

Sartorial Code-Switching: Vestimentary Identity Performance and Female Celebrity in Paris,
1832-1939

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ABSTRACT

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Sartorial Code-Switching is a case study of dress and appearance as a power technique in the lives of four women—George Sand, Sarah Bernhardt, Colette, and Josephine Baker—who rose to prominence in Paris between the July Monarchy and World War II. Each chapter focuses on one of these individuals to show their place in the wider socio-historical contexts that shaped them, while also tracing a chain of similarities that stretches from each to the next. At first glance their social identities may seem worlds apart from each other: an aristocratic cross-dressing author, a world-famous Jewish actress, an innovative bourgeois writer, and the first black international superstar. Indeed, while there are occasional connections made in scholarly literature between one or two of these women, this study is unique in creating a specific grouping out of all four. This project constitutes a new historical intervention by positing that, despite their undeniable differences, Sand, Bernhardt, Colette, and Baker exhibited remarkably similar levels of attention to the way class, race, gender, and hybridity interacted with appearance. Such

(re)presentations of the self could, when properly leveraged, result in increased autonomy and even wealth and fame, as it did for these four women who began their lives from varied positions of social marginality. Yet each one managed to achieve celebrity and a measure of control over her attendant public image by the end of her lifetime. In *Sartorial Code-Switching* I will argue that this was due largely to the way they manipulated images of identity within and across cultural norms. This power technique, which I term sartorial code-switching, is more dynamic and significant than it may at first appear. It is connected to questions of gender, race, class, and ethno-religious marginalization as well as to the media phenomenon of fame itself.

The introduction to this interdisciplinary project will cover its focus, methodology and structure, providing throughout a selected review of relevant literature in the multiple fields it engages. Following this, in Chapter One I examine George Sand's relationship to clothing as both an instrument of corporeal agency and as a symbolic literary device in her work. This chapter contextualizes cross-dressing as a process of blurring or crossing boundaries (gendered, class-based, and racial) in post-revolutionary Paris, and will set the stage for following chapters. In Chapter Two, I analyze Sarah Bernhardt's identification with the Virgin Mary in her autobiography *Ma double vie*, to show echoes of this self-identification in Bernhardt's public image, most notably through Alphonse Mucha's Art Nouveau publicity posters. I compare these sources to show how Bernhardt intentionally claims, among other hybridities, a Jewish-Christian cultural duality that defies contemporary binaries. Chapter Three investigates the connection between Colette's conception of femininity and her attachment to animals, arguing that Colette's photographs, performances, and literature repeatedly portray archetypal Woman as either

animalistically embodied or as a human-animal hybrid more properly belonging to the natural world than to male-coded modernity. In Chapter Four, I unpack Josephine Baker's little-known early career whiteface performance *Si j'étais blanche*, demonstrating how Baker switched codes across gender and race boundaries to interrupt her primarily white male audience's enjoyment of scopophilia. Finally, the conclusion revisits main themes from all four case studies and highlights their significance for 21st century issues. These include, among others, current fashion's relationship to gender, race, and class, and the significance of sartorial code-switching for some of today's marginalized communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Introduction.....	vii
Chapter 1: The Pen and the <i>Pantolon</i> : George Sand’s Articulation of Clothing, Class and Power.....	1
Chapter 2: Dressing Up the Truth: Sarah Bernhardt as a “little Madonna”.....	79
Chapter 3: “You’re so human!”: Embodiment, Gender, and Animality in Colette.....	166
Chapter 4: Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being Seen: Josephine Baker and the Scopophilic Gaze.....	261
Conclusion.....	314

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Dedication

To my life partner: thank you for showing up in ways you never expected you'd have to.

Thank you for the late nights, the household chores, the solo parenting moments, the archive trips abroad, and the emotional and material support you have provided against all cultural norms and expectations. I love you.

To my parents: thank you for raising me to think, explore, and imagine. Thank you for the lifelong support of my academic goals. And thank you from the bottom of my soul for those many, many hours of childcare.

To my children: I hope watching me finish this will inspire you to stick with your dreams.

INTRODUCTION**Embodied Identities**

Sartorial Code-Switching: Vestimentary Identity Performance and Female Celebrity in Paris, 1832-1939, is a cultural history and case study of dress and grooming in the lives of four women who overcame various obstacles to achieve celebrity in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It began as a study of George Sand's life, work, and apparent singularity. However, as I learned more about Sand I became increasingly intrigued by the context in which she found fame. In some respects Sand was unique, in others she had predecessors, but it was the focal point of dress and appearance that fully captivated my attention. Sand had chosen to wear male attire in the streets of Paris at a time when it was illegal for women to do so.¹ Where did she get this idea? And although her supporters and detractors would find many reasons for it, why did Sand ultimately choose to mark the advent of her literary career with masculine clothing?

Research in the Bibliothèque Nationale and other Paris archives confirmed my suspicion that Sand's sartorial choices were significant. I soon found that her particular approach to gender-bending in the early nineteenth century did not arise in a vacuum; this, and myriad other forms of subversive boundary-blurring in dress, have a long and complex history in France. The investigation of that history in conjunction with continued research on Sand's life and work led me to conclude that her choice to cross-dress, in the time and place in which she had chosen to do so, was not some coincidental or secondary matter. It was also not exclusively a story of either gender or clothes. It was, in a way, the tip of an entire cultural iceberg—key for understanding many things about

¹ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: a Life of Colette* (Knopf, 1999), 84.

Sand and her wider world that did not often seem to be highlighted from this angle in scholarly work.

It was in pursuit of this research on Sand that I discovered her relationship to Sarah Bernhardt. As a young actress Bernhardt had acted in some of Sand's plays and portrayed Sand as something of a mentor figure in her life, yet scholarship linking the two of them seemed limited. As I studied the large body of primarily biographic literature devoted to Bernhardt I noticed aspects of her approach to dress, appearance, and overall personal imagery that seemed to echo the themes of my research on Sand. Through researching Bernhardt, I became increasingly aware of her acquaintance with and subtle similarities to Colette, and finally through an investigation of Colette's life, work and performances the theme of race became increasingly apparent until I finally discovered, with great excitement, that she had been a close personal friend of Josephine Baker. And Baker, in her turn, proved to be another explosive force in the field of dress and self-presentation whose subversive manipulation of primitivism's racial assumptions had not, I felt, been fully analyzed. The connecting thread between all four of these women was their subversive use of dress and appearance as a power technique.

A certain reticence on the part of many women's history scholars to engage with "frivolous" clothing studies is, perhaps, understandable. Although fashion is increasingly considered a serious research topic,² this project's intersectional feminist approach would not so long ago have been viewed in scholarly circles as incompatible with its investigation of fashion and dress. After all, what Ilya Parkins describes as feminism's

² Valerie Steele, *The Berg Companion to Fashion* (Berg, 2010), xvii-xviii.

“conflicted relationship”³ with clothing and grooming has long roots in the history of women’s oppression. Entirely apart from such controversial practices as corseting, hoop skirts, and extreme dieting to fit a fashionable ideal, there are also religious associations at play that have contributed to the deep strains of misogyny running throughout much of Western history. As Efrat Tseëlon observes, “since the Fall is blamed on the woman, the links between sin, body, woman and clothes are easily forged.”⁴ Additionally, scholars from Thorstein Veblen⁵ to J.C. Flugel⁶ and David Kuchta⁷ have demonstrated that as the middle class rose throughout the early modern and revolutionary periods, men’s attire grew more restrained and businesslike while women’s increasingly decorative clothing cemented their place as status symbols; vehicles, as Veblen so famously put it, of a system of “conspicuous consumption” that made society’s ideal respectable woman her

³ Ilya Parkins, *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli: Fashion, Femininity and Modernity* (Berg, 2012), 2.

⁴ Efrat Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity: the Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life* (Sage Publications, 1995), 14.

⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

⁶ J. C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (Leonard & Virginia Woolf at The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis), 1930.

⁷ David Kuchta, “The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (University of California Press, 1996), 63: “...in the 18th century women were excluded from power "by associating femininity with luxury and masculinity with legitimacy.”

husband's "chief ornament."⁸ This association between femininity and useless, decorative frivolity is still strong in today's Western culture.⁹

Then, too, fashion studies is a relatively young area of inquiry. Until the 1980s, many considered it the exclusive province of costuming and theater specialists or perhaps of museum curators, although it made occasional appearances in other fields such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and even linguistics.¹⁰ Even as recently as 2013 scholars have argued that academia still continues to undervalue fashion studies.¹¹ But the field of fashion is now undeniably accelerating and expanding every year, increasingly recognized for its enormous potential.¹² Valerie Steele points out that fashion studies' huge interdisciplinary umbrella encompasses "anthropology, art history, cultural and intellectual history, economics, gender and queer studies, material culture,

⁸ Thorstein Veblen, "'Conspicuous Consumption' and 'Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture' from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)," in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 284.

⁹ See, for instance, Deborah C. Payne's excellent afterword to *The Clothes That Wear Us*, in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (University of Delaware Press; Associated University Presses, 1999).

¹⁰ See Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin, *Material Strategies: Dress and Gender in Historical Perspective* (Blackwell Pub., 2003); Emanuela Mora et al., "The Internationalization of Fashion Studies: Rethinking the Peer-Reviewing Process," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2014): 3–17; Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, *Thinking through Fashion: a Guide to Key Theorists* (I.B. Tauris, 2016), 2; and Valerie Steele, *The Berg Companion to Fashion* (Berg, 2010), xvii.

¹¹ Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart, "Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013: 171–192.

¹² Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Polity, 2015), viii-ix.

and other fields, some of them also newly emerging.”¹³ The study of fashion is so all-encompassing, in fact, that Joanne Entwistle labels it a “thematic area of interest” rather than a traditional discipline, pointing out that even in the past fifteen years it has “massively complexified and now breaches disciplinary boundaries.”¹⁴ There is something about fashion studies that turns out to be just as dynamic, cutting-edge, and explorative as fashion itself.

Method and Methodology

Sartorial Code-Switching makes full use of fashion studies’ elastic interdisciplinarity. In keeping with Halberstam’s “scavenger methodology”¹⁵ it draws on relevant sources regardless of disciplinary constraints, allowing for a multifaceted theoretical and practical approach. Each chapter traces a life story, but also situates that story in its cultural context as a case study of variously marginalized individuals attaining social power. Doing this through the lens of fashion studies allows for engagement with everything from economics to psychology to feminism to critical race theory and beyond. Clothing, grooming, and self-presentation serve as focal points to unpack the multiple fields of study they engage.

Interdisciplinarity allows for a fuller investigation of Sand, Bernhardt, Colette, and Baker as individuals who used collective culture to transform their various levels of social disadvantage into power by playing with—and sometimes against—norms of appearance. These four case studies also disrupt conventional biographical approaches by

¹³ Valerie Steele, *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, xvii.

¹⁴ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, ix.

¹⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), 13.

grouping together cultural icons who have been selected, paradoxically, for their extreme visibility as celebrities and their simultaneous invisibility in certain areas of collective memory. While Sand, Bernhardt, Colette and Baker are each famous in their own right, they have too often been treated as two-dimensional popular culture figures or as isolated, exceptional phenomena. Indeed, many scholars have tended to approach these four women on an individual basis, as we see in the large number of biographical works devoted to each of them.

