may have posed for Bazille in this work and others.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Fried, 588, n.190.

Laure's body shares the picture plane with Olympia's as the sharp color contrast between Olympia's somewhat sallow skin and Laure's pink dress is broken. The tips of Olympia's toes—not as firmly outlined as her shins—and the skirt of Laure's dress are nearly inseparable. The manner in which Manet has painted Laure's face makes similar, contradictory promises. Laure continually threatens to disappear entirely from the work, the dark skin of her face and hands nearly indistinguishable from the dark drapery behind her; it is only the lightness of her own European dress that allows the viewer to clearly discern her from the painting's background. Manet does not truly reconcile the harsh, light tones of Laure's dress with the subtle, dark tones of her skin. Instead, the viewer's eye must oscillate constantly between them, shuttling back and forth from one identity—signified by the European dress—to another—her face and headwrap—without rest or resolution. But Mieke Bal points out that Laure's face is “(in)visible” in the same way that Olympia's hair is not immediately recognizable as a mass over her left shoulder.<sup>76</sup> Seeing both through “seeing color” is crucial to understanding the function of the work as a modern one, presenting a disjunctive image of race relations while simultaneously offering the promise of solidarity, if one is willing to look for it.<sup>77</sup>

#### **iv. Manet and Artifice**

If in nothing else, Manet's disdain for Orientalism becomes apparent in the sheer artifice of *Olympia*. Feminist theorist Victoria P. Tillotson discusses a phenomenon in the nineteenth-century, in which the “the demand for authenticity at the heart of colonial exoticism in nineteenth-century Europe governs the production and dissemination of

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<sup>76</sup> Bal, 398-399.

<sup>77</sup> Bal, 399.

‘fakes.’”<sup>78</sup> In this sense, the importance of Orientalist “objectivity” and scientific accuracy—ranging from the details of a Gérôme painting to the scientific description of Sara Baartman’s physical attributes—actually allowed for more falsely “exotic” wares or paintings to be produced. These not only helped to further the interest of white superiority but also met a simple capitalistic demand. Manet’s work, in its foregrounding of the class standing of both Laure and Olympia, thus presents a critique of the colonizing of bodies that occur within the French capitalist economy at the same time that he questions the “authenticity” of any Orientalist project. His emphasizing of pictorial language also serves as a searing critique of the “false exoticism” of Orientalist practices: the staginess of the painting signified through the lifted (stage?) curtain in the upper left corner, Manet’s inconsistent treatment of line, the lack of depth, the jewelry that only draws further attention to Olympia’s nudity. Manet’s insistence on setting *Olympia* in a contemporary brothel—or perhaps, even more metaphysically, his very studio—further contributes to the work’s sense of purposefully stilted nature. The raised sheet on the lower left side of the work perhaps best illustrates this intention; the lifted sheet exposes not only the triangular reddish-brown of Olympia’s bed underneath but also Manet’s small signature in black. If Laure and Olympia seem isolated from each other or in irresolvable tonal conflict, Manet thus draws attention to the complete manufactured nature of their predicament, the very artifice of which criticizes the French hierarchy of race and the practice of colonialism in the process.

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<sup>78</sup> Victoria P. Tillotson, “A Materialist Feminist Reading of Jeanne Duval: Prostitution and Sexual Imperialism from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present Day,” in *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, ed. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham (New York: Routledge, 1997), 291-305, 297.

Manet's affinity for artifice also comes from his purposeful quotation of other well-known artworks. There has been much discussion of *Olympia's* restaging and subversion of the composition of iconic Old Master works like Titian's *Venus of Urbino*; some scholars, like Michael Fried, argue that it is Manet's ability to incorporate—but with a crucial difference—passages from works by Old Masters into his own paintings that truly marks him as a painter of modernity.<sup>79</sup> This assumption is no less true for Laure, whose posture and composition, like that of *Olympia*, may have been taken from a work by an artist Manet often paid tribute to: Peter Paul Rubens. A small drawing (ca. 1592-1640, fig. 8) showing a black woman in a yellow bonnet and matching dress bears a striking similarity to Laure's composition and facial expression in *Olympia*. The woman's head is tilted to her right and her gaze, fixing on something just out of frame, is directed slightly downward. Whether Manet knew this work in the nineteenth-century is unknown, but the similarities in dress and posture to those of Laure are uncanny and Manet's appreciation for the work of Rubens could have made this a likely visual source.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the elegant but modest seventeenth-century dress and the attention to the facial features of the woman in the drawing indicates that this work was also a portrait study of a person living in the Netherlands at the time of its creation. Like Laure, this

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<sup>79</sup> See Fried, 25-27.

<sup>80</sup> The British Museum now credits the drawing to a follower of Rubens instead of the Master himself, but Arthur Mayger Hind, in his Catalogue for the British Museum in 1923, attributed it to Rubens. It is likely that this would have also been the case in the nineteenth-century. See Arthur M. Hind, *Catalogue of Drawings by Dutch and Flemish Artists Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Drawings by Rubens, Van Dyck and Other Artists of the Flemish School of the XVII Century*, vol. 2 (London: British Museum, 1923), 32, n.104. Hind here refers to the work as *Head of a Negress*. Note that Hind's mention of the work is limited to its cataloguing; Manet's relationship to the drawing is purely my own conjecture, as I have yet to find a source that mentions this work with regards to *Olympia*.

woman was a historical figure and not a mere archetype. Like Laure, this woman's dress and facial expression indicate her social specificity; the dangling earring matches the string of pearls on the top of her (somewhat generalized) bonnet and her wide eyes and slight smile indicate her kindness and personality. The light catches the subtle tones of her lower lip, much as it does Laure's in *Olympia*, adding to an overall sense of human individuality.

If the composition of Laure indeed is inspired by this work, then Laure is as much a portrait of a contemporary woman as *Olympia* is one of Victorine Meurent—which is to say, she is and she isn't. If Manet's painting of Meurent was both a specific contemporary portrait and a depiction of a generalized type that serves the work's narrative of prostitution, then why has there not be a suggestion that Laure, in fact, functions the same way? Laure pulls back the "veil of idealization" on Orientalism here to the same degree; she is dressed in the style of a trope but neither adheres entirely to that trope nor shakes off completely allusions to it. She is no more a simple compositional transposition than *Olympia* is. Though her posture and mannerism may have been inspired by a work like the Rubens drawing, she is, at the same time, a different kind of woman entirely. This critique of tropes hinges as well on Manet's playful reference to the artifice of the work. Certain questions about the nature of the painting go unanswered: if *Olympia* was a common courtesan, as T.J. Clark argues, how could she afford "such an exotic servant"?<sup>81</sup> If Laure is indeed a servant in nineteenth-century Paris, she is presumably a free woman due to the abolition of slavery—but why, then, did both Salon critics and Manet himself repeatedly refer to her a "negress," a term

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<sup>81</sup> Argued by Bernheimer, 272.

that is steeped in associations with French slavery, while Zacharie Astruc's poem explicitly refers to Laure as a "slave"?<sup>82</sup> These contradictory elements render the painting incoherent unless the work is understood as an inherent critique of Orientalism and its attendant ideologies. Perhaps the clearest example of the work's artifice is the possibility, presented by Griselda Pollock, that Laure is actually not an immigrant, but a French citizen. Pollock wonders:

What would it do to our expectations of the painting to realise [sic] that a woman of African parentage was born in Paris and lived there all her life, bearing the Francophone name Laure, when perhaps most viewers imagine that this figure brings to the painting for which she modeled an otherness, an exoticism, a sexual freight, which this figure now may or may not support?<sup>83</sup>

I would like to propose that such a possibility—that Laure is in fact a French citizen and not an immigrant, that it is actually the viewer's own projection of Otherness onto her that creates a difference that does not actually exist—is crucial both to Laure's signification of modernity through a cultural hybridity and *Olympia's* functioning as a coherent painting through Orientalist critique. If Laure the model is merely dressed in the *trappings* of a trope and actually has little in common with the figure she represents, then she is more than just an "intentional comment on this popular [Orientalist] theme, a direct modernization of the pervasive motif of odalisque and slave," as suggested by art historian Anne Coffin Hanson.<sup>84</sup> She is instead a direct denial of the motif altogether, calling attention to the artifice of the entire ideological paradigm and, at the same time, asserting her individuality and autonomy. It is in this way that Laure is allowed to

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<sup>82</sup> Pollock, "A Tale of Three Women," 289 and 305. Astruc's term in the original French is "l'esclave."

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 255. Pollock has uncovered a birth certificate of an orphan named Laure with no last name, dated 19 April 1839. It is unclear whether this is in fact the same Laure but, as Pollock says, "the possibility is important."

<sup>84</sup> Hanson, 99.



collapse the notions of the “Self” and the “Other.” Rather than solely functioning as a surrogate for the male viewer as Charles Bernheimer suggests, Laure instead is both the Other and the Self, the looked at and the looker. Just as the tones of her face oscillate, making her sometimes hard to see, so too does her identity, in a style very much in keeping with the Baudelairean concept of the “modern.” There is thus no recourse to the “objective” or “scientific” observation necessary to the ideological positions of Orientalism and colonialist superiority. Much as her face comes in and out of focus in *Olympia* due to Manet’s coloring and sometimes opaque brushstrokes, Laure’s meaning shifts depending on how one looks at her.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

But how have we been looking at Laure? The critical response to her, while illustrating critics’ own anxieties about her role in modern France, reveals that there was no space for a humane or complex depiction of black women in art at this time. The caricaturists further denigrated her through racializations of her body, either by rendering her as “hideous” as one critic claimed she was or by neutering her curious power through the insistence on the servant stereotype. As Griselda Pollock notes, Laure in these caricatures “is expelled from her modernity, her presence in Paris, put back into grotesque fancy dress. In a sense she is stereotypically othered in ways which reveal the relays between blackness, dirt, sexuality, slavery, animality and a hierarchy of difference.”<sup>85</sup> Here, then, the potential of Laure to become a figure of “de-Orientalizing” power, her ability to represent not a generic exoticism but a complex web of class, race,

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<sup>85</sup> Pollock, “A Tale of Three Women,” 305.

and sexuality, has been purposefully denied. Pollock refers to the “failed legacy” of *Olympia*, as Orientalist works were produced with renewed force after the Salon of 1865.<sup>86</sup> The work itself was shown in the Exposition Universelle of 1889, a World’s Fair that also prominently featured “human zoos” displaying recreations of “African” villages, complete with human exhibits.<sup>87</sup> The irony of *Olympia*’s—and Laure’s—presence at such an event went apparently unnoticed. This work was absorbed into an art historical canon that equated blackness with subservience and primitive sexuality. Manet’s successors in modernism, artists from Paul Gauguin to Pablo Picasso found in Laure exactly what Sander Gilman posits: a figure made sexual through her very existence, regardless of the realities of her pictorial depiction.<sup>88</sup> As twenty-first-century black French activist and writer Patrick Lozès writes about the French elision of black experience: “The invisibility which afflicts the Black populations of France is itself rendered invisible....”<sup>89</sup> The “invisible” brushstrokes of Orientalist art and the unnoted biases of scientific racism are both contingent on ostensible objectivity, ideological positionings that silently make whiteness the standard against which all “Others” are measured. These tendencies have enabled racial superiority and have ultimately succeeded in omitting Laure from our gaze, in rendering her identity largely invisible from the narrative of *Olympia*.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>87</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 17. See also the work’s exhibition history listed in Cachin, 174.

<sup>88</sup> See Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits* for an extended discussion of Gauguin’s relationship to *Olympia* and primitivism. Picasso paid tribute to *Olympia* with a satirical sketch in 1901 (also entitled *Olympia*), in which he literally collapses the figures of *Olympia* and Laure into one nude, black figure from whose primitive sexuality he (in a self-portrait as an artist) is drawing aesthetic inspiration. See Gilman, 102-104 for a discussion of this work and its relationship to Picasso’s oeuvre.

<sup>89</sup> Trica Danielle, Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall, eds, *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 107.

But the historical failure to recognize Laure the icon on her own terms should not preclude us from now acknowledging the complexity of her symbolic power. One of Manet's Salon critics, Ernest Fillonneau, referred to Laure, in a throwaway comment, as "some sort of Negress."<sup>90</sup> The confusion latent in this critic's words is essential in parsing the meaning of the figure. Exactly what "sort" of figure is Laure? As Gautier wondered, what can we make of her? The importance of Laure as a figure in *Olympia*, and the key to her modernity as well as that of the work as a whole, lies in the fact that she is no "sort" of figure. She is a figure who deifies the genre of Orientalism, refuses to fit into any category of scientific or objective observation, and challenges any dichotomous barriers between "Self" and "Other." She is perhaps a working class woman, a lesbian companion, a colonial immigrant, a French citizen, an artistic construction. She bears the weight of any and all of these projections or connotations through the dense meanings figured in her face, her costume, her posture, her color. Yet many contemporary commentators, like artist Lorraine O'Grady, criticize *Olympia* for its apparent lack of black female subjectivity. O'Grady also, however, discusses multiplicity of identity as being essential to the formation of subjecthood and demands a return to the forms of modernism.<sup>91</sup> Is Laure not precisely the kind of dense and loaded symbol that O'Grady may be looking for? If T. J. Clark can argue that *Olympia* as a figure presents, through her gaze, composition, and pictorial rendering, an image of feminine agency that belongs only to her, why can Laure not be granted the same level of metaphoric interpretation?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Hamilton, 71.

<sup>91</sup> Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 174-87.

<sup>92</sup> Clark, 133.

More to the point, if Manet is now lauded for his realism, if his life-long desire as an artist was “to be himself and not someone else,” to paint what he saw as the “truth” as Zola proclaimed—if all this was so inherently part of Manet’s artistic message, why would his “truthful” depiction stop at Olympia and not encompass Laure as well, in all of her complicated contemporaneity?<sup>93</sup>

With this painting Manet, perhaps more than even he realized, picked apart the genre trappings of Orientalism and thus thoroughly critiqued French constructions of race and colonial superiority. With Laure, Manet created a new artistic form, one whose multiplicities of identity, meanings, and symbolic import have only just begun to be recognized. Perhaps more than any other work, Manet’s *Olympia* demonstrates the importance of what Pollock calls “reading for ‘the other woman,’” attempting to deconstruct the dominant racial hierarchy in order to reveal the stories of those women who have been ignored or displaced by racist patriarchal practices.<sup>94</sup> But I would like to propose that neither Laure nor Olympia is the “Other woman” in this work. The composition of *Olympia* struck a curiously dissonant chord with Manet’s contemporaries, but the balance between the verticality of Laure and the horizontality of Olympia suggests a harmonious dependence. Perhaps this dependence signifies the dependence of France proper on its colonies. Perhaps it symbolizes the dependence of the viewer on the labor economies of prostitutes and servants alike. Perhaps it is a comment on the modern need for voyeurism and the presence of an “Other” for the definition of the “Self.” Regardless of the signification, that dependence is there—between Laure and Olympia,

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<sup>93</sup> Quotations are from Honour, 165 and 207. Honour, however, believes that in *Olympia*, Laure is an Orientalist trope that prevents the work from reaching its aim of truth.

<sup>94</sup> Pollock, “A Tale of Three Women,” 305.

and between them and us. We as viewers are inextricably linked to these women; assimilated into the fabric of their reality through Olympia's gaze, yes, but also through the figure of Laure, whose identity becomes a cipher onto which we can project our desires or meanings. If, as Clark suggests, Olympia's look interpellates us as the male bourgeois client of a prostitute, then Laure's refusal to look reveals nothing, allowing her true identity to remain just out of our grasp. It cannot thus be a coincidence that Manet has placed the only exit from the claustrophobic world of *Olympia* just behind Laure's head, the sole strip of lighter green indicating the presence of a world outside the one presented by the painting. Perhaps this small indication of an exterior space suggests the possibility of a different world, one markedly different from our own perceptions of "Self" and "Other," one that only Laure has access to.

**Part II**  
**Laure in America: The**  
**Oppositional Gaze and Black**  
**Female Subjectivity in the Art of**  
**Carrie Mae Weems and Mickalene**  
**Thomas**

## I. Introduction

The question remains, however, if Laure can ever really be seen in her original context as anything other than a manifestation of negative—or, at best, profoundly ambivalent—conceptions of black femininity. For some, like artist Lorraine O’Grady, Laure is only one example in a long line of images that represents the freight of stereotypes and derogatory symbolism that black woman bear in art history:

Forget euphemisms. Forget “tonal contrast.” We know what [Laure] is meant for: she is Jezebel *and* Mammy, prostitute and female eunuch, the two-in-one. When we’re through with her inexhaustibly comforting breast, we can use her ceaselessly open cunt. And best of all, she is not a real person, only a robotic servant who is not permitted to make us feel guilty, to accuse us...<sup>95</sup>

Here O’Grady not only acknowledges Sander Gilman’s conception of Laure as an external marker of Olympia’s venal sexuality, but also compounds the ostensibly denigrating meaning of Laure’s image by conflating her with the sexless stereotype of a Mammy. O’Grady sees no humanity in Manet’s depiction of Laure; she reads the figure instead as the apogee of racist and sexist imagery of black womanhood, the paradigmatic figure who cannot escape the binaries of being foisted upon her by cultural oppressions but instead embodies them completely. O’Grady has many reasons to respond to Laure with such disgust, as the aforementioned “failed legacy” of this figure dooms her to representational purgatory. Pablo Picasso’s c. 1902 parody of *Olympia* under the same title (fig. 9) substitutes Laure for Olympia, depicting her nude on a bed in the company of the equally naked artist, who inserts himself as a Laure-like figure bearing a basket of fruit instead of a bouquet of flowers.<sup>96</sup> Picasso’s leering gaze at the Laure, whose completely nude form is angled for the viewer’s voyeuristic consumption, works not only

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<sup>95</sup> O’Grady, 175.