My project seeks to counterbalance this tendency. Although some associations between Sand and Bernhardt or between Colette and Baker have been touched on in scholarly literature, to my knowledge all four have never been explicitly connected for the purposes of an intensive study,¹⁶ making my dissertation a new intervention in the field. This may perhaps be explained in part by traditional academic classifications. Sand and Colette have primarily been grouped under the rubric of French literature or women writers, while information about Bernhardt and Baker is often confined to drama libraries. My goal, then, is to broaden the scope of inquiry and demonstrate that significant links do exist between these types of figures, despite their seemingly disparate backgrounds. The intersectionality of this project will refuse to treat its three main axes—

¹⁶ For instance, Laura Mariani's *Sarah Bernhardt, Colette e l'arte del travestimento* (Cuepress, 2016) focuses primarily on these two figures in isolation; Bennetta Jules-Rosette acknowledges that Baker and Colette were "close friend[s]" (*Josephine Baker in Art and Life: the Icon and the Image* (University of Illinois Press, 2007, 66) but does not go into detail. Simon Njami notes that Josephine Baker "resembled and even surpassed Colette and Georges [sic] Sand," but stops there without giving any further analysis (Njami, "Foreword: A Luminous Humanism," in *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: the Icon and the Image*, xii). Judith Thurman's extensive biography *Secrets of the Flesh* briefly mentions that Colette and Sarah Bernhardt were both members of an exclusive artistic and literary group called the *Cercle des Arts et de la Mode*, but no further information about their relationship is provided.

gender, class, and race—as somehow distinct from one another, but will continually hold them together, creating a conscious multiplicity that finds its echo in the complex histories of four women whose collective lives span almost two centuries.

Scope

As an in-depth case study of the ways industrial Western identity has been shaped by dress and vice versa, my project focuses on a period of European bourgeois ascendancy that begins in 1832 and ends with the first year of WWII in 1939. This timespan allows for an overview of Sand's era, which dealt more immediately with the aftershocks of the French Revolution, through Sarah Bernhardt's experience of the equally fraught Second Empire and the aftermath of its fall. Colette achieved notoriety during the Belle Époque and saw both world wars firsthand, while Baker, as I will cover briefly in Chapter 4, became a Resistance spy during World War II and later wore her French military uniform to the March on Washington. I move freely between the micro- and macro-level as I explore the careful manipulation of each woman's appearance at specific moments of sociopolitical change during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Throughout my discussion of the various historical contexts in which these four women cemented their celebrity, I will continually ask how they, as social actors, constructed their visual appearances to combine (and in some cases appropriate) elements such as race, class, and gender that wider society often still attempts to hold separate. Given the cultural context in which these women produced their multimodal expressions of self, how did contemporary observers read them? What cultural assumptions do their often-hybridized identity performances draw on? By using Kimberlé Crenshaw's vision

of intersectional analysis as a lens through which scholars can “see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects,”¹⁷ I draw attention to the ways real people have historically used dress and grooming practices to consciously overlap class, race, gender, and other artificially separated hierarchies on their bodies. As we will see in the following chapters, this allows us to explore issues of affect, embodiment, and the artificially dichotomous relationship between mind and body that has been established in much of Western culture. For example, these dynamics play out in the real-life stories of George Sand, Sarah Bernhardt, Colette, and Josephine Baker in their gendered and classed navigations of public space, negotiations with cultural standards for ethno-religious belonging and exclusion, Western notions of corporeality as negative or animalistic, and the intersectional oppressions of a classed, gendered, and raced hierarchy that requires women and racialized Others to constantly perform for a gaze.

As one of the most emblematic urban centers in that culture, Paris is the staging ground for this project. All four women transformed themselves there. Whether I am discussing how Benjamin’s work on arcades relates to Sand’s sartorial interactions with her new Parisian setting, investigating Bernhardt’s ability to reach various audiences, examining Colette’s distinction between country and city, or tracing Baker’s ecstatic discovery of Parisian spectators’ appetites, in each one of these women’s lives Paris is a cultural epicenter whose significance for any discussion of sartorial code-switching cannot be ignored. Its rapidly transforming landscape throughout the 19th century, particularly during and after Haussmannization, is equaled only by its strange and powerful ability to produce entire hybridized groups like the *demi-monde*. In the vast

¹⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later,” *Columbia Law School*, Columbia University, June 8, 2017.

anonymity of 19th and early 20th century Parisian streets, possibilities for hybridity and boundary-blurring were more available than in the countryside, and these factors, along with the constant high-stakes pressure of upward (or downward) mobility, created the perfect conditions for sartorial code-switching.

Sartorial Code-Switching

In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes famously presents language's relationship to fashion as so all-defining that it is fully constitutive: "Without discourse there is no total Fashion, no essential Fashion...the magazine is a machine that makes Fashion."¹⁸ Barthes privileges the *vêtement écrit* (written clothing, or in his case magazine captions) over the *vêtement-image* (visual clothing, or the fashion magazine's images), in keeping with his work on discourse analysis and semiotics. However, Barthes' categorizations of vestimentary or real codes (actual clothing), terminological code (language), and rhetorical code (fashion as a combination of image and word in magazines) are useful for analyzing dress and appearance as a communicative process, allowing, even in Barthes' paradigm, for a sociological reading of the original vestimentary code (the worn clothing object) that views it as "a generative mother tongue through which actual garments become instances of speech acts."¹⁹ Although Barthes requires these speech acts to pass through the terminological and rhetorical phases to achieve full semiological status, we nevertheless have a theoretical base in his work for the analysis of everyday material clothing as a rudimentary communicative device.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (University of California Press, 1990), xi, 51.

¹⁹ Paul Jobling, "Roland Barthes: Semiology and the Rhetorical Codes of Fashion," *Thinking through Fashion: a Guide to Key Theorists* (I.B. Tauris, 2016), 143.

If dress and appearance are a functional proto-language even before passing through “superior” phases, then it follows that this language can lend itself to code-switching as readily as any other—indeed, its “evolution” into other forms or categories may be more of a code-switch than a permanent transformation. I would even go so far as to disagree that the original vestimentary code or “mother tongue” is inferior to other, more abstracted categories like the terminological or rhetorical, but agree with scholars like Paul Jobling that “fashion is a matter of intertextuality between word and image”²⁰ to which I would add a third term, materiality. Although useful in many ways, Barthes’ approach is—in keeping with his structuralist devotion to semiology—overly logocentric and disconnected from the physical experience of wearing clothes. With these considerations in mind, I have chosen “sartorial” as a descriptor for the way clothing and its users can switch cultural codes. Because it derives from the Latin *sartor*, or tailor, the term “sartorial” maintains a residual linguistic (and thus cultural) connection to the physical act of altering clothes to fit a unique body for a specific social occasion, an action that in itself gestures to what sartorial code-switching entails.

The term “code-switching” comes from linguistic scholarship first developed in the 1950s.²¹ Sometimes also referred to as “code mixing,” it has a complicated history with multiple categorizations, variants and motivations theorized over decades. Aside from its semiological origins, which align pleasingly with Barthes’, the aspect of code-

²⁰ Ibid., 139.

²¹ See, for example, Hans Vogt, “Language Contacts,” *WORD*, vol. 10, no. 2-3, 1954: 365–374; Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact, Findings and Problems* (Linguistic Circle of New York, 1953); or Einar Haugen, *Bilingualism in the Americas: a Bibliography and Research Guide* (University of Alabama Press, 1956).

switching that most interests me is communication accommodation theory (CAT, originally speech accommodation theory), developed by sociolinguistics professor Howard Giles to explain why code-switching occurs. Its main idea is that language users alternate their speech between two or more linguistic sets, sometimes combining them into new arrangements, and that they do so in order to blend in with or stand out from others (convergence vs. divergence). This is a striking parallel concept to Georg Simmel's analysis of fashion's fundamental tension between "social obedience" and "individual differentiation"²² Simmel's focus on the ways human beings dress for and against conformity with various social groupings is, as Peter McNeil points out, the ultimate "paradox of fashion" in which individuals can often be seen "belonging and standing out simultaneously."²³ I would add that they sometimes do so in rapid succession and for reasons beyond the simple question of in-group belonging. As Hemphill and Suk have shown, humans also engage in "flocking" and "differentiation" for various identity-defining activities, including fashion and dress. When engaged in these activities, we see people "flocking to themes in common, but differentiating themselves within that flocking activity."²⁴ These concepts reinforce another key aspect of sartorial code-switching: that in addition to its association with embodiment and social context, it can contain a range of behaviors related to individuality and conformity that

²² Daniel L. Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion: a Reader* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 297.

²³ Peter McNeil, "Georg Simmel: The Philosophical Monet," in *Thinking through Fashion: a Guide to Key Theorists* (I.B. Tauris, 2016), 71.

²⁴ C. Scott Hemphill and Jeannie Suk, "The Law, Culture, and Economics of Fashion," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 61, no. 5 (2009): 1153.

ultimately involve switching between one visual vocabulary and another—sometimes performing one inside the other to subvert it, as differentiation within flocking can do.

The term “sartorial code-switching” is my own innovation, used throughout the dissertation sometimes as a complete phrase and at other times as a central theme to which I allude. It holds together various foundational aspects of the field of fashion studies by comparing the linguistic concept of code-switching to the way clothing and dress are used for combining—and often subverting—the visual identity markers associated with gender, class, and race. In doing so, it does in some ways refer back to Barthes’ linguistically inflected understanding of clothing as a system of communicative signs. Its connection to code-switching, however, also surpasses the former’s semiological origins by incorporating more recent fashion scholarship that has paid greater attention to material culture and embodiment. Scholars like Jonathan Culler have taken issue with Barthes’ fundamental premise,²⁵ arguing that fashion is not so much a fully-developed language as it is a range of possible meanings produced through what Deborah C. Payne calls “various ‘rhetorical’ and social strategies.”²⁶ I would agree to a certain extent that clothing, because of what John Harvey terms its “multivalence,”²⁷ does perhaps “[surpass] the semiotic properties of language”²⁸ in many ways. However, this perspective still allows for Barthes’ view of the “polysemic” nature of a semiotic sign

²⁵ Jonathan D. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Cornell University Press, 1975).

²⁶ Deborah C. Payne, “Afterword,” 344.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

within a linguistic network, or what Bakhtin terms its “multiaccentuality.”²⁹ There is room in these latter theories for a range of contextual signification that precedes and continues into what structuralists have considered a formally developed language, and in my understanding of clothing and dress as a “language” I do not necessarily mean any fully-formed or enclosed linguistic system, but rather this visually communicative, context-specific generation of meanings and interpretations that surpasses the purely “verbal behavior” which Anne Hollander identifies as incomparable to fashion’s “self-perpetuating visual fiction.”³⁰

And yet, for the women included in the following case studies, clothing’s “visual fiction” often led to a materially enhanced reality. This is yet another intended nuance in my choice of the phrase “sartorial code-switching”—that one code or system, whether linguistic, visual or cultural, is sometimes not enough to contain the communicative multiplicity generated by clothing’s transgressive users. Their multiplicity often calls attention to the artificiality of the categories it performs, aligning it with Butler’s concept of performativity. This is, for example, what Sand does by wearing masculine attire, or what Josephine Baker does by wearing whiteface—such switches between supposedly stable sartorial codes call the inherent validity of those codes’ boundaries into question, showing viewers that “‘the normal,’ ‘the original,’” which is supposedly being imitated, is instead itself “revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one.”³¹ The performance

²⁹ See Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane, “Polysemic Signs,” in *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (SAGE, 2016).

³⁰ Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes* (University of California Press, 1993), xv.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 138.

of one socially defined race or gender by another, in other words, juxtaposes two visual codes that subversively undo each other in the process, thereby exceeding the separate communicative possibilities of each.