<sup>96</sup> See Gilman, 101-102.

as an expression of a sexualizing male gaze but also as a somewhat self-deprecating comment on the modern artist's unabashed appropriation of African forms for his art; influenced by the "primitive" forms of some African sculptures, Picasso here wittingly positions himself as a modern perpetuator of Orientalist tropes, complete with the bowl of fruit that so often demarcates "Africa" in the white Western Imaginary. Paul Gauguin's portrayal of his Tahitian child-bride in his seminal work *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (*Mana'o tupapau*) (1892, fig. 10) is also clearly indebted to Manet's *Olympia*—not only did the artist take a copy of Manet's work with him to Tahiti, but the bed in *Spirit* is also directly modeled on that of *Olympia*.<sup>97</sup> Though this work is not intended to convey the "humor" of Picasso's drawing, Gauguin's painting again positions a woman of color as an explicitly erotic figure, lying nude on her stomach in a pose that seems designed to seduce her out-of-frame lover (the artist himself). In these works, Laure has been transformed from a complex, multivalent figure to an exotic symbol of Orientalist/Modernist sexual fantasy.

I reproduce and discuss these works here not because of their "accurate" translations of Manet's Laure—I believe, in fact, that they are degrading misinterpretations—but instead to indicate the shift in context that had befallen this figure by the time that Lorraine O'Grady wrote her essay in 1992. Laure's "reputation," in many ways, precedes her. Though O'Grady rightfully recognizes that Laure cannot only be a figure for sexual consumption due to her clothed appearance in Manet's painting, her vitriolic response to the image conveys the impossibility of seeing the work in the aftermath of Modernist Primitivism. *Olympia*, at some point in the early twentieth

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<sup>97</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 21.



century, became synonymous with racist caricature—and, more to the point for O’Grady, the standard of imagery against which black female artists should attempt to represent themselves. O’Grady, after all, is interested in the possibility of “repossessing black female subjectivity” through self-referential and overtly political art.<sup>98</sup> If she perceives Laure as not “accusing” viewers because Laure does not meet our gaze and thus becomes “opaque,” she prescribes that the only solution to this ostensible passivity is for black female artists to “look back.”<sup>99</sup> Only in returning the gaze can black women transcend the marginal or liminal conditions of their bodies—exemplified for O’Grady by Laure—which are both “visible” as reflective surfaces for white beauty and “invisible” as complex, individual human beings.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, O’Grady suggests that art that returns or alters the (white, male) gaze can allow black female artists to re-center the sexuality that has been “excised” and denied them by representations such as Manet’s. As O’Grady puts it, “To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves.”<sup>101</sup> There is no more powerful avenue for self-expression than that of self-representation.

Feminist theorist bell hooks reaffirms this concept of “looking back” as a kind of “oppositional gaze,” one that both challenges the hegemonic representations of black women and creates an alternative iconography of agency.<sup>102</sup> For hooks, “There is power in looking,” a power that is undeniably linked to harnessing the gaze in order to subvert

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<sup>98</sup> O’Grady, 184.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>102</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

the viewer/viewee relationship.<sup>103</sup> For hooks, sexuality, too, is the key to alternative modes of representation and self-making:

When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects.<sup>104</sup>

hooks is here using the concept of the erotic proposed by feminist theorist and poet Audre Lorde, who defines the erotic as the “lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered,” one that centers passion and feeling over the “sensation without feeling” that Lorde equates with the pornographic.<sup>105</sup> Eroticism here is tantamount to sexuality for hooks, a means to make the Self legible and visible to Others through the body. But in theorizing the possibility of feminist intervention in dominant modes of representation, hooks also posits the need for existing points of entry in order for such a subversion to occur. Quoting feminist film theorist Annette Kuhn, hooks repeats Kuhn’s order that women seeking to undermine oppressive image models must “identify points of leverage for our own intervention: cracks and fissures through which may be captured glimpses of what in other circumstances might be possible....”<sup>106</sup> hooks, like O’Grady, sees the theorizing and representing of sexual subjectivity as paramount to the self-expression and representational cohesion of black women. And O’Grady, too, understands the value of such pressure points, referring to them as flashpoints or “provocations intense enough to lure aspects of [the black woman’s] image from the depths to the surface of the mirror.... These are places where, when enough stress is applied, the black female’s aspects can be

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>105</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 54-55.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in hooks, *Black Looks*, 77.

reinserted into the social domain.”<sup>107</sup> I would like to suggest that Manet’s Laure is such a crack, fissure, or flashpoint in the artistic representation of black women—certainly that seems the case for O’Grady, whose aforementioned distaste for the figure easily fits into the category of “intense provocation.” But there are other black female artists as well who seem indebted to—or repulsed by—the figure of Laure and reference her in their own art in order to reify or constitute their identities. For photographer Carrie Mae Weems and photographer/painter Mickalene Thomas, Laure is a figure who emerges as both an emblem of the exclusionary canon of art history and a site unto which they can project their own artistic or personal identities. Laure in the work of Weems and Thomas is being worked through, pressured, and transformed in a way that runs utterly counter to the sexualized gaze of Picasso or Gauguin. In utilizing Laure as a site of opposition or counter-representation, Weems and Thomas attempt to reclaim black female subjectivity in ways that challenge hegemonic notions of objectivity, identity, visibility, gender, race, and the Self/Other dichotomy.

And yet I cannot completely ignore my own disagreement with O’Grady’s reading of Laure as an inherently negative or caricatured figure. bell hooks, in her essay, “Naked Without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic,” reiterates much of what O’Grady asserts when she states not only that black women have almost always been portrayed as “mammies, whores, or sluts” but that representations of black female bodies have also consistently shown them as “de-aestheticized and de-eroticized” due to the

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<sup>107</sup> O’Grady, 185. O’Grady here is expanding upon the concept of “flashpoints” theorized by psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose.

history of colonization.<sup>108</sup> I believe that it is due to this violent history of American slavery and the perniciousness of the stereotypes of both the Mammy figure and the “exotic” seductress that O’Grady responds with such disdain or ambivalence to the figure of Laure. Laure, indeed, on her surface seems to embody the characteristics of the American Mammy; critical race theorist and feminist Kimberly Wallace-Sanders states that the archetypal Mammy may be a “cook or personal maid to her mistress” and that “her clothes are typical of a domestic servant, headscarf and apron, but she is especially attracted to brightly colored, elaborately tied scarves.”<sup>109</sup> Though this physical description seems to suit Laure’s clothes, Wallace-Sanders also notes that the Mammy’s body is “grotesquely marked by excess,” a feature that is emphatically missing from Manet’s depiction of Laure. As I stated before, the “grotesqueness” of Laure’s body was not present in *Olympia* but only inserted later by French caricaturists (see figs. 2). But it may in fact be these caricatures that O’Grady finds herself responding to; these caricatures also project the same exaggerated sexuality—the “Jezebel” or Hottentot quality—onto the body of Laure that Sander Gilman perceives. Indeed, these caricatures cruelly misrepresent Laure such that they reflect precisely the synthesis of “Jezebel *and* Mammy” to which O’Grady refers. Because the experience of living as a black woman in America is perpetually marred by the cultural and representational legacy of slavery—by the expectations that black women embody simultaneously these two equally derogatory

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<sup>108</sup> bell hooks, “Naked Without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic,” in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge: MIT, 1998), 65-73, 67.

<sup>109</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, “The Body of a Myth: Embodying the Mammy Figure in Visual Culture,” in *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, ed. Barbara Thompson, (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in Association with U of Washington, 2008), 163-179, 164.

tropes—and because Laure ostensibly uncritically reflects these clichés, these artists are prevented from seeing her as I see her, prevented from exploring how Laure in fact may be connected to issues of labor, class, solidarity, and imperialism. If these three artists see the body of Laure as a “site of conquest in all efforts of colonization,” as hooks states, then I see her as a criticism of that very practice of colonization.