Clothing, and especially high fashion, may indeed be at times a “visual fiction” akin to “figurative art.”³² But it is also, in the chapters that follow, a story of physical empowerment for marginalized people living out hybrid identities. Embodied agency is a central part of my project, and one that scholars have increasingly developed as part of fashion’s turn toward sociology and material culture. Agnes Rocamora and Anneke Smelik write that “[o]ur agency takes place through material things and objects—such as clothes...Our identities function within material culture.”³³ Joanne Entwistle innovated the concept of a “situated bodily practice” that brings “the totality of the *dressed body* into social analysis”³⁴; she traces the rise of additional scholarship over the past fifteen years that now “brings bodies and clothing/fashion together,”³⁵ a paradigm into which this project also fits. Beyond this, sartorial code-switching is inclusive of, but broader than, Western cultural associations with terms like “cross-dressing” or “transvestism.” Joanne B. Eicher has redefined the term “dress” to include “a wide variety of behaviors connected to getting dressed...not just putting on clothing and accessories but also grooming the body.” This opens up various possibilities for exploring an expanded

³² Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes*, xv.

³³ Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, *Thinking through Fashion: a Guide to Key Theorists*, 12.

³⁴ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, xi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

definition of the term “sartorial” and its social implications; it can even include, as Eicher points out, a culturally constructed notion of nudity that involves “being dressed without wearing any clothing at all.”³⁶

Eicher’s expanded notion of dress is important for understanding how “fashion” itself may sometimes be expressed in the absence of clothing or in its metaphorical presence, just as often as in its more traditional definition as “dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles.”³⁷ This broader understanding of dress and embodiment finds its echo in Grosz’s assertion that bodies themselves are “never completely natural” but are, instead, “*the* cultural product” composed of “social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, and constitution.”³⁸ The way a body’s physical or metaphorical appearance is assembled, the layers of materiality and symbolism invested in it by the wearer, and the interpretation performed by a given “reader” of this body’s messages in a particular place and time, are all expanded areas of fashion studies inquiry in Eicher’s and Grosz’s paradigms. I have adopted this widened lens in my approach to fashion studies.

Outline of Dissertation

The four chapters that follow this introduction each highlight the same fundamental themes: class, gender, race, and the sometimes-complicated relationship of

³⁶ Joanne Bubolz Eicher et al., *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society* (Fairchild Publications, 2008), Eicher vii.

³⁷ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (I.B. Tauris, 2003), 4-5.

³⁸ Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 23.

these social metrics to dress and grooming practices. Although individual chapters may place different levels of emphasis on each of these factors, all three are constantly present and create, along with the central theme of fashion and appearance, a unifying thread.

George Sand's life is a good starting point for this project because of her incredibly simultaneous importance in the literary, social, political, and artistic fields of her time. Sand came of age during the 1820s and 1830s when the post-Revolutionary bourgeois class was continuing to ascend in France, which as I will show makes her decision to engage in sartorial code-switching (particularly gendered cross-dressing) all the more significant. Thus, a key focus of Chapter One is class. I argue that George Sand's experience of growing up the hastily legitimized child of an aristocratic father and camp follower mother was a defining aspect of her life and career. I offer a unique analysis of Sand's decision to adopt male attire in the streets of 1830s Paris that takes into consideration her embodied experience of clothing, as well as her equally strong understanding of clothing's social symbolism. I propose that Sand's decision to cross-dress was fully connected with her views on class and autonomy. Because class and race were intertwined in this time period, I also perform an in-depth analysis of scenes from Sand's first major novel *Indiana* to demonstrate how Sand articulates an early understanding of intersectionality in the character of Noun, whose clothing is a significant—but often overlooked—aspect of the novel's plot.

In Chapter Two I investigate Sarah Bernhardt's deployment of physical and metaphorical sartorial code-switching as a way of controlling her legacy. Bernhardt's international fame spawned endless rumors that she owned human skulls, displayed Satanic tendencies, moonlighted as a prostitute—and reports from the Parisian vice police

who tracked Bernhardt show that some of these were true. Yet in her 1907 memoir *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt casts herself and those closest to her as the intimate protégées—sometimes almost the body doubles—of the Virgin Mary. In this chapter I give a socio-historical overview of her cultural context to show that Bernhardt’s multifaceted identity did not fit neatly into nineteenth-century bourgeois gender or social norms, and I propose that *Ma double vie* demonstrates this gap. I argue that Bernhardt is very conscious of the difference between new forms of media, where she often chose to appear scandalous or provocative, and the time-honored autobiographical genre (particularly in France) as a medium for the performative redemption of her long-term legacy. In her memoirs and in some stage performances designed to similarly rehabilitate or balance out her image, Bernhardt carefully reshaped her societal Otherness—as a Jewish convert to Catholicism, unwed mother, and courtesan—into a clear message of cultural in-group belonging. In this paper I analyze that textual negotiation to unpack the logistics of Bernhardt’s unlikely success story as the daughter of a Dutch Jewish prostitute who became France’s most globally recognized celebrity, indeed almost a physical embodiment of the French nation, in the years surrounding the Dreyfus Affair.

In Chapter Three, I unpack Colette’s famous affinity for animals through the lens of gender. I argue that throughout the phases of her multi-decade career, Colette’s articulation of femininity is remarkably consistent in its attachment to embodiment and the natural world. Using a series of her selected literary and journalistic works as well as photographs of Colette that she produced and distributed during her lifetime, I posit that she repeatedly portrays archetypal Woman as an animalistically embodied figure or as a human-animal hybrid more aligned with organic nature than with masculine civilization.

I argue that Colette does this partly by engaging in strategic moments of sartorial code-switching that I will analyze throughout the chapter.

Chapter Four investigates Josephine Baker's little-known use of whiteface in her debut performance of the song *Si j'étais blanche*. I review Baker's early life and career to demonstrate that many of the code-switching techniques she took with her to France, including literal and metaphorical whiteface and blackface, were traditional tools that had helped black minstrel performers survive in segregated America. I argue that, rather than transforming herself completely as some scholars and critics have suggested, Baker simply adapted these visual techniques to French audience expectations in order to achieve stardom—in other words, she switched codes. Her performance of *Si j'étais blanche*, when put into that context, becomes a unique moment where Baker's old and new stage personas are seen to overlap more obviously than usual, with Baker mocking her rival Mistinguett to reverse the scopophilic gaze of a primarily white male audience.

The conclusion reviews the chapters' main themes and explains the significance of these 19th and early 20th-century stories for our 21st century world. As hot-button sociopolitical issues like gender performance, religious and national belonging, our relationship to the natural world, and racial marginalization become ever more visible and urgent, how can an overview of figures like Sand, Bernhardt, Colette and Baker help us understand current culture? I argue that case studies of historical individuals, like each of the four chapters that follow, can illuminate aspects of these wider questions with surprising clarity. In the conclusion I offer an additional case study of black gay high school student Brandon Allen's sartorial code-switching at his high school homecoming

in September 2019, tying this episode back to the themes discussed throughout the preceding chapters.

This dissertation is a chronologically organized series of case studies of women from disparate backgrounds who, despite their differences, represent a chain of personal and cultural influence stretching from one to the next. As I have pointed out and will briefly emphasize in each chapter, Sand knew and mentored Bernhardt, who in turn met Colette, who in turn was friends with Baker. The threads of similarity running between the following chapters indicate that these personal connections and interactions were not coincidental. Each individual studied here was able to overcome societal and material obstacles to achieve exponentially greater agency, and each performed a series of calculated visual and embodied sartorial code-switches to do so. As I draw from and build on the vast scholarly work that has accumulated around each of these women, introducing new viewpoints and angles of inquiry on their lives, in this project I am equally concerned with making connections across artificially enforced borderlines—between theorists of sometimes varied disciplines, between canonized French authors and *demi-mondaine* stage performers, between white Parisians and black Americans, and between previous centuries and our own.

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CHAPTER 1

**The Pen and the *Pantalon*:
George Sand's Articulation of Class, Clothing, and Power**

Qui est-il ou qui est-elle ? Homme ou femme, ange ou démon, vice ou vertu ? Quoi qu'il soit, c'est un des plus grands écrivains de notre temps. D'où vient-elle ? Comment nous est-il arrivé ? Comment tout d'un coup a-t-elle ainsi trouvé ce merveilleux style aux mille formes, et dites-moi pourquoi il s'est mis ainsi à couvrir de crachats et de boue la société toute entière ? Quelle énigme cet homme ou cette femme, ou plutôt cet homme et cette femme ! Et quel critique en ce monde osera jamais l'expliquer ?³⁹

Jules Janin, « George Sand, » *La Mode*, 1835.

[Who is he or she? Man or woman, angel or demon, vice or virtue? Whatever it is, this is one of the greatest writers of our time. Where does she come from? How did he come to us? How did she suddenly find this marvelous style of a thousand forms, and tell me why he decided to spit and throw mud on society as a whole? What a riddle this man or woman is, or rather this man and this woman! And what critic in the world would ever dare to explain it?]

Although one biographer has referred disparagingly to George Sand's autobiography *Histoire de ma vie* as “mercilessly padded” and filled with “feigned folksiness,”⁴⁰ it is indeed remarkable how quickly the question of class appears in its pages. The legendary and controversial Sand may or may not be feigning her “folksiness,” but she certainly foregrounds it as a major part of her public identity. After some philosophical digressions reflecting on autobiography as an art, Sand finally begins her own narrative in the following words:

³⁹ Jules Janin, « Galerie contemporaine: George Sand », *La Mode*, Sept. 1835, 180.

⁴⁰ Dan Hofstadter, *Introduction*, in *My Life* by George Sand (Harper & Row, 1979), vii-viii.

“Je suis née l'année du couronnement de Napoléon, l'an XII de la République française (1804). Mon nom n'est pas Marie-Aurore de Saxe, marquise de Dudevant, comme plusieurs de mes biographes l'ont découvert, mais Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, et mon mari, M. François Dudevant, ne s'attribue aucun titre.”⁴¹

[I was born the year of Napoleon's coronation, Year 12 of the French Republic (1804). My name is not Marie-Aurore de Saxe, Marquise of Dudevant, as several of my biographers have discovered, but Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, and my husband, Mr. Francois Dudevant, does not claim any title.]

Sand's explanation of her origins has a distinctly apologetic tone. As if to offset her well-known aristocratic background and personal relationship with the Bonapartes, Sand balances the coincidence of her birth year and Napoleon I's coronation with the caveat that it was in fact Year 12 of the Republic, and while giving her correct name hastens to add that her husband never pretended to a noble title. The latent anxieties operating in this paragraph are all the more interesting because *Histoire de ma vie* was written by a woman who, although sole heir to an aristocratic grandmother, puts a significant rhetorical distance between herself and the nobility. In other words, Sand engages throughout *Histoire de ma vie* in code-switching—a “feigned folksiness” is indeed occurring in both linguistic and narratological spheres, but perhaps for more complicated (and legitimate) reasons than disparaging biographers may realize. I argue that Sand's consistent focus on social class is directly related to her adoption of men's clothing as a young woman in 1830s Paris. A brief overview of the vestimentary context in preceding

⁴¹ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie* (1854-1855), 18.

decades will explain why, as we will see, Sand chose to align herself with the working class when defending her choice to cross-dress.

Gendered cross-dressing's associations in this time period were generally negative in bourgeois society. First, for centuries European prostitutes had worn pants to advertise their services.⁴² More recently, throughout the Revolution groups of radical Jacobin women had agitated for inclusion in the emerging Republic by wearing masculine attire⁴³, a phenomenon to which male Republicans responded with fear, hostility, and often public violence. This was partly due to the old aristocracy's decadent cross-dressing habits in the period leading up to the Revolution. Although gendered and classed transvestism were technically punishable *crimes de faux* (crimes of falsehood) under the Ancien Régime, Christine Bard argues that a special tolerance existed in France for certain exceptions to such rules, thanks largely to historical figures like Joan of Arc and the many other Catholic saints known to have cross-dressed for various reasons.⁴⁴ And aristocratic elites had a habit of flouting sartorial restrictions anyway. See, for example, a 1783 portrait of Marie Antoinette hunting in her custom-made breeches (Fig. 1) or a probable portrait of Prince Philippe d'Orléans (Fig. 2), Louis XIV's younger brother who was raised as a girl and known to habitually wear women's clothing. Code-switching was also common at aristocratic masquerade balls during which guests would dress across multiple boundaries

⁴² Eugenia Paulicelli, *Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy: From Sprezzatura to Satire* (Ashgate, 2014), 119.

⁴³ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Feminism and the Body* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 198.

⁴⁴ Christine Bard, *Une histoire politique du pantalon* (Points, 2014); see also, for instance, Frédérique Villemur. "Saintes et travesties," *Clio*, no. 10 (1999): 55-89.

including that of gender (Fig. 3), titillating each other with the promise of sexually ambiguous romantic adventures.⁴⁵

The other side of Sand's cross-dressing equation, the *pantalon* or long trousered garment, has a different history in France. It shares a certain continuity with Old Regime notions of masculinity, as witnessed by the expression "Qui culotte a, pouvoir a" [*whoever wears the breeches has the power*]. This is roughly equivalent to the English expression "wearing the pants" as a shorthand for social dominance, but now implies long trousers in the cultural imaginary rather than breeches. These types of sayings reinforce the fact that, as Christine Bard points out, "Le costume reflète l'ordre social et le crée, permettant, notamment, le contrôle des individus." [*Clothing reflects the social order and creates it, permitting, notably, the control of individuals.*]⁴⁶ Where once breeches indicated male aristocratic control of society, the popular expression now applies to their bourgeois successors' garment; but the fact that notions of social power were able to transfer so completely from short breeches to the long *pantalon* is nevertheless remarkable. Bard notes that the *pantalon* is "d'origine populaire," [*of popular or lower-class origin*], and that its French etymology is probably related to a 16th-century clown named Pantalone who was popular in Italian theater. The *pantalon* was only widely adopted by upper class males around the turn of the nineteenth century when, among other factors, the French Revolution made it unfashionable (and politically dangerous) to

⁴⁵ Sarah R. Cohen and Jessica Munns, "Masquerade as Mode in the French Fashion Print," in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-century Culture* (Newark: U of Delaware, 1999), 180-188.

⁴⁶ Christine Bard, *Une histoire politique du pantalon*, 7.

follow old aristocratic vestimentary codes like wearing breeches.⁴⁷ Until this shift, however, the *pantalon* and its prototypes were associated with “conditions dominées” [*dominated social classes*]. One possible origin for it is the “Braies des Gaulois,” or Gallic tribal long “breeches,” indicating a deep cultural connection between this garment and the origin story of the French nation, but also—in light of the Roman conquests—in many ways contributing to its original status as “le vêtement du vaincu, du Barbare, du paysan, du marin, de l’artisan, de l’enfant, du bouffon.” [*the clothing of the conquered, of the Barbarian, of the peasant, of the sailor, of the artisan, of the child, of the clown.*]⁴⁸ The *pantalon*’s usurpation of the *culotte*’s cultural space is thus a vestimentary indicator of changing power dynamics in French society—its own kind of revolution.

Sand’s public appearance in the recently ascendant *pantalon* in 1830s Paris, then, is a hybrid social performance that pulls on multiple cultural strings. On some level she is claiming the same popular, revolutionary power that helped propel the bourgeoisie to sartorial and social dominance. But, by adopting what has become bourgeois masculine dress, she automatically subverts it as well, echoing the old aristocratic cross-dressing games that are also part of Sand’s cultural heritage as a member of the nobility. What Flugel terms the Great Masculine Renunciation⁴⁹ —the cultural shift from men’s decorative Old Regime clothing to the dark, uniform-like business suit still favored today—was not designed for individuals like Sand. While David Kuchta complicates the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9-11.

⁴⁹ See J. C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes*. International Psycho-analytical Library; No. 18 (Leonard & Virginia Woolf at The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1930).

timeline and details of the Renunciation,⁵⁰ it is nevertheless indisputable that there was a gradual power shift from decorative to sober male attire throughout the eighteenth century that eventually included the replacement of breeches with trousers—and it is equally indisputable that the *pantalon*'s new power status, like that of its predecessor the *culotte*, was not meant to be shared with women.⁵¹ This makes the aristocratic Sand, who claims her working-class origins as a rationale for transvestism, both a gendered and class-based cross-dresser. I argue that by combining these multiple vestimentary identities on her body simultaneously, Sand is thus engaged in sartorial code-switching.

With this historical context in mind, I will demonstrate that Sand's view of clothing reflects her stance on contemporary social issues affecting women and other marginalized populations—a political consciousness that I contend derives largely from her own negotiations with a split class background. In this chapter I examine Sand's relationship to clothing as an instrument of agency indexed to class. This will involve exploring how urban space interacted with gender when Sand arrived in Paris, which is encapsulated most iconically in the figure of the *flâneur* (or city stroller), typically a well-off bourgeois man with plenty of leisure time (Fig. 4).⁵² I argue that Sand's hybridized appearance in Parisian public spaces parallels the brief popularity of arcade passages in ways that allow us to analyze the tension between her aspirations to *flânerie* and the

⁵⁰ See David Kuchta, "The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832," in *The Sex of Things*, edited by Victoria De Grazia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 54-78.

⁵¹ See Thorstein Veblen, "'Conspicuous Consumption' and 'Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture' from The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899)," in *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader*, by Daniel L. Purdy (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 261–288.

⁵² Louis Huart, *Physiologie du flâneur* (Paris: Aubert et Cie; Lavigne, 1841), 11-15.

actual classed and gendered realities she first had to overcome. Then, using a Girardian lens, I will argue that certain episodes and characters in Sand's first major novel *Indiana* underscore her class-based view of dress as an instrument of social agency (or indicator of its lack), facilitating a new reading of Sand's advocacy for the marginalized lower classes that she identifies with.

Hybridity and (Un)Belonging

As we have seen, questions of class arise immediately in Sand's autobiography; they continue throughout and intensify at key moments. In many of these episodes Sand seems to be grappling with the question of whether her hybrid class status (aristocratic father, working-class prostitute mother) can support its own contradictions. The social stressors accompanying such a mixed background in this time period become evident, for example, when Sand describes her birth: "Cette naissance, qui m'a été reprochée si souvent et si singulièrement des deux côtés de ma famille, est un fait assez curieux, en effet, et qui m'a parfois donné à réfléchir sur la question des races."⁵³ [*This birth, with which I have been reproached so often and so singularly on both sides of my family, is in effect a rather curious fact, which has sometimes caused me to reflect on the question of different breeds/classes.*] The slippery linguistic nuances of "race" in contemporary parlance underscore the connections between its nineteenth-century associations with class, gender, race, and any other "breed" (indicating that class was, in this time period, a biologically-inflected category). In an age growingly obsessed with evolutionary theory and, eventually, degeneration theory, class differences could be seen as markers of

⁵³ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 21.

physiological superiority or inferiority.⁵⁴ Sand is effectively presenting herself here, in the closest cultural translation of her words, as a half-breed. Reflecting her uniqueness as the legitimate child of an aristocratic father who has taken the unnecessary—and therefore unusual—step of marrying a lower-class mistress who already has children by other men, Sand is reproached for her uncomfortably blended existence by both the aristocratic and commoner sides of her family.

In the apologetic introduction to her autobiography, Sand navigates this tension largely by downplaying her noble heritage in favor of her mother’s working-class roots. Those biographers who have tried to flatter Sand by highlighting her “illustre origine” are, she says, probably “fort aristocrates” (extremely aristocratic themselves or sympathizers with the aristocracy; used here as a pejorative). Furthermore, Sand points out that they are seemingly unaware of “une tâche assez visible dans mon blason” [*a stain on my coat of arms*]⁵⁵—namely that her aristocratic heritage comes through illegitimacy.:

Or, si mon père était l'arrière-petit-fils d'Auguste II, roi de Pologne et si, de ce côté, je me trouve d'une manière illégitime, mais fort réelle, proche parente de Charles X et de Louis XVIII, il n'en est pas moins vrai que je tiens au peuple par le sang, d'une manière tout aussi intime et directe; de plus, il n'y a point de bâtardise de ce côté-là.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Foucault’s notion of “perversion-heredity-degenerescence,” in *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 26, 54, 118-19.

⁵⁵ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

[Yet, if my father was the great-grandson of Auguste II, King of Poland, and if, on his side, I find myself in an illegitimate but very real way to be the close relative of Charles X and Louis XVIII, it is no less true that I am connected to the people by my blood, in a manner just as intimate and direct; besides, there is no illegitimacy on that side.]

Sand here prioritizes her connection to “the people” through her mother. This is made even more explicit a bit earlier in the same passage: “On n’est pas seulement l’enfant de son père, on est aussi un peu, je crois, celui de sa mère. Il me semble même qu’on l’est davantage, et que nous tenons aux entrailles qui nous ont portées de la façon la plus immédiate, la plus puissante, la plus sacrée.”⁵⁷ *[One is not only the child of one’s father, but also a little, I believe, that of one’s mother. It even seems to me that one is more the mother’s child, and that we cleave to the womb that has carried us in the most intimate, powerful and sacred way.]* And in the face of social pressures to look down on her older maternal half-sister, Sand protests by honoring her mother’s bird-selling relatives above her father’s illustrious lineage:

Mais n'étais-je pas, moi aussi, la fille de Sophie Delaborde, la petite fille du marchand d'oiseaux, l'arrière-petite-fille de la mère Cloquard? Comment pouvait-on se flatter de me faire oublier que je sortais du peuple, et de me persuader que l'enfant porté dans le même sein que moi, était d'une nature inférieure à la mienne, par ce seul fait qu'il n'avait point l'honneur de compter le roi de Pologne et le maréchal de Saxe

⁵⁷ Ibid., 21.

parmi ses ancêtres paternels? Quelle folie, ou plutôt quel inconcevable enfantillage!⁵⁸

[...wasn't I also the daughter of Sophie Delaborde, the granddaughter of a bird-seller, and the great-granddaughter of Goodwife Cloquard? How could anyone have cherished hopes of making me forget that I came from the People, while persuading me that my sibling was inferior to me only because she did not have the dubious honor of counting the King of Poland and Marshal Saxe among her paternal ancestors? What madness! What inconceivable silliness!]

The class hybridity explicitly laid out in this passage works in combination with Sand's gendered code-switching, as Massardier-Kenney notes, to create a curious binary split. Unable to cope with her multiplicity, the cultural imaginary has produced two George Sands; she has typically been represented as either a harmless old grandmother who wrote children's tales or as a pants-wearing virago who consumed cigars and men with equal voracity, but seldom as both.⁵⁹ The degree to which Sand herself was responsible for this split is still a matter of dispute. For her part, Isabelle Naginski contends that by adopting both male attire and a male pseudonym Sand was able "to preserve her native female sympathy for traditional feminine preoccupations and values" or, in other words, switch comfortably between two balanced yet distinct gender codes. I argue that this combination of discrete masculine and feminine elements that would thus qualify as code-switching, and indeed, Naginski asserts that Sand's work shows evidence of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 635.

⁵⁹ Françoise Massardier-Kenney, *Gender in the Fiction of George Sand* (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 1.

juxtaposing male and female narratives to create a “multi voiced nonhierarchical dialogue” that reveals her personal views about the biological relationship between sex and gender as well as systems of domination like social class hierarchies.⁶⁰ In this paradigm Sand is *both* feminine and masculine in alternation, holding her distinctly different masculinity and femininity together to create what Naginski terms a total “androgyny.”⁶¹ This view is supported by representations of Sand like Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, in which one image is clearly a replication of the other and the illustrator, as if to emphasize that Sand’s body can function equally well in both gender roles, has not found it necessary to change her facial expression, body position or short pageboy hair. In the first image we see Sand *en homme*, but with a vest that shows her feminine curves. Similarly, the second image shows Sand *en femme*, but still sporting her cropped hair and an intricately knotted scarf that is reminiscent of a cravat.