Perhaps it is because of the pervasive nature of these stereotypes that Weems and Thomas attempt not to position Laure outside of this traumatic caricature but instead choose to critically explore the facets of those two extreme characterizations. Perhaps in the reading of *Olympia* that Weems and Thomas enact, Laure is a colonized figure whose clothes actually indicate the “exaggerated displays of modesty” and “repression of the erotic” discussed by hooks instead of the implicitly lesbian figure that I see whose eroticism is embedded in her relationship with Olympia.<sup>110</sup> If O’Grady sees Laure as a servant whose breasts have been denied their sensuality and instead have been replaced with flowers as a demonstration of Mammy-like devotion to her mistress, then I see her as a woman whose eroticism is not repressed but subtly apparent in the delicate shine of her lip, the elegant curl of her fingers around the edge of the bouquet’s paper, and the unreadable (desiring? apprehensive?) gaze at her companion. But Weems and Thomas respond to and refigure Laure differently from O’Grady and from each other. Weems interprets Laure as a “Mammy” and attempts to insert a sexuality of the self into a figure she understands as sexless, while Thomas perceives her sexuality and refigures her as a “Jezebel” in order to reclaim that sexuality and identity. Though the themes of both artist’s appear similar, the differences in their interpretations are crucial. In the pages that

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<sup>110</sup> hooks, “Naked Without Shame,” 68.

follow, I would like create a space that both interrogates the successful ways in which Weems and Thomas use Laure as a fissure through which to assert their own sexual subjectivities, and posits that their works do, in fact, fundamentally misread Laure. It is my hope that both my reading and these artists' readings can exist in a space of mutual respect and active engagement, even as we disagree on points of symbolic, but major, significance.

## **II. Carrie Mae Weems Refuses to be “Manet’s Type”**

If Orientalism was the “objective” genre of the nineteenth-century, through which the authority and superiority of white imperialists over colonized peoples could be justified by the ostensible clarity of style and medium, then the medium of photography was tantamount to the “reality” of life itself. Photography, at the time of its invention, was considered so life-like and objectively documentary that it caused a brief crisis in the conception and function of artistic representation, since photography seemed to end the need for “subjective” modes of representation like painting. Photographers have long since used the pretension of objectivity to their advantage in order to create work that is subversive or autobiographical; photography is thus a fecund medium for the reinscription or refashioning of historically marginalized black subjectivities.<sup>111</sup> Carrie Mae Weems is no exception. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall and curator and photographer Mark Sealy note, Weems’s work consistently undermines “some of the assumptions underlying the documentary form.”<sup>112</sup> Weems consistently utilizes narrative

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<sup>111</sup> See Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different: A Historical Context* (London: Phaidon, 2001).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

text in conjunction with her photographs, which serves to impose her authorial voice onto an otherwise seemingly “objective” image. Her innovative series *From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried* (1995-1996) gleams its poignancy from the juxtaposition of pseudo-scientific daguerreotypes of American slaves and African subjects with poetic text Weems etched onto the glass frames of the images. Weems, through the intervention of text that sympathizes with the black photographic subjects, purposefully subverts the supposed authority of these images—and, by extension, the evidentiary role they played in “legitimizing” racism for whites who subscribed to theories of physiognomy.

It is clear then that Weems (much like Manet) is invested in questioning the objectivity of her medium. Yet Weems chooses to align herself against Manet in order to constitute her identity and subjectivity in her series, *Not Manet’s Type* (1997, fig. 11). This series of five photographs depicts Weems as a reflection in her bedroom in varying poses and states of undress. Below the photographs are Weems’s meditations on her place in the canon of art history as a black woman who is simultaneously a subject and an artist, an Other and a Self: “Standing on shakey [sic] ground I posed myself for critical study but was no longer certain of the questions to ask / It was clear that I was not Manet’s type, Picasso—who had a way with women—only used me & Duchamp never even considered me.” Weems is here self-consciously placing herself among the canon of three white masters of modernism by linguistically replacing the black models these masters used (or didn’t use, in the case of Duchamp) with her physical and ideological self. She makes herself synonymous with these past models in order to emphasize continuities in the art historical representation of black women, even as the assumption of that identity enacts an agency that works to subvert the authority of these masters.

Weems, too, is playing with the notion of looking/gazing in the composition of these photos, as the viewer sees Weems in her bedroom only through a large mirror on her dresser. Though this artistic choice contributes to a strong sense of voyeurism to the work, it also makes the viewer complicit in the objectification of Weems, who notably does not return our refracted gaze—she does not look in the mirror to look at either herself or us. Instead, Weems has here used the mirror to indicate her difficult reflections on the larger themes of image making and representation; does she avoid gazing at the mirror because she does not yet know how to (re)present herself or reclaim her subjectivity? The work thus exposes, in the words of artist Deborah Willis, Weems’s “vulnerability as she attempts to empower her image” and her difficulty in representing herself without invoking the long legacy of images created by white modernists that always already precedes her.<sup>113</sup> In showing only her reflection, Weems thus brilliantly literalizes the visible/invisible dichotomy that plagues the images of black women: she is visible, but only as a reflection, her visual presence in the mirror always predicated on her physical absence from the “real” foreground of the composition. In this way, she further draws attention to the constructed nature of these photographs, refuting the objectivity of the medium by her insistence on what art historian Robert Storr calls her “theatrical” “mise-en-scene” photography.<sup>114</sup> Much in the way that the obvious artifice of Manet’s *Olympia* called attention to the falsity of Laure’s figural type, the disorienting composition of Weems’s series draws connections to the artificial poses of previous black muses at the same time that it asserts her subjectivity by underscoring her artistry.

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<sup>113</sup> Kathryn E. Delmez, ed., *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2012), 37.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 28.



Laure is absent here, but her presence is deeply felt; she is, apparently, Manet's "type." Though Weems never clarifies what "type" of woman she believes Laure to be, it is clear that she is deeply conflicted: on the one hand, Weems implicitly reveals that she associates Laure with the only type of woman the figure could be seen to ostensibly embody—a sexless Mammy or a servant, but on the other the presence of Weems's own nude body seems to state that the image type she is responding to is one of sexualized, Orientalized exoticism. By choosing to appear both nude and clothed in alternating images, Weems answers the call of hooks and O'Grady in an attempt to theorize a subjectivity of black female sexuality, or the "liberatory body politics" that hooks proposes.<sup>115</sup> Yet the body here is much like Laure's—more like Laure's than Weems would perhaps admit. Not only does Weems, like Laure, not return the gaze of the viewer, but her body is also not angled towards the viewer or presented for easy, sexualized consumption, much like the clothed and obscured body of Laure. Weems faces away from the mirror—and thus the viewer—in the first two photographs, as if she cannot bear to subject her body to further examination. Though she faces the mirror in the third and fourth images, her eyes are closed and her pose uncomfortable as she first sits on the floor and then upright on the bed. But the last photograph in the series shows Weems lying completely nude on the bed gazing not away from or towards the mirror but instead at the ceiling in a relaxed pose that seems to indicate not only her comfortableness with her own nudity but also her freedom from the paradigm of harmful image types. Just as the text from the previous image has Weems "hop[ing] that there were other models by which to live," the text of the last image suggests that the artist

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<sup>115</sup> hooks, "Naked Without Shame," 73.

found such a model in Frida Kahlo “who painted incessantly—beautifully while Diego scaled the scaffolds to the very top of the world.”

In both the figural pose and the text, Weems here hints that she has found an alternative space for what bell hooks calls the “possibility of agency” even within the Foucauldian dominant relations of power: Weems can explore and express her subjectivity because she utilizes her body and her art as a site of resistance.<sup>116</sup> It is telling that Weems is neither gazing towards nor directly away from the mirror but instead at the ceiling as if to make physical a parallel plane of alternative image making—she has chosen not to follow either the path of the ambitious white modernist or the oppressive legacy of their black muses, but instead takes as her model another artist of color, Kahlo, whose work she sees as entirely self-determined. Aligning her nude form with a plane in opposition to the voyeuristic viewer indicates that the artist has come into herself and reclaimed her body. Weems also gives us more physical signs of her hope and eventual release from a history of toxic representation, as the dresser, whose mirrors frames each image, is in the last image completely unencumbered by either the closed box or perfume bottles and bouquets that crowd it in the preceding photographs; Weems is free of baggage in this final image. Moreover, the curtain on the window behind Weems’s bed saturates the room with light in this final image, symbolizing her enlightenment and suggesting an escape from the otherwise hermetic space of her bedroom—and, by extension, any space in which black women are subject to hegemonic representational fantasies. If Weems’s tactics of “intervention and appropriation” do indeed “give voice to the disempowered subjects,” as curator Kathryn E. Delmez states, then Weems has here

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<sup>116</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

intervened in the legacy of Laure in order to empower herself, to make Self what has been historically Othered, to make her presence bodily in a way that refutes its history of invisibility.<sup>117</sup> O’Grady Laure’s accoutrements—the constructed bedroom, the bouquets, the suggestion of an exit—are given a different meaning in Weems’s photographs; if Weems is not “Manet’s type” of woman, she implies it is because she is no “type” of woman and must forge forward in this new mode of “naming herself” without the net of historical precedent to catch her.

Yet there is an inherent paradox at the heart of Weems’s series, one that only becomes evident after the aforementioned historical precedent is called into question. *Not Manet’s Type* functions as a searing critique of the art historical canon—here invoked by the names of four “Masters”—but it can only do so if the canon that Weems positions herself so adamantly against is a monolith of representation. That is to say, the critique that Weems’s piece posits can only be effective if all of the works she invokes through the naming of these canonical Masters negatively portray black women. The form of the series itself intends to convey the repetitive and static nature of these representations, with the text that names and refers to the white artists remaining effectively the same in appearance across the series, while the self-portraits of Weems vary from one work to the next. Weems is here trying to invert the traditional art historical status quo through equating the world of the white, male Masters with the visually uninteresting and unoriginal at the same moment that she aligns herself with the creative, the visual, and the feminine. But in doing so, Weems flattens out the dialogue between herself and these artists into a simplistic binary of figural forms and iconography, one that literally

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 4.

“typifies” Manet’s Laure. Furthermore, Weems is attempting to insert the sexual subjectivity she perceives is missing from the image of Laure in Manet’s painting through the use of her own nude body; in this way, the artist is apparently deciding that Laure is an emblem of the sexless Mammy. Yet, Weems then swiftly refers to Picasso in the same text—the very artist whose caricature of Olympia employs the trope of the black, sexual Jezebel. Weems is thus conflating the two stereotypes of black female representation in the figure of Laure without differentiating between the representational modes of these two canonical artists or clarifying which figure she is responding to: does her understanding of Laure come from Manet’s figure or Picasso’s? The title of the piece, *Not Manet’s Type*, thus reveals that Weems has presumed the function of Laure as a symbolic figure before peremptorily dismissing her. Though she attempts to summarily reject all of art history’s exploitative representations of black women by implying what they are compared to what she is emphatically *not*, Weems unintentionally aligns herself with the canon by yet again misreading Laure. And though Weems borrows many motifs from Manet and represents herself in ways that borrow directly from his images, Laure is here again understood as a mere caricature against which “real” representations of black womanhood must be opposed—even as the image of Laure Weems tries to evoke blurs as soon as it is invoked.

### **III. Mickalene Thomas and Parodic Sexuality**

The work of Mickalene Thomas has qualities in common with that of Carrie Mae Weems, though the former artist works primarily in painting instead of photography. Her photographs, which set modern-day black women in the costumes and settings of the

American 1970s, work to convey the artifice of their constructions much like those of Weems (and Manet); though Thomas states that she wants models to pose like themselves, she also sets them in purposefully elaborate and intensely nostalgic settings that seek to substitute the living rooms of working class black families in the mid-twentieth century for the studios of pre-or proto- modern French painters in the late nineteenth-century.<sup>118</sup> In working with settings of such obvious construction (in her painting, construction is both the message of the work and its technique, as works sometimes have elements of mixed media collage), Thomas thus intervenes in the apparently ubiquitous world of the late nineteenth-century in order to call its artistic “authenticity” into question. By paying overt homage to French masters in the composition of her works, the artist makes these two settings—that of 1970s black America and that of 1860s white Paris—analogue, suggesting that the nostalgic world of her childhood should be as valued historically as that of nineteenth-century Paris.

Because *Tamika sur une chaise longue* (2008, fig. 12) is a photograph it does not have any of the elements of collage common to Thomas’s painting, but the artist’s indebtedness to the world of Manet is clear; not only does the photograph’s intermixing of bright cloth patterns function similarly to Manet’s flat planes of color, but also the use of French for the work’s title explicitly invokes the period considered by some as a high point of art historical canon. Thomas’s works, like this one, often include French phrases in conjunction with names of African or African-American origin. Moreover, Thomas suggests that this literal “naming” of oneself comes from her childhood investment in the postcolonial reclamation of African heritage contemporaneous with the Black Pride

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<sup>118</sup> Mickalene Thomas, *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, Lisa Melandri ed. (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012), 22.

movements of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>119</sup> In so doing, Thomas (re) inserts and appropriates the language of traditional art history in order to construct a black female subjectivity marginalized or excluded from such a canon. Thus, Tamika reclining eloquently in the pose of a traditional nude puts her in conversation with Olympia and Laure at the same moment that it allows her to retain her own subjecthood; set among the trappings of twentieth-century black popular culture design, Laure is not translated into Thomas's work, but instead given a unique identity through a form of resignification that speaks simultaneously to her colonial origins and new, postcolonial reappropriations. Thomas thus unknowingly reframes the cultural hybridity that it is at the center of Laure's symbolic significance; much as Tamika here is depicted with elements of both African-American identity and French art history, Laure is figured with both a loose fitting French dress and an Afro-Caribbean headdress—one whose cloth shares the colorful qualities of Thomas's clashing fabric motifs. Hybridity is thus crucial to both Laure and Tamika's iconographic significance.

If this work and others by Thomas (like her riff on Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* from 2010) seem like parodies of works by modern masters, it is because they share in part the spirit of parody which seeks to find truth in formal mimicry. As Sander Gilman reflects on the work of yet another African-American artist, Kara Walker, "Parody can do more than merely highlight; it can provide an alternate reading of those persistent cultural images that float about in our conscious and that, for good, or for ill, as

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 29.

subject or as object, constitute our construction of our worlds.”<sup>120</sup> But unlike Carrie Mae Weems, who uses Manet’s work as a springboard for the explicit critique of art history in order to better see herself, Thomas indicates some interest in the humanity of Laure and pays homage to both her and Manet’s original work. Thomas’s parodic images of Manet attempt to propose an alternate reading of his paintings at the same time that they also acknowledge the value of these historical works. According to art historian Denise Murrell—another scholar interested in the rethinking and reclamation of Laure from the annals of art history—Thomas’s paintings like *Qusuquzah, Une Très Belle Nègresse #2* (2012) “extend a small and under-historicized body of work by foundational modernist masters—portraits of black women that, within the context of their periods, can be seen as modernizing portrayals of their subjects’ complex humanity.”<sup>121</sup> The French descriptor of *Qusuquzah* is, of course, the word-for-word phrase Manet used to describe Laure the model in his notebook, here serving an ambivalent marker that both skewers the Orientalizing tendencies of the white French masters and pays tribute to the specificity of the French words to describe a beauty that is uniquely black and female in its identity and origin. To Thomas, Manet’s work is not merely that of an art historical Master against which she must assert herself, but instead a complex and humane oeuvre whose symbolism and iconography is vacillating and ambiguous.

*Tamika*, too, occupies this multivalent space in which parody is both tribute and subversive self-fashioning. *Tamika*—whose breasts are exposed and whose open pose suggests an accessible sexuality reminiscent of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*—is, at first

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<sup>120</sup> Sander L. Gilman, “Confessions of an Academic Pornographer,” in *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, by Kara Walker, Philippe Vergne, ed. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 27-35, 30.

<sup>121</sup> Thomas, 21.

glance, similar to both Gauguin's and Picasso's substitution of Laure for Olympia in their sexually explicit and objectifying works. But the figure in fact exemplifies Thomas's own attempts to reclaim black female subjectivity and sexuality in spite of such a legacy. Tamika's forthright look out towards the viewer rivals that of Olympia herself in its tenacity, and she is presented to us as an embodiment of the oppositional gaze; the triangular shape her left arm makes resting on her corresponding knee suggests a formal stability and power the corroborates such a gaze. Moreover, her unsmiling mouth and flexed left foot convey an authority and strength missing from the pose of Titian's Venus. Even as Thomas presents her model as relaxed with her head resting leisurely against the chaise, she positions Tamika not as a sex object but a "sexual subject," to borrow a phrase from hooks.<sup>122</sup> Thomas, in fact, depicts Tamika much as Manet portrays Laure: as a portrait, not a figural type, who has her own inscrutable inner life. Kara Walker commented on what she saw as the "complex sexuality" of Thomas's women by stating these works, through the "pride and resistance" of their models, move away from the stereotypes of their compositional referents and instead "spiral inward" to deliver a "promise of womanist agency."<sup>123</sup> The bouquet in Tamika's right hand—a clear reference to the bouquet Laure offered to Olympia, often thought to be a offer of affection from a suitor—is not hold adoringly aloft, but is shown slipping out of Tamika's hand onto the floor. If these flowers are, too, intended to be a missive of love from a lover beyond the frame of the photograph, then Tamika could not care less about them, and choses instead to focus on the viewer with an assertive yet reflective gaze.

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<sup>122</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 77.

<sup>123</sup> Kara Walker, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB Magazine* Spring 2009, <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/3269/>>.