These images show Sand’s contemporaries interpreting her body as a fluid entity switching between codes of appearance with ease, even simultaneously. One account of meeting Sand in the 1830s demonstrates the confusion of a binary thinker confronted with her multiple social indicators:

During an intermission, Buloz came over to Etienne and said, “Do you want to meet George Sand?” Answering that he did, Etienne immediately looked all around. *Seeing only men’s clothes*, he asked “George Sand is in the loge?” “Not at all,” replied Buloz. “Here she is.” In fact, *dressed as a man and with a man’s hairstyle*, she was sitting awkwardly on a stool from which Etienne hurriedly helped her rise

⁶⁰ Isabelle Hoog Naginski, *George Sand: Writing for Her Life* (Rutgers University Press, 1991), 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

while offering her his seat. Their conversation lasted throughout the intermission. At first Etienne's attention was captured by this famous woman's *beautiful face*, then the admiration he felt gave way to confusion caused by seeing *the masculine costume* on this beautiful creature. All Etienne's ideas were suddenly scrambled by *the clash of two currents flowing in opposite directions*. Was he talking to a man or a woman? *He couldn't make up his mind*, and he realized that the words he managed to speak lacked the ease with which he normally conversed...Etienne did his best, but every time his eyes moved *between this beautiful, intelligent face and the clothes giving the lie to her sex*, his ideas got jumbled again, and he ended up mute.⁶²

This portrayal of Sand's cross-dressing suggests that she did not succeed at "passing" completely. The question then remains: did she want to pass? Petrey goes on to suggest that Sand may have enjoyed the effect her ambiguous male/female appearance had on people, perhaps even leveraging its shock value. Such an explanation would align with Butler's description of "subversive laughter" in pastiche⁶³, making Sand (whether consciously or not⁶⁴) on some level a participant in the creation of a rebellious public image that, in many ways, undoes its own categories.

⁶² Sandy Petrey, *In the Court of the Pear King: French Culture and the Rise of Realism* (Cornell University Press, 2005), 77-78, emphasis added.

⁶³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 146.

⁶⁴ For example, Martine Reid notes in *Signer Sand: l'oeuvre et le nom* (Belin, 2003), 19 that Sand did not want to be seen as an *hommasse* (a man-woman), meaning that her intentions for self-representation may have been at odds with her actual impact on society and certainly with the ways her cross-dressed body was often interpreted by others.

That Sand may have purposely evolved this image in one direction or another does not seem palatable to Naginski, although Massardier-Kenney certainly finds it plausible. Citing Janis Bergman-Carton, she identifies Sand as “the single most represented woman in the first part of the nineteenth century” who controlled the “construction of her authorial persona [more] than any other woman in the period. The commission, conception, and dissemination of portraits was one of the several methods she used to elicit and imprint her persona on French culture.”⁶⁵ For Massardier-Kenney, Sand used image control—both on her own body and in secondary representations of it—to perform herself as an author. That many of her public portraits were more or less conventionally female-coded combines with Sand’s “masculine” behavior in controlling her own publicity campaign to produce a synthesis that Massardier-Kenney identifies as gender transcending, rather than androgynous in Naginski’s usage of the term. Instead, according to Massardier-Kenney, even when Sand “seems to articulate her view of gender differences, she is, in fact, deconstructing traditional definitions of gender...her own activity as a woman writer undermines the claim[s] she makes about the universality of [sexual] difference.”⁶⁶ A similar ambiguity persists in debates about whether Sand, with her exceptionalist attitude toward other women despite enjoying a personally liberated lifestyle, can be called a formal feminist.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Françoise Massardier-Kenney, *Gender in the Fiction of George Sand*, 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Pierre Vermeylen, *Les idées politiques et sociales de George Sand* (Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 49; or Martine Reid, *Signer Sand: l'oeuvre et le nom* (Belin, 2003), 168-169.

The tensions within and between these interpretations of Sand may arise, in part, from Sand's complicated mix of personal and social identities. This was not helped by the nineteenth century's widespread fear of hybridity as monstrous. Martine Reid has traced the complexity of Sand's own, often more traditionally complementarian understanding of social gender and the inversely radical perceptions of her peers that she was, by code-switching between gendered vestimentary signs, possessed of a pathological third-sexed body—with Edmond de Goncourt, for example, insisting that women like Sand certainly must have “des parties générales se rapprochant de l'homme, des clitoris un peu parents de nos verges.”⁶⁸ [*genitals closer to those of a man, with clitorises a bit like our penises.*] As if to mark all boundary crossing as chaotic, some of the language surrounding hybridity in this time period did not clearly distinguish between race, gender, and class, instead viewing them all as important and intertwined factors in a popular ideology of hereditary degeneracy that would persist well into the twentieth century. One critic named Lasserre is representative of such linguistic and conceptual tendencies when he notes, in relation to Sand's multiple hybridities, that she is “de race très mêlée.”⁶⁹ In contemporary parlance this could have indicated that Sand was mixed-race, mixed-gender, mixed-class, or some combination of all three (most often interpreted today as mixed-gender). Thus, while Massardier-Kenney seems to favor casting Sand as a deconstructive agent vis-à-vis the social category of gender—presumably to avoid confirming any of Lasserre's categories as valid—Naginski, on the other hand, embraces Sand's code-switching as evidence that even if critics like Lasserre are somewhat correct

⁶⁸ Martine Reid, *Signer Sand: l'oeuvre et le nom* (Belin, 2003), 221.

⁶⁹ Christine Planté, *La petite sœur de Balzac: essai sur la femme auteur* (Seuil, 1989), 121.

in identifying certain behaviors as “mêlée,” hybridity is nothing to be ashamed of in any case. From this standpoint Sand’s defiance of Lasserre’s norms both verifies her transgressive hybrid status *and* constitutes a positive aspect of her legacy. I argue that the ambiguous multiplicity of Sand’s “race” in Lasserre’s pejorative description of her is apt, given Sand’s focus on class and gender (and also, if to a lesser extent, what we now term race) in her political ideas and literary production.

Shifting Spaces: Classed and Gendered Agency in Paris

In the very early days of her career, Sand’s attitude toward transgressing cultural norms seems to have been cautious. A letter to her mother in 1831 that attempts to downplay the strains in Sand’s marriage is revealing in this regard. “You have been told that I wear the trousers,” she writes, “well, you have been deceived...On the other hand, I do not want my husband to wear my skirts. Each to [their] dress, each to [their] freedom.” Sand’s growing discontent and corresponding yearning for increased independence had apparently, judging from this letter, been interpreted as a dangerous indication that she wanted to metaphorically “wear the trousers.” But not to worry, she assures her mother; she does not wish to put her husband in the rhetorically transvestic position of a degraded wife. Besides, as young Sand insists, “my husband does what he wants—he has mistresses or not as he desires...rules over his possessions and his house as he wishes...You see that I value and trust him.” And as for the suggestion that she is taking too masculine a role in her domestic life, Sand hastens to add that “since I have given him complete control over our wealth, I do not think that I can be suspected of wanting to dominate him.” Interestingly for our discussion of Sand’s focus on class, she then points out to her commoner mother that she actually now has “[t]he same allowance, the same

ease as you. A thousand crowns a year make me wealthy enough, in view of the fact that I like writing and that my pen already furnishes me a small income.” Sand claims that this arrangement is enough for her, provided she can continue living in mutual respect and indifference with the husband she carefully avoids. “...I am entirely independent. I go to bed when he rises, I go to La Châtre or Rome, I come home at midnight or six o’clock in the morning; it is entirely my business.”⁷⁰ By insisting on her ability to support herself with her own pen and being able to survive on the same allowance as her non-noble mother, Sand seems to be suggesting here that she prioritizes independence above conventional upper-class luxury. At this specific moment, however, she is unwilling to admit that her marital arrangement indicates any breach of social decorum.

Sand’s letter insisting that she did not wear the trousers in her marriage reads ironically in light of what would follow. Later that same year, at age 27, she left her husband for Paris. She was still a legal minor in his custody, and her two children would be the focus of many domestic disputes over the years of marital separation that followed, but a thread of their entanglement had been cut in an age when divorce was nearly impossible to obtain.⁷¹ It was an important step on Sand’s road to independence. Disgusted with the dowry conditions of her transactional marriage agreement, which left her nominal owner of her estate but unable to manage it, Sand began questioning women’s legal status quo. “Je ne suis pas dans la position des propriétaires aisés,” [*I am not in the position of a wealthy landowner*] she would remind a friend years later while

⁷⁰ George Sand and Joseph Barry, *In Her Own Words* (Anchor Books, 1979), 326-327.

⁷¹ Miriam Schneir, *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (Random House, 1972), 25.

still battling to regain control of her estate. “Je suis femme, c’est-à-dire *mineure*, séparée de mon mari légalement, et cependant toujours sous sa dépendance pour les affaires d’argent, tant les lois protègent mon sexe.”⁷² [*I am a woman, which means I am a minor, separated legally from my husband and yet still dependent on him when it comes to money, thanks to the way our laws protect my sex.*] As a partial solution, in 1831 Sand arranged with her husband that she would begin habitually spending half the year in Paris to pursue a career.⁷³ This new environment would test her coping skills. Paris was gradually changing and hybridizing in ways that echo Sand’s own usage of sartorial code-switching to navigate urban public space, and I argue that a large part of Sand’s increased agency after coming to Paris is connected to her understanding of clothing as a tool for increasing (or decreasing) autonomy. As we have seen, male garments like the *pantalon* that Sand would wear in this endeavor served as a cultural shortcut for notions of autonomy, self-determination and domination of public space in early nineteenth-century France.

The Paris that greeted Sand on her arrival was filled with possibilities for the privileged, but life there was often chaotic and miserable for the lower classes. Sand would later say of Paris that “cette vaste et terrible capitale est devenue un gouffre où le sang se fige, où la richesse s’engloutit, où la vie se perd.”⁷⁴ [*this vast and terrible capital has become an abyss where blood congeals, where wealth devours itself, where life is lost.*] High art and the latest fashion blossomed alongside ancient specters of mass

⁷² Pierre Vermeulen, *Les idées politiques et sociales de George Sand*, 42.

⁷³ Béatrice Didier, “Préface,” in *Indiana* (Gallimard, 1984), 7.

⁷⁴ Pierre Vermeulen, *Les idées politiques et sociales de George Sand*, 140.

poverty and disease; 1832 saw one of the worst epidemics of cholera in the city's history, claiming thousands of victims in a few weeks. Sewage ran straight into the Seine and polluted the water source used by half of all Parisians for washing and drinking just as it had in medieval times.⁷⁵ The nation's capital hovered in frustration between old and new, modern and backward, a tension aggravated by France's slow start in joining the Industrial Revolution.⁷⁶ Still many years away from Haussmann's sweeping renovations and a century from lasting democracy, there were nevertheless strong signs of what the future might bring to Paris, famously encapsulated for Walter Benjamin in the emergence of commercial arcades. Made possible by modern materials like iron and glass, these long, tunneled passageways combined interior and exterior (Fig. 7).

I argue that Sand's hybridized negotiation of public and private dress codes parallels the arcades' hybridized negotiation of public and private urban spaces. If (for the bourgeoisie at least⁷⁷) interior space was discursively coded feminine in the early nineteenth century and exterior public space was viewed as masculine territory,⁷⁸ with regulations about who could go where that were often quite restrictive,⁷⁹ then both Sand

⁷⁵ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris* (Random House, 2002), 218.