Just as the focal point of Olympia's stare is a question left unanswered, so too does the recipient of Tamika's gaze remain a mystery. But it is interesting to conceive of Thomas herself as the object of that seductive but standoffish gaze. Thomas, who identifies openly as a lesbian, creates work that implicitly grapples with notions of lesbian desire; all of her images of women are centered on physical beauty and black female embodiment/empowerment. Thus, Thomas, unlike Weems who often takes herself as the subject of her works, reclaims her sexuality and subjectivity through the articulation not of her physical self but instead of objects of her sexual or erotic desire. Women like Tamika who populate Thomas's work are thus Selves and Others, the desirers and the desired, the lookers and the looked at. The sexual subjecthood on display in Thomas's work again contends with the notion of a "present absence" or "visible invisibility" that afflicts the representations of many black women; Thomas herself is physically absent from most of her work yet her presence is felt through the composition and design of her artistic vision. These erotic portraits constitute her authorial voice and Self even as the oppositional gaze of her subjects Others her, always hovering just outside the frame. Instead of re-enacting the traditional power dynamic of the possessor and possessed common to the art historical canon by subjecting models to an objectifying gaze, Thomas's work attempts to upend such a power balance. In the words of Walker, "A formerly exploitative gaze—Manet's *Olympia*, Matisse's odalisques—becomes the frame for a kind of post-womanist self-consciousness."<sup>124</sup> The ambivalent relationship to such models as Laure is further implied by Thomas's repeated use of her mother as a sexual and erotic subject of portraiture. If Laure for O'Grady represented the negative

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

conflation of the stereotypes of both “Jezebel and Mammy,” then the maternal figure in Thomas’s work is positively returned to the sexuality from which she had historically been “excised”—a marked difference to the Mammy stereotype than that of Weems, who responds to the “type” with derision and contempt.<sup>125</sup> This, too, is a way for Thomas to explore her own sexuality through mediation; she notes not only that photographing her mother marked the shift in her work towards black female portraiture, but also that her mother is “much sexier than I am.”<sup>126</sup>

Sexual and bodily vulnerability—like that expressed in Weems’s photographic series—becomes the intimate language through which Thomas can communicate with her mother and express herself, subverting the traditional stereotyped view of “de-eroticized” (to use hook’s phrase) black maternity embodied by the Mammy.<sup>127</sup> Thomas’s expression of bodily and erotic connection with her mother recalls a passage in Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* in which Lorde recalls a daydream she had of her mother “looking down on me lying on the couch, and then, slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places.”<sup>128</sup> Lorde—who, like Thomas, identified as a black lesbian—touches on her erotic connection with her mother throughout her “biomythography” in order to not only explore the concept of the “erotic” that she theorized but also attempt to understand her mother as an erotic being. Moreover, Lorde implies that the pain she feels being separated from her mother comes from the ultimate

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<sup>125</sup> O’Grady, 175-76. O’Grady here uses Judy Chicago’s refusal to symbolically depict Sojourner Truth’s vagina in the artist’s landmark work *The Dinner Party* (1973-78) as an example of the ways in which white women have ignored the sexuality of black mothers.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas, 28 and 10, respectively.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas, 28.

<sup>128</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley: Crossing Press), 1982, 78.

split between mother and the daughter: the biological source of the Self becoming finally, irreversibly Othered at birth.

Much like the work of Weems, Thomas's art takes as its formal model and subject matter the familiar genres and archetypes of art history only to call attention to what has been missing from them. "Looking back" for Thomas often means allowing a model to look back for her, blurring the lines between the Self and the Other in radically new ways. Like Weems, Thomas is invested in exploring Lorde's concept of the erotic. It is this concept that bell hooks references when she laments the "repression of the erotic" so prevalent in representations of black women, and it is perhaps this understanding of *Olympia* as pornographic that unsettles Weems and O'Grady. Indeed, it is the purposeful lack of eroticism on the part of Olympia herself that confounded nineteenth-century critics, who were more accustomed to Orientalist images rife with soft and ostensibly "erotic" and "exotic" women. But for Thomas, the Mammy and the sexed or erotic body coexist, and it is perhaps this belief that allows her to move past the reading of Laure as a caricature; O'Grady's indictment of Laure as both Mammy and Jezebel is here synthesized into a positive and complex portrait. Unlike Weems's series, Thomas's *Tamika* does not reject the notion of Laure outright but instead seeks to refigure and remold her. This symbolic reshaping does not, I believe, stem from a disdain for the work of Manet or an understanding of Laure as a type, but instead from a desire to re-place her in a specifically African-American context. Thomas—who, upon viewing Manet's *Portrait of Laure*, noted the "engagingly direct gaze through which Manet linked Laure and the viewer"—seems to see Laure as a complex and erotic figure.<sup>129</sup> Perhaps she even

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas, 22.

read Laure's gaze in Manet's *Portrait* as a different yet equally oppositional one. And though Kara Walker called Manet's work "exploitative," it is unclear if Thomas shares that opinion, as *Tamika* is a parody that does not seek to reject the figure of Laure but instead places her within an explicitly sexual and erotic context. Perhaps Thomas even sees and identifies with a certain implicit lesbian sexuality in the figure of Laure and it is perhaps for this reason she is transmuted into *Tamika*, a womanist figure of maternal seduction.

Yet Mickalene Thomas's insistence on representing the explicitly sexuality form of *Tamika*, and, by extension Laure, can perhaps be understood as a misreading in its own right. Though both bell hooks and Lorraine O'Grady originally insist on sexuality and representations of the naked black female form as the ultimate avenue to agency and liberation, O'Grady later somewhat amends her stance on the matter. She writes in a postscript to her essay, that sex is "just one center among many" for black Americans, and warns against using sexuality as the organizing principle around which a monolithic notion of the Self can be constructed.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, to state that it is only through the naked female form that female artists can express themselves begs the reiteration of Audre's Lorde's assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>131</sup> Constantly representing the black female body as naked—whether she is purposefully sexualized or not—can further reinscribe the black female body as inherently sexual. In attempting to circumvent the perceived "licentiousness" of the black female body, further representations, may, in fact, recapitulate it. If Thomas implies that she is the viewer and the recipient of *Tamika*'s gaze, then she is also, in some ways, positioning *Tamika* as an

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<sup>130</sup> O'Grady, 182.

<sup>131</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

object, with Thomas herself as the adoring yet removed artistic Master. Indeed, if *Tamika* serves partially as a parody of Manet even in its attempt to subvert the gendered Master/model relationship of the art historical canon by replacing it with one of lesbian sexuality and eroticism, then this move partially fails. Subversion is sometimes perilously close to substitution, and Thomas's (objectifying?) gaze is felt even, or especially, in the absence of her own female body.

For Audre Lorde, difference has to be recognized, in both the understanding of identitarian privileges and the practice of self-representation. And though both Weems and Thomas seek to represent an "erotic" Self/Other in keeping with Lorde's theory, their reliance on a sex as an assertion of self-expression may elide much of the non-sexual purpose of the erotic. Lorde notes that the erotic can be sexual, but isn't *only* about sexuality or sexual self-expression; instead, it is:

...a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.<sup>132</sup>

Lorde also examines the erotic as satisfaction in work, in sharing your feelings with others, and in critical self-reflection. In fact, the work of Weems and Thomas achieve all of these latter criteria. And yet, their reliance on the black female form as a sexual one—in either Weems's defiant response to the Jezebel or Hottentot trope or in Thomas's parodic accommodation of it—can have a limited and limiting scope, an eroticism whose power comes too deeply from an Other instead of a Self, a viewer instead of a "sense of internal satisfaction" or a series of alternate "centers." It may be, however, that there are

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<sup>132</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 54.

not yet tools that exist outside of the “master’s house” for black female artists, mired as we all are still in the traumatic legacy of American slavery, international imperialism, and institutional racism and sexism. The tools of the Other or master may in fact be the only language with which these artists can make their Selves legible and visible. Any assertion of subjectivity and agency must, in some way, reference the Othering the Self has been forced to undergo due to systemic oppression. And if Laure is not legible to Thomas or Weems as a multivalent black woman, then perhaps it is because she herself can be seen as a “master’s tool”; for these artists, perhaps Laure fails to capture the complexity of black women’s identities and experiences by virtue of the fact that Manet painted her. Perhaps for these artists, any representation of a black female body that comes from a white subject position is always already colonized, to paraphrase Lorraine O’Grady.<sup>133</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion: What Is It I Think I’m Doing Anyhow?<sup>134</sup>**

This final issue—of whether a white male artist can create a complex, valid, or human depiction of a black woman—has been one that has personally troubled me throughout my working on this project. In fact, I have been wracked with doubt and guilt over what place I have to write this thesis at all. Griselda Pollock, in the introduction to her essay *Avant-Garde Gambits*, reflects that it is her very whiteness which gives her interrogations of race and gender their importance; whiteness, she notes, is an unmarked and “invisible” category of Selfhood in a society where Otherness is synonymous with

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>134</sup> See O’Grady, 186, n.26 for the history and reinterpretation of this phrase. My alteration of the original title of Toni Cade Bambara’s autobiographical essay is meant to be a self-critique that questions my right to use this phrase at all.

the “markedness” of color.<sup>135</sup> By calling attention to her own whiteness (i.e. her own racial category), she reasons, she is destabilizing it and refuting the authoritarian “objectivity” that so often goes along with such a subject position. Instead of setting herself apart from racism, she acknowledges her complicity in it as a white Westerner growing up in South Africa during apartheid. Quoting African-American artist Adrian Piper, who states that racism is not *her* problem as a person of color but is everyone’s problem as racialized subjects, Pollock asks herself “what am *I* going to do about it?”<sup>136</sup> The answer is the work of her art history, in which she uses her privilege in order to interrogate the ways in which the art of some Post-Impressionist painters (that of Gauguin in particular) perpetuates racist and sexist visual and thematic tropes.