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Belknap Press, 1999), 16.

⁷⁷ For a nuanced investigation of the ways women negotiated public space in post-Revolutionary France, see Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen, *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789-1914* (Ashgate, 2014).

⁷⁸ Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (MIT Press, 1992), 3-10.

⁷⁹ Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique* (Université Stendhal, 2007), 18; see also Victoria Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

and Parisian arcades are transgressive in their ability to combine supposedly exclusive qualities. “The public man” in Paris, as Michelle Perrot explains, was at this time considered to be an “eminent subject of the city” who “must embody its honor and virtue.” Conversely, “[t]he public woman constitutes its shame, the hidden area, dissimulated, nocturnal, a menial object, territory which one passes over, appropriated, without individuality.”⁸⁰ In this rhetoric any woman whose presence in Parisian streets was not condoned by strict bourgeois standards risked being conflated with the threat of urban prostitution. But I argue that Sand and Parisian arcade passageways stand as exceptions to these strictly gendered notions of interior and exterior space. As such, they are in the same category with other negotiations of what was often a practically artificial public-private split—“espaces-temps de plus ou moins grande mixité tels que les revolutions, les fetes publiques, les carnivals,” and so on.⁸¹ [*space-times of greater or lesser mixedness/hybridity such as revolutions, public festivals, carnivals.*] Because this binary division of space is an important aspect of contemporary hegemonic culture (or at least its rhetorical control of dominant cultural narratives), Sand’s ability to throw it into question constitutes a rebellion against bourgeois norms.

Sand’s decision to sartorial code switch was thus, I argue, thoroughly grounded in class. As we have seen, even the simple fact of her aristocratic background had the potential to evoke what Sand’s bourgeois contemporaries would have viewed as gender fluidity. Sand’s upbringing only confirmed such expectations; she had even applied for a

⁸⁰ Michelle Perrot, *Femmes publiques* (Textuel, 1997), 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

transvestite license in her home department of Indre-sur-Loire.⁸² Napoleon's reforms meant that cross-dressing had been formally illegal for three decades already by the time Sand arrived in Paris, and offenders could pay large fines or go to jail. Revolutionary- and Directoire-era gender bending inspired these draconian Napoleonic laws, which constituted a massive effort to enforce order in the post-Revolutionary period. When it came to transvestism, however, the law granted a few medical exceptions. Rosa Bonheur's official license was approved on the grounds of her frequent slaughterhouse visits to study animal anatomy for her paintings, demonstrating how inclusive these "health reasons" could be for elites.⁸³ Sand had enjoyed a similarly permissive upper-class environment in her youth and often wore men's clothing while out riding with her tutor. That Sand's tutor and grandmother should so casually allow her to wear male costume as a matter of comfort testifies to the aristocratic privilege in which she was raised, surrounded by the fields of her family's estate at Nohant. Sand's inherent territorial dominance at home is further underscored by her habit of sometimes continuing these cross-dressed horseback rides through town to purposefully shock the local bourgeois population (who she disdainfully called "imbeciles.")⁸⁴

Newly arrived in Paris, Sand once again put on her "disguise," but this time in order to navigate the modernizing city streets. For Walter Benjamin, nineteenth-century Paris was not only "the capital of the nineteenth century," it was also "a crucible for

⁸² *Le Parisien*, "Une «Permission de travestissement » pour George Sand," *Le Parisien*. April 2012, 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁴ Simone Vierende, *George Sand, la femme qui écrivait la nuit* (Presses Université Blaise Pascal, 2003), 58.

modernity,⁸⁵ thanks largely to innovations like arcades. Half-outside half-inside arcades were liminal, transitional spaces whose hybridity, as we have seen, echoed that of half-noble half-commoner Sand cross-dressing in her trousers. Arcades' glass ceilings provided natural light while at the same time protecting shoppers from rainy, muddy streets and their questionable sewage systems, just as Sand mimicked male dress while at the same time remaining voluptuously feminine in many ways. Both Sand and the arcades thus merged old representational codes repeatedly and paradoxically with new ones. In glass-roofed arcades, pedestrians experienced the natural lighting of a stroll down a city street, yet enjoyed the comforts of heating and ventilation previously found only in upscale interiors; in the arcades, for the first time "street and interior [were] one."⁸⁶ When Sand first came to Paris, arcades were still primarily aimed at male consumers. Their dual function was not only "to protect the passer-by from the dangers of the streets; they had to hold him, enslave him, body and soul...he was supposed to feel so enchanted that he forgot everything: his wife, his children, the office, and dinner."⁸⁷ In other words, the target demographic for arcade shopping was the archetypal nineteenth-century *flâneur*, or "stroller," whose leisurely wanderings through the city connoted pleasurable sightseeing and commercial activity. The *flâneur*'s possessive, default-male gaze made him potential owner of all he surveyed.

⁸⁵ Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-century Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2006), 1.

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project*, xii.

⁸⁷ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 213.

Arcades were built with the *flâneur* in mind. Indeed, until about 1870 the streets of Paris grew increasingly packed with carriages until “sweet flânerie,” or pleasurable strolling, became “impossible except in the arcades.”⁸⁸ Sand, like so many others, understood the benefits of the *flâneur*’s ability to people-watch all day, giving him an edge among the poets and writers whose world she hoped to infiltrate. But individuals in women’s clothing were not yet able to access the benefits of flânerie. Eventually arcades would develop, some two decades later, into the first department stores;⁸⁹ it was primarily after this that female consumers increasingly gained marketing attention for their agency and spending power. This transition was also marked by a shift from female shopkeepers (designed to seduce male shoppers) to male department store employees (designed to appeal to women).⁹⁰ Both arcades and department stores blended inside and outside space so that consumers could enjoy the novelty of strolling around indoors while gazing and being gazed upon, which had hitherto been made possible primarily by moving from interior to exterior. The advent of arcade shopping meant that these two spheres and their respective activities could be paradoxically—and delightfully—mixed together. A contemporary issue of the *Illustrated Guide to Paris* exults: “Lining both sides of the arcade, which gets its light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the *passage* is a city, a world in miniature.”⁹¹ For consumers used to the hustle and bustle of Paris street

⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project*, 32.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

boutiques, the new arcades seem to have produced a feeling of otherworldly bliss; they were, in Benjamin's words, "phantasmagorias" of space and time.⁹²

Through arcade roofs, the stunning revelation of natural light penetrated deep into building interiors whose construction used increasing amounts of iron. Elsewhere in the city, further harbingers of modernity were taking hold; gas lighting had been slowly replacing oil lanterns for almost a decade by the time Sand arrived. A softer, more romantic glow now lit up the continued threat of Parisian nights. The streets were still dirty, still packed with poverty and its attendant crime, but they were undeniably more charming.⁹³ Charm and sleaze, side by side; it was a paradox that challenged newcomers like Sand to fight for survival, a theme that would later echo in the novels of her friend Balzac. Still, as ever, Paris offered plenty of hope if you had enough money to buy it. Balzac understood this intimately; Sand, with her eternal idealism, learned it the hard way, as she would later recount in *Histoire de ma vie*:

...j'étais avide de me déprovincialiser et de me mettre au courant des choses...[mais je] savais bien qu'il était impossible à une femme pauvre de se passer ces fantaisies. Balzac disait: «On ne peut pas être femme à Paris à moins d'avoir 25 mille francs de rente.» Et ce paradoxe d'élégance devenait une vérité pour la femme qui voulait être artiste...je voyais mes jeunes amis berrichons...vivre à Paris avec aussi peu que moi et se tenir au courant de tout ce qui intéresse la jeunesse intelligente. Les événements littéraires et politiques...théâtres et des musées...ils voyaient tout, ils étaient partout. J'avais d'aussi bonnes

⁹² Ibid., 12.

⁹³ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 219.

jambes qu'eux et de ces bons petits pieds du Berry qui ont appris à marcher dans les mauvais chemins, en équilibre sur de gros sabots. Mais sur le pavé de Paris, j'étais comme un bateau sur la glace. Les fines chaussures craquaient en deux jours, les socques me faisaient tomber, je ne savais pas relever ma robe. J'étais crottée, fatiguée, enrhumée, et je voyais chaussures et vêtements, sans compter les petits chapeaux de velours arrosés par les gouttières, s'en aller en ruine avec une rapidité effrayante.⁹⁴

[...I was hungry to de-provincialize myself and become acquainted with the world...but I knew very well that it was impossible for a poor woman to have fantasies. Balzac used to say, 'You can't be a woman in Paris on under twenty-five thousand.' And this paradox, that a woman was not really a woman unless she was smartly dressed, became a reality for the woman who would be an artist...I saw that my young male friends...were living in Paris on as little as I, and learning about everything intelligent youths could wish. Literary and political events...theaters and museums...they saw everything, they went everywhere. I had legs as strong as theirs, and good feet which had learned to walk sturdily in their great clogs upon the rutted roads of Berry. Yet on the Paris pavement I was like a boat on ice. My delicate shoes cracked open in two days, my high heels made me fall, I didn't know how to lift my dress. I became worn out, tired, sick, and I watched my shoes and my clothes, not to mention my little velvet hats, which the gutters watered with rain, go to rack and ruin with alarming rapidity.]

⁹⁴ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 131-132.

Here Sand explicitly links gender performance to class and wealth. Her reasoning is clear; Sand didn't have the twenty-five thousand required to perform respectable womanhood in Paris, so by default she chose to be a man—she had observed that her “young male friends...knew about everything” because they could go everywhere and see for themselves; they were able to become *flâneurs*. This was something that Sand, as Catherine Nesci points out, desperately wanted to do in order to become the kind of modern artist her male friends also aspired to be.⁹⁵ As a socially privileged woman Sand already knew the interior world of the salons; she now wished to “espionner l'espace public et culturel des hommes,”⁹⁶ [*spy on the public and cultural space of men*] to achieve that “omniscience quasi balzacienne du regard” [*quasi-Balzacian omniscient gaze*] which set contemporary literature apart, and which Sand knew would be “[un] étape essentielle dans son devenir artiste”⁹⁷ [*an essential step in becoming an artist*] if she wanted to achieve the type of masculine-coded success that hinged on accessing Parisian public spaces. But practical problems loomed large for women of Sand's social standing who might attempt *flânerie*.⁹⁸ By the very decorativeness, expensiveness, and uncomfortable nature of their clothing they were marked not as autonomous spectators, but as objects of the spectator's gaze. Unlike most men, they could not go everywhere

⁹⁵ Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique*, 261.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁹⁸ For a detailed description of how bourgeois Parisian public space was intentionally designed to exclude women from power as the nineteenth century progressed, see Victoria Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

and see everything. As Gustave Flaubert wrote in *Madame Bovary* years before meeting (and coming to adore) George Sand:

A man at least, is free; he may travel over passions and over countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most far-away pleasures. But a woman is always hampered. At once inert and flexible, she has against her the weakness of the flesh and legal dependence. Her will, like the veil of her bonnet, held by a string, flutters in every wind; there is always some desire that draws her, some conventionality that restrains.⁹⁹

Flaubert here allows room for an understanding of cross-dressing's potential appeal, even if he does not overtly address or condone it. Paris's urban environment regularly provoked crises of identity related to autonomy and external social signifiers like clothing. Flaubert's description above perfectly captures the tension between desire and conventionality that marked that most cosmopolitan of maladies, the *mal du siècle*: caught between the old and the new, the antique and the modern, many artists of the early nineteenth century felt that the world no longer made sense and that the rising bourgeoisie, with its focus on money as the main component of social identity, had thrown traditional class distinctions into chaos. Romanticism, with its countercultural emotional abandon, was in the air.

Sand quickly found her footing in this shifting artistic landscape. After a stint as a writer in the galley of a Parisian newspaper, she broke through to literary success with the publication of *Indiana* in April 1832.¹⁰⁰ To match her literary accomplishments, Sand

⁹⁹ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, translated by Marx Aveling (Random House, 1938 [1857]), 103.

¹⁰⁰ George Sand, *Indiana* (Gallimard, 1984), 12.

cultivated a personal reputation as a *bohème*, once again with its attendant costume—for example, the fashionable Turkish slippers and silk Oriental dressing gowns that she sometimes wore at home, and which shocked her more prudish visitors. In the wake of France’s 1830 colonial invasion of Algeria, harem pants were all the rage among Romantic bohemians. Sand took a liking to them, and also to the bohemian lifestyle itself. Balzac’s recollection of their first meeting specifically mentions her Orientalist-inspired outfit: “pretty yellow slippers ornamented with fringes, neat stockings, and red pantaloons.”¹⁰¹ Here we see Sand fashionably dressing across cultures as well as genders. Her paradoxical simultaneity aligns with the hybridity that Walter Benjamin would later pinpoint as a key principle of bohemianism in this time period:

The flâneur still stands on the threshold—of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd...the crowd is the veil through which the city beckons...In the flâneur, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace—ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer. In this intermediate stage, in which it still has patrons but is already beginning to familiarize itself with the market, it appears as the *bohème*. To the uncertainty of its economic position corresponds the uncertainty of its political function.¹⁰²

And so Sand, with her multiple levels of in-between, joined the fledgling Romantic movement. Her appearance, background, and values were a perfect fit; simultaneously

¹⁰¹ Francis Henry Gribble, *George Sand and Her Lovers* (Scribner's Sons, 1907), 231.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project*, 10.

noble and working-class, Sand seemed to continually insist that she was everything but bourgeoisie—describing herself, for instance, as constantly “disgusted” by “bourgeois rapacity.”¹⁰³ For one thing, bourgeois respectability would have been anathema to the bohemianism Sand was busy cultivating on the Parisian literary scene. Her “disguise” allowed her to experience both anonymity on the streets of Paris and infamy in the pages of its yellow journalism sector, where countless newspapers lampooned her as a bluestocking.¹⁰⁴ Others caricatured her as voluptuously curvaceous in her masculine clothing while pretending to a sort of sexless intellectualism (Fig. 8). But I argue that caricatures such as these evoke, more than anything else, the mocking images of early nineteenth-century dandies who padded out their chests and corseted their waists in the name of fashion (Fig. 9). The supposed hypervisibility of Sand’s sartorially-illogical and self-betraying curves, then, forms part of a contemporary set of social anxieties about fashion and gender that include a deep-seated fear of too-fashionable and therefore effeminized males, in addition to female-to-male cross-dressers like Sand. The exterior projections inherent in such portrayals become clear when compared to Sand’s own description of her male attire as precisely the opposite of body-revealing:

A cette époque, la mode aidait singulièrement au déguisement. Les hommes portaient de longues redingotes carrées...qui tombaient jusqu'aux talons et qui dessinaient si peu la taille que mon frère, en endossant la sienne à Nohant, m'avait dit en riant: “C'est très joli, cela,

¹⁰³ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 231.

¹⁰⁴ Whitney Walton, "Writing the 1848 Revolution: Politics, Gender, and Feminism in the Works of French Women of Letters," *French Historical Studies* 18, no. 4 (1994): 84.

n'est-ce pas? C'est la mode, et ça ne gêne pas. Le tailleur prend mesure sur une guérite, et ça irait à ravir à tout un régiment.”¹⁰⁵

[At this time, fashion helped with disguising myself. Men wore long squarish overcoats...that fell to their heels and hid their waists so completely that my brother, putting his coat on at Nohant, had said to me laughingly, “It’s very pretty, isn’t it? It’s the fashion, and it’s comfortable. The tailor measures a sentry-box, and those measurements fit the whole regiment.”]

In this passage Sand appears to be making an effort to distinguish between the type of dandified waist-pinching that bourgeois detractors would have expected a feminized body (of either sex) to perform in men’s clothes and the formless, gaze-avoidant “disguise” she presents as her first foray into Parisian cross-dressing. But episodes like Sand’s reputed penchant for riding out across the city in men’s clothes with a dress-wearing Alphonse de Lamartine¹⁰⁶ would have been read by contemporary observers as further proof of her deviance, not to mention a possible throwback to aristocratic libertinism. As if to deflect such charges, Sand claims her mother’s working-class roots as her primary motivation for transvestism:

...j’avais posé ce problème à ma mère, qui [vivait à Paris] très élégante et très aisée avec 3,500 francs de rente: comment suffire à la plus modeste toilette dans cet affreux climat...Elle m’avait répondu: «C’est très possible...quand j’étais jeune et que ton père manquait d’argent, il avait imaginé de m’habiller en garçon. Ma sœur en fit autant, et nous

¹⁰⁵ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project*, 523.

allions partout à pied avec nos maris, au théâtre, à toutes les places. Ce fut une économie de moitié dans nos ménages.»

Cette idée me parut d'abord divertissante et puis très ingénieuse. Ayant été habillée en garçon durant mon enfance, ayant ensuite chassé en blouse et en guêtres avec [mon tuteur], je ne me trouvai pas étonnée du tout de reprendre un costume qui n'était pas nouveau pour moi...Je me fis donc faire une redingote-guêrite en gros drap gris, pantalon et gilet pareils. Avec un chapeau gris et une grosse cravate de laine, j'étais absolument un petit étudiant de première année. Je ne peux pas dire quel plaisir me firent mes bottes...Avec ces petits talons ferrés, j'étais solide sur le trottoir. Je voltigeais d'un bout de Paris à l'autre. Il me semblait que j'aurais fait le tour du monde.¹⁰⁷

[...I had asked my mother, who lived [in Paris] elegantly and easily on thirty-five hundred francs, how one might dress in the most modest style in that dreadful climate...She answered me, "It's very possible to do...when I was young and your father was hard up, he hit on the idea of dressing me as a boy. My sister did the same, and we went everywhere with our husbands, to the theater, anywhere we wanted. And it halved our bills."

At first I found this idea merely amusing and then I saw it was ingenious. Having been dressed as a boy in my childhood, and then having hunted in a men's blouse and boots with [my tutor], I was not at all disturbed by putting on a costume that was not new for me...So I had an overcoat made for me out of gray cloth, with trousers and vest to match. With a gray hat and a big wool tie, I was absolutely

¹⁰⁷ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 133-134.

transformed into a first year [male] student. I cannot express what pleasure my boots gave me...With those little iron heels, I was now solid on the sidewalk. I flew from one end of Paris to the other. I felt as if I could have gone around the world.]

Sand presents the class-based requirements of navigating urban public spaces as her motivating force. By insisting on the “most modest style” and her transformation into a first-year student, Sand emphasizes her choice as one of working-class necessity rather than aristocratic decadence. She also describes a deep affective connection to the clothes that have increased her autonomy, particularly the solid men’s boots that (unlike her fashionable female shoes) have transferred Sand’s previous physical capabilities to her new existence in Paris. Sand’s narrative highlights the fact that cross-dressing had always been a common technique among the lower classes, who used such techniques of sartorial code-switching to survive the big city. Strict gender adherence was left to the bourgeoisie who increasingly shaped official discourse as the nineteenth century continued.¹⁰⁸ Besides, as Sand’s anecdote about Balzac demonstrates, respectable ideals of womanhood had never really applied to lower-class girls anyway. Sand makes this devastatingly clear in the first few pages of *Indiana*:

Raymon était un homme de moeurs elegantes, de vie recherchée, d’amour poétique. Pour lui une grisette n’était pas une femme, et Noun, à la faveur d’une beauté de premier ordre, l’avait surpris...Tout cela

¹⁰⁸ Bonnie Bullough and Vern L. Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 183.

n'était pas la faute de Raymon; on l'avait élevé pour le monde...on avait petri toutes ses facultés pour un bonheur de prince...¹⁰⁹

[Raymon was a man of elegant manners and lifestyle, poetic when in love. For him a grisette was not a woman, and Noun, whose beauty was first-rate, had surprised him...None of this was Raymon's fault; he had been raised to be worldly...all his emotions had been stunted by his princely upbringing...]

Sand here highlights the widely-accepted fact that a *grisette*, or working-class servant girl, is *a priori* excluded from conventional definitions of womanhood. In their comparatively sensible attire and without the social or financial capital Balzac identifies as crucial for performing “real” womanhood, these *grisettes* were generally viewed (by worldly men like Raymon) as easily available sexual objects. It was so common for middle-class students to cohabit with disposable *grisettes* in a sort of common-law marriage before their “real” marriages that the practice became a cultural trope (Fig. 10). But lower-class girls like the *grisettes* often had to take whatever stability they could get. Parisian poverty reached new heights just before the 1830 revolution and Sand's arrival the following year:

A report by the *département* of the Seine in 1829 found that ‘of the 224,000 households in Paris at least 136,000 must be described as being poor, and a further 32,000 households as living on the edge of poverty’...there were once again soaring bread prices, wage cuts and unemployment; some 64,000 Parisians had no stable employment, signifying that they were dependent either on charity or on crime; while

¹⁰⁹ George Sand, *Indiana*, 75.

foreigners were horrified to discover four-year-olds working long hours
in the mills.¹¹⁰

If Balzac's "smartly dressed" real woman had to have "twenty-five thousand a year" to prove her authentic gender status, then there were an awful lot of females in the city who didn't qualify. They survived by adapting beyond bourgeois norms. Sand describes her working-class mother and aunt engaging with clothing in this way, disguising themselves as men to access the theater's cheaper *parterre* instead of the expensive side boxes where Balzac's impractically-dressed "real women" traditionally hid from direct view.¹¹¹

Indeed, the central anxiety of gender performance in public space at this time was that of active viewer and passive object. The *flâneur's* male gaze represented a powerful agency that women had been trained not to imitate but to accept. Industrialization and increased urbanization tripled the number of Parisian prostitutes between 1820 and 1850;¹¹² Fig. 11 demonstrates the appropriate posture for a *grisette* who does not wish to advertise her sexual services to the ubiquitous masculine scrutiny of a *flâneur* who knows that many lower-class women on the street are, in fact, sexually available to him. The *grisette's* posture in this image is the exact opposite of the working-class prostitute in Fig. 12 who openly invites her potential customers' inevitable male gaze. One type of prostitute, the *lorette*, was especially unsettling in her ability to broadcast sexuality in public spaces. Typically a working-class girl who achieved upward mobility through

¹¹⁰ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 217-221.

¹¹¹ Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 18.