I would like to attempt a similar self-critique and call attention to my own whiteness with regards to the arguments of this project. I have struggled constantly with how to best mobilize or justify my theory of Laure as more than a mere extension of Orientalist tropes. I have no desire to in any way delegitimize the thoughts or feelings of those artists like Lorraine O’Grady and Carrie Mae Weems who see Laure as only a slightly more insidious Hottentot, or those of Mickalene Thomas who needs to make Laure’s sexuality explicit and accessible for (lesbian) consumption. And yet I cannot help but feel differently than they about the figure of Laure. She is more than that to me; whether or not this is because of my experiences of being white in a culture of white supremacy that seeks to defend the “genius” of the white male artist through any means necessary, I do not know. I think this latter reason is a (frankly unflattering and uncomfortable) possibility. But I also think that intentions of Manet—and the woman

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<sup>135</sup> Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 8-12.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

who posed for him—deserve more investigation than the extant historical record allows for. I also realize that many of my arguments ostensibly arise from theoretical interest, since I never have and never will have the life experiences of a black woman. The traumas of slavery, imperialism, and racism can never affect me as they could affect O’Grady, Thomas, and Weems; the Hottentot and Mammy are not reflected back to me as painfully cruel and distorted images of my body as they are for these other artists.

But I also wrote this paper—and, more metaphysically, am currently writing this section—as an attempt to call my practice of feminism into question. It would have been easy for me to take as the topic for my thesis a white female artist and investigate the terms and possibility of her empowerment with regards to the art historical canon of white female figures, to see my identity positionings and privileges reflected back to me in a comfortable and uncritical way. But I have to ask myself the same question Griselda Pollock poses, with a slight inversion: how am I going to use my privilege to make feminist art history intersectional? How am I going to interpret the figures of color that have been designed for (my) white consumption and how am I going to interpret the figures of color who have been created to criticize that white consumption? This essay has been my attempted (and admittedly flawed) response to those personal questions.

And yet I feel that the self-critique cannot stop there. Adrian Piper, though concerned about the complicity of every person in structural systems of racism and oppression, has also expressed her deep ambivalence about identity politics on the whole. She wrote, “Whenever someone deflects attention from my work to my identity as a CWA [Colored Woman Artist], I start to get nervous about whether they are actually



seeing my work at all.”<sup>137</sup> This statement is indicative of Piper’s further expressed worry that the very category of “People of Color” flattens out difference and in fact merely perpetuates the self-same dichotomy of (White) Self versus (Not-White) Other that the politically conscious term attempts to circumvent.<sup>138</sup> I feel it necessary here to again to raise the question of my own participation in these practices. Have I, through the very writing and designing of this project, presumed that experiences of black womanhood are monolithic or unitary in nature? Am I not “seeing at all” the work of Weems and Thomas because of my preoccupation with their assumed categories of identity—again capitulating to a white supremacist society in which color is “marked” as race and all the artistic production of black women is then preemptively understood as being a form of self-expression that is assumed to relate directly to constructed identities of gender and race? If this is indeed the case, what does it mean that I cannot “see” when Weems or Thomas or hooks or O’Grady attempt to “look back” at me?

Even calling attention to my whiteness in this way may, in fact, work contrary to Pollock’s intentions in order to reaffirm and recapitulate racial hierarchies. John P. Bowles, in the introduction to his book on Piper, also meditates on his own whiteness and the negative effects of such attempts at self-awareness. He remarks:

... simply proclaiming one’s whiteness cannot resolve racial inequality; to claim whiteness for oneself unproblematically is to make a statement of value reiterating established hierarchies of race privilege.... I am faced with a paradox, therefore: to identify as “white” is to risk declaring who I think I am and who I am certain I am not. ... However, it is also clear that to refuse to acknowledge whiteness is tantamount to claiming it, as if I believe I have somehow transcended

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<sup>137</sup>Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Selected Writings, Vol. 2* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996), 161-173, 166.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 161, n.1.

race (unlike the racialized subjects I study). . . . I am responsible for my course but must admit that the way forward is not entirely clear.<sup>139</sup>

Bowles goes on to say imply that Pollock's tactic of merely acknowledging her own whiteness is not sufficient; instead, we all must interrogate and deconstruct what we think whiteness or blackness means, accepting instead the social constructedness or "fabrication" of race that we all enact every day.<sup>140</sup> Bowles here quotes postcolonial and critical race theorist Franz Fanon who said, "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other."<sup>141</sup>

I am largely in agreement with Bowles, but like him, I am somewhat at a loss of how to convert this theory of deconstruction into praxis. Moreover, I am struck by Fanon's seemingly simple phrase, which contains therein the complexity of the postmodern attempt to deconstruct identity categories. It also, to me, suggests the futility in the reclamation of subjectivity, hinting at the dark antithesis of O'Grady's belief that "self-expression is not a stage that can be bypassed."<sup>142</sup> If speaking is always limits one to the language of the Other, how can a black Self be posited or (re)claimed? Is every attempt fated, like the works of Weems and Thomas, to oscillate between subversion and recapitulation? Is even possible for the oppositional gaze to create an alternative space within of the confines of the current structures of kyriarchical domination? Is the rethinking or "salvaging" of Laure by white art historians like myself always doomed to fail because of the context in which she—and we—is always already historically embedded?

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<sup>139</sup> John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 12-13.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>141</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 13.

<sup>142</sup> O'Grady, 177.

Though I am sure that I am utterly unqualified to answer these questions, I personally must believe, like bell hooks and cultural theorist Michel Foucault that there is “necessarily the possibility of resistance.”<sup>143</sup> Self-expression and subjectivity must be theorized and claimed, even if it utilizes the language of the Other. We are all, ultimately, locked in a position of interdependence similar to that staged by Laure and Olympia; the meaning of relationality and the relationality of meaning are all present on Manet’s canvas, as visible and unclear as his shocking brushstrokes. It is for this reason that I have attempted to engage critically with O’Grady, Weems, Thomas, and Manet in an effort to demonstrate my deep respect and intense love for their works. I know my identity and privileges as a white, upper-middle class woman in some ways precludes me from understanding completely the experiences their works are trying to convey, but I have realized this is as true for my relationship with Manet’s work as it is for that of Thomas and Weems. Manet probably did not envision his 1863 masterpiece would ever be viewed by the likes of me, nor that Laure would be subject of a Women’s Studies thesis. My analysis and criticism of these works is intended to indicate my intellectual commitment—anything less immersive would bespeak a “white guilt” and a fear of misinterpretation that I perceive as an obstacle rather than an excuse. For better or for worse, I know that I stand enthralled by these works, and by the figure of Laure, who has started appearing to me in my dreams and whispering to me in my sleep. For me, much as she is for O’Grady, Thomas, and Weems, Laure is a ghost I cannot rid myself of, one whose power is perhaps ultimately undefinable. Whether or not Manet, O’Grady, Weems, and Thomas agree, I believe there is strength hidden in every inch of Laure’s painted

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<sup>143</sup> Foucault quoted in hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

form—power that is perhaps made more hypnotic because of its inaccessibility, because it belongs more rightly to her (or our ideas of her) than to Olympia or to any artist. I want to see Laure as more than a Mammy, more than a reference to a Hottentot or Jezebel, more than a mere caricature of a servant or a sex worker—because this alternate reading opens up the possibility of a freedom. If only we could watch her turn her back to us and move through that green curtain to the space beyond the harshness of Olympia’s room. Maybe then we could follow her out.

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## Illustrations



**Fig. 1:** *Olympia*, Édouard Manet, 1863, oil on canvas, 51.4 x 74.8 in., Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia\\_\(Manet\)#mediaviewer/File:Edouard\\_Manet\\_-\\_Olympia\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project\\_3.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia_(Manet)#mediaviewer/File:Edouard_Manet_-_Olympia_-_Google_Art_Project_3.jpg).



**Figs. 2:** Counterclockwise: caricatures of *Olympia* by Cham (in *Le Salon*, June 2, 1865), Bertall (in *Journal Amusant*, May 27, 1865), and G. Randon (in *Le Journal*, June 29, 1865).

Images source: <http://olympia1865.wordpress.com/category/caricatures>



**Fig. 3:** *Le Marché aux esclaves* or *The Slave Market*, Jean-Léon Gerôme, 1866, oil on canvas, 33 5/16 x 24 15/16 in., Clark Art Institute  
Image source: <http://www.clarkart.edu/Collection/5538>





**Fig. 4:** *Odalisque or Esther*, François-Léon Benouville, 1844, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau.

Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois-L%C3%A9on\\_Benouville#mediaviewer/File:L%C3%A9on\\_Benouville\\_Odaliske.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois-L%C3%A9on_Benouville#mediaviewer/File:L%C3%A9on_Benouville_Odaliske.jpg)



**Fig. 5:** *Le basier enfantin* or *The Childlike Kiss*, Jacques-Eugène Feytaud, 1865, oil on canvas, 43 5/16 x 59 13/16 in., Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille.

Image source: [http://www.theroot.com/content/dam/theroot/articles/history/2014/10/a\\_black\\_model\\_who\\_graced\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_19th\\_century\\_france/feytaud.childlike\\_kiss.1865.the\\_root.3.5mb.jpg](http://www.theroot.com/content/dam/theroot/articles/history/2014/10/a_black_model_who_graced_the_art_of_19th_century_france/feytaud.childlike_kiss.1865.the_root.3.5mb.jpg).CROP.rtstoryvar-large.childlike\_kiss.1865.the\_root.3.5mb.jpg





**Fig. 6:** *Children in the Tuileries Gardens*, Édouard Manet, ca. 1861-1862, oil on canvas, 14 7/8 x 18 1/8 in., The Rhode Island School of Design Museum.  
Image source: [http://risdmuseum.org/art\\_design/objects/827\\_children\\_in\\_the\\_tuileries\\_gardens](http://risdmuseum.org/art_design/objects/827_children_in_the_tuileries_gardens)



**Fig. 7:** *Portrait of Laure or La Nègresse*, Édouard Manet, 1862-1863, oil on canvas, 24 x 19.7 in., Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin.

Image source: <http://pinacoteca-agnelli.it/visit/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Manet.jpg>





**Fig. 8:** *Head and shoulders of a black woman*, Circle/School of Peter Paul Rubens, ca. 1592-1640, bodycolor heightened with white over black chalk on paper, 19 1/16 x 15 3/8 in., The British Museum.

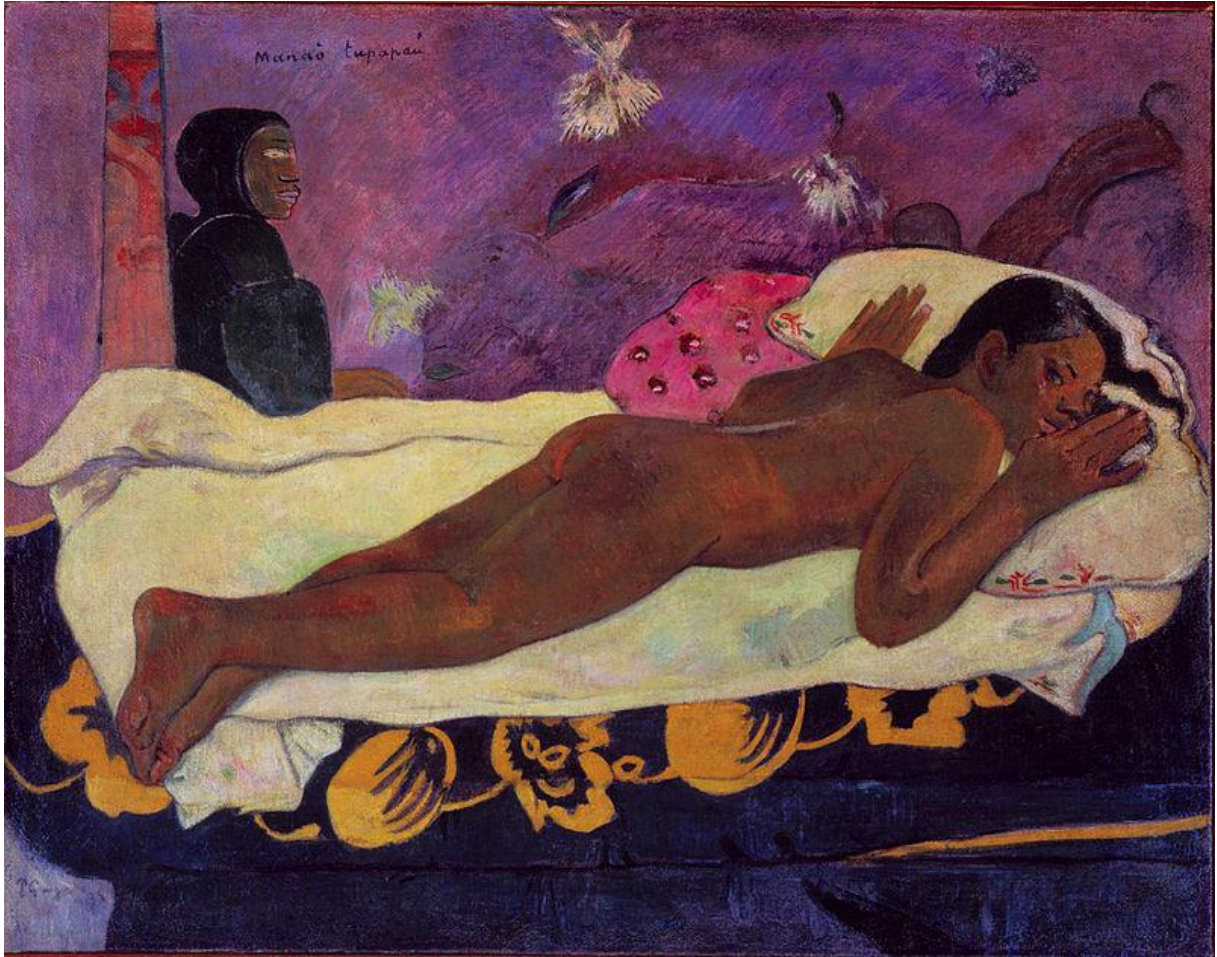
Image source: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=709256&partId=1&searchText=rubens&images=true&from=ad&fromDate=1592&to=ad&toDate=1640&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=709256&partId=1&searchText=rubens&images=true&from=ad&fromDate=1592&to=ad&toDate=1640&page=1)





**Fig. 9:** *Olympia*, Pablo Picasso, c. 1902, ink and chalk on paper, 6 x 8 13/16 in., Private collection.

Image source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/a-parody-of-manet-s-olympia-with-junyer-and-picasso>



**Fig. 10:** *Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao tupapau)*, Paul Gauguin, 1892, oil on burlap mounted on canvas, 45 11/16 x 53 x 5 1/4 in., Albright-Knox Art Gallery.  
Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit\\_of\\_the\\_Dead\\_Watching#/media/File:Paul\\_Gauguin-\\_Manao\\_tupapau\\_\(The\\_Spirit\\_of\\_the\\_Dead\\_Keep\\_Watch\).JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit_of_the_Dead_Watching#/media/File:Paul_Gauguin-_Manao_tupapau_(The_Spirit_of_the_Dead_Keep_Watch).JPG)



**Fig. 11:** *Not Manet's Type*, Carrie Mae Weems, 1997, five pigment ink prints, 30 x 18 in. each, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Image source: Kathryn E. Delmez, ed, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2012), 161-163, and <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/carrie-mae-weems-not-manets-type>. **Note: I have photoshopped this image in order to reflect the series in the above catalogue, solely for the purposes of reproducing the order of the version of the series I discuss.**





**Fig. 12:** *Tamika sur une chaise longue*, Mickalene Thomas, 2008, mounted C-print, 24 x 29 1/2 in., Courtesy of Mickalene Thomas, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Image source: [http://sites.hampshire.edu/sometimes/files/2014/08/Tamika\\_Sur\\_Une\\_Chaise\\_Longue\\_photo-e1409243847966.jpg](http://sites.hampshire.edu/sometimes/files/2014/08/Tamika_Sur_Une_Chaise_Longue_photo-e1409243847966.jpg)