¹¹² Victoria Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris*, 18.

relationships with wealthy men, she was not a *grande horizontale* or a *grisette* but something in between. The *lorette* sometimes gained spectacular wealth but was often a sensible stock market investor (until women were banned from playing the Parisian stock market in 1848). Largely because of this social ambition and financial savvy, Victoria Thompson describes the *lorette*'s class identity as "unstable," a fluid status of "unusual liberty" that was often "indicated by her penchant for masculine dress and masculine behavior."¹¹³ *Lorettes* would dress in male attire to enter the masculine areas of theaters just as Sand did, although their purpose was to flirt with potential clients by showing off their bodies in bifurcated trousers and curve-hugging vests. Maurice Alhoy's 1841 description of a *lorette* could in some respects apply equally to George Sand: "[she] changes her sex, one would believe that she had worn a hat all her life, that she was born with boots. She twirls her cane, stops passersby who are smoking and lights her cigarette from theirs."¹¹⁴ Although Thompson is careful to note that "no one would consider Sand a *lorette*," it is nevertheless remarkable how completely both of them were able to "[cross] the boundaries between masculine and feminine behavior," perhaps explaining why Sand took great pains, as we have seen, to assure readers of her autobiography that she was cross-dressing out of a desire for practicality and anonymity. The *lorette*'s "unusual and independent character" were, after all, still tied to prostitution. Her relatively greater freedom was contingent on her sexual availability to a male Parisian

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹¹⁴ Maurice Alhoy, *Physiologie de la lorette* (Aubert, 1841), 90.

public, ultimately putting her in the same non-woman/sexual object category as the lowly *grisette*.¹¹⁵

These are the gendered power dynamics underpinning Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough's assertion that in the early nineteenth century, "[s]trictly speaking, there may have been no female equivalents of the *flâneur* (George Sand notwithstanding)," even if "there were indeed women active in the public realm."¹¹⁶ Here we may note Sand's significance by the fact that she is the only candidate proposed as a possible contender for the position of *flâneuse*, yet her arrival on the Parisian scene preceded the true emergence of this "female [equivalent] of the *flâneur*" by several decades. Simply put, Sand could not be a *flâneuse* because she wore male costume in earnest (as the *lorettes*, who wore it flirtatiously, did not). Shielded and visually defined for others by the surface effects of her clothing (and thus, I argue, alternating perhaps distinctly but certainly rapidly between gendered codes), Sand functioned for all intents and purposes as a male *flâneur*. Sand's "disguise" thus did for her, in the public sphere, what Martine Reid has shown the adoption of a mask-like male pseudonym did for her work.¹¹⁷ Although many women like the *grisette* and the *lorette* were "indeed...active in the public realm" and negotiated some kind of place for themselves on the streets of Paris, most critics agree that it was only with the advent of department stores, driven by the female gaze as an engine of consumerism, that anything like a true *flâneuse* could be said

¹¹⁵ Victoria Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris*, 134-135.

¹¹⁶ Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-century*, 4.

¹¹⁷ Martine Reid, *Signer Sand: l'oeuvre et le nom*, 31-47.

to appear on the Parisian scene. Even then, their consumerism was often still considered a private household activity for many years simply because they were women.¹¹⁸ *Flânerie*, that fantasy of the leisured individual drifting dreamily through the city, was public by its very nature; in Sand's heyday this pleurably possessive gazing was still very much a male activity. Problematically, it was also something Sand desperately needed to engage in if she was going to be a successful Romantic novelist.

Sand referred to her male attire as "a disguise"¹¹⁹ precisely because it allowed her to go incognito at will, enabling her to gather material for her novels without anyone questioning her public presence or the masculinity of her all-absorbing *flâneur* gaze. Indeed, as she would later explain in her memoirs, gender performance was not just about putting on clothes. Behavior was also a key factor in successfully imitating the opposite sex, and there were distinct body languages associated with each social gender that could be clearly described and replicated. According to Sand, most of this behavioral "disguise" was actually about the expectation of seeing vs. being seen:

Les femmes savent peu se déguiser, même sur le théâtre. Elles ne veulent pas sacrifier la finesse de leur taille, la petitesse de leurs pieds, la gentillesse de leurs mouvements, l'éclat de leurs yeux, et c'est par tout cela pourtant, c'est par le regard surtout qu'elles peuvent arriver à n'être pas facilement devinées. Il y a une manière de se glisser partout sans que personne détourne la tête, et de parler sur un diapason bas et sourd qui ne résonne pas en flûte aux oreilles qui peuvent vous

¹¹⁸ Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-century*, 5.

¹¹⁹ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 133-134.

entendre. Au reste, pour n'être pas remarquée en *homme*, il faut avoir déjà l'habitude de ne pas se faire remarquer en *femme*.¹²⁰

[Women are not good at disguising themselves, even on stage. They will not sacrifice their wasp waists, their dainty feet, their pretty swaying, their lustrous eyes; yet only by giving up these qualities, especially the lustrous eyes, may they evade detection. There is a way of slipping hither and thither without one head turning your way, and of speaking in low, dull tones which do not shrill like a flute. Besides, if you do not want to be noticed as a man, you must first get the habit of not being noticed as a woman.]

Here again we see that Sand considers the crux of the matter to be autonomous control of one's own self-presentation; the ability to function as an active agent rather than a passive object. As previously discussed, Sand wanted the *flâneur's* power of observation in order to enrich her writing. This would require a shift from object of the gaze to active gazer, which required the ability to go unnoticed whenever necessary (something Sand identifies, in the preceding passage, as inherently more difficult for females to achieve). Sand could thus choose, through her dress and behavior, which role she wanted to play. At times it was convenient for her to remain the feminine object; at others she would don her "disguise" and assume the active position of anonymous gazer. This interplay of binaries was a far cry from the casual comfort that had motivated her use of hunting breeches and knee boots for horseback riding with her tutor at Nohant. In Paris, choices about self-presentation and personal image involved thousands of potential spectators.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 134-135.

Sand's ability to go incognito was directly related to the modern idea of the crowd, a concept that became increasingly real as the population of Paris ballooned exponentially in the early 1800s, leaping from 700,000 to over a million by 1844.¹²¹ The experience of getting caught up in this human flood could be a heady one. Along with the *flâneur's* commercial role as a "scout in the marketplace," he was of necessity an "explorer of the crowd," a *voyeur* of humanity whose observations of human life and behavior made perfect fodder for the kind of novels Sand hoped to write. These new urban crowds "[inspired] a sort of drunkenness, one accompanied by very specific illusions" that gave the *flâneur* a feeling of omnipotence.¹²² Sand's personal recollections capture this excitement:

Je n'étais plus une dame, je n'étais pas non plus un *monsieur*. On me poussait sur le trottoir comme une chose...on ne me regardait pas, on ne me reprenait pas; j'étais un atome perdu dans cette immense foule...on ne me voyait pas. Je n'avais aucun besoin de me presser pour éviter des paroles banales; je pouvais faire tout un roman...¹²³

[I was no longer a lady, but I was not completely a monsieur either. People pushed me on the sidewalk as if I were an inanimate thing...nobody looked at me, nobody approached me, I was an atom lost in this immense crowd...people did not see me. I had no need to hurry in order to avoid propositions ; I could compose an entire novel...]

¹²¹ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 212.

¹²² Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project*, 21.

¹²³ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 335.

In this passage Sand identifies her previous difficulties as directly related to the problem of being visually female. Now that she is male in appearance (if not completely a *monsieur* all the way through) she is freed from many of the difficulties a female of any social class could expect to encounter in Paris—being looked at, approached, bothered by catcalls. Without these obstacles Sand feels empowered to compose novels in her head as she moves through Parisian public space; she is now in *flâneur* mode, a “passant bohème”¹²⁴ in Nesci’s terms [*bohemian passerby*].

Male-coded anonymity was thus a precursor for the kind of artistic activity Sand hoped to engage in by experiencing the city. Sand could enjoy these privileges in her male attire only in certain contexts, especially after gaining celebrity as a famous author whose penchant for male costume was widely known. Eventually Sand would become a recognizable celebrity, leading her to welcome one aspect of Haussmann’s extensive remodeling of Paris with an audible sigh of relief: she could now walk through broad boulevards at a safe distance from other pedestrians, no longer “forced every moment,” as she put it, “to consult the policeman on the street corner or the affable grocer.”¹²⁵ Sand was once again granted the relative anonymity she craved. But if Sand found a way to transform her experience of urban space into a “mix-cité,”¹²⁶ others around her were not so lucky, as she well knew. In the next section, I examine one literary example of Sand’s attitude toward exploitation in hierarchical gender and class relationships.

¹²⁴ Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique*, 263.

¹²⁵ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 240.

¹²⁶ Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique*, 242.

Clothing, Oppression, and Suicide in *Indiana*

Throughout Sand's first major novel *Indiana*, published in 1832, we find questions of race and gender intersecting with more traditional genre conventions to produce a gendered, racialized, and class-conscious articulation of Romantic agency. I argue that Sand innovates a new version of the rare Romantic heroine who approaches the genre's suicide trope in specific ways. Whereas the typical male Romantic genius suffers from an artistic sensibility that pushes him to break with what Andrew Elfenbein terms his "respectable social codes,"¹²⁷ any resulting penalty is seldom harsher than the punishment he visits upon himself through extreme sensitivity and, eventually, he finds relief through death—which often takes the form of suicide. For cultural Others, however, social crises and notions of respectability take on new dimensions as their personal identities are often outside the norm in a way the Romantic poet-hero's is not, constraining their personal choices to a degree he cannot fully comprehend. Subaltern Romantics, in other words, have a lot more to deal with than melancholy. The extreme consequences imposed from outside on such individuals raise questions of agency that cast suicide, in the final evaluation, as an act of rebellion having much less to do with aesthetic suffering than with actual, physical problems of agency in nineteenth-century Western culture. Sand herself explicitly stated that sometimes "l'on se suicide dans la peur de se laisser mourir,"¹²⁸ [*kills oneself for fear of allowing oneself to die*]; in this paradigm "[l]e

¹²⁷ Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (Columbia University Press, 1999), 33.

¹²⁸ George Sand, *Le péché de Monsieur Antoine*, vol. 2 (Calmann-Lévy, 1887), 185.

suicide peut être...‘un hommage rendu à la morale publique.’”¹²⁹ [*suicide can be...a tribute to public morality.*] Sand’s attitude toward the sometimes redemptive power of self-annihilation resurfaces in *Indiana* where attempted and completed suicides are undertaken by various characters as acts of moral resistance to a corrupt society.

Cross-dressing is a key aspect of Romantic literature that Sand’s *Indiana* repurposes to underscore these themes. I argue that its presence in the text signals a societal power crisis where subaltern characters “try on” their social superiors’ identities and vice versa. This also distinguishes Sand from her masculine counterparts. Margaret Waller has shown¹³⁰ that male Romantic authors often engaged in rhetorical cross-dressing, a metaphorical code switch from what contemporaries considered a masculine to a feminine authorial “voice,” and that doing so was foundational to their success. Ross Chambers describes how the failed 1830 French revolution gave rise to a generation of men caught between anger and helplessness who, like Chateaubriand, felt themselves exiled even on paternal soil. In most cases their disillusionment and anger could not be safely acted out through political channels, resulting in an artistic defiance that “sublimated (and hence repressed)” itself by becoming “a writing of melancholy. For melancholia is anger vaporized...[it] is not necessarily writing that thematizes sadness; rather it espouses the decentering and vaporization of being that are the principal features of melancholia.”¹³¹ This “vaporization of being” echoes the suicidal urge that famously

¹²⁹ Pierre Vermeulen, *Les idées politiques et sociales de George Sand*, 84.

¹³⁰ See Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel* (Rutgers University Press, 1993).

¹³¹ Ross Chambers, *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 33.

characterized Chateaubriand's youthful political frustrations. Such frustrated urges invert and eventually justify withdrawal from the public sphere by taking on the markers of affected Romantic femininity that Waller identifies: "alienated subjectivity," a "rhetoric of sickness" that simultaneously glorifies and pathologizes excessive emotion, the exaltation of Woman as both angel and curse, and the uneasy *mal du siècle* felt by those who perhaps longed not so much to change traditional social systems as to take their rightful place in them.¹³² Baudelaire put the conundrum of artistic male effeminacy more sharply into perspective with his blunt pronouncement that "[the] more a man cultivates the arts, the fewer erections he has."¹³³ If traditional masculinity seemed to be getting him nowhere, a male Romantic author could always trade it in for "figurative cross-dressing,"—that heady mix of culturally feminine-coded sentimentality and heavy emoting that had made Chateaubriand so wildly popular.¹³⁴

If these feelings of dispossession and entitlement underpinned the male Romantic's femininized authorial voice, I argue that Sand, in contrast, was able to draw directly on many of her own real-life experiences to create the Romantic pathos of her novels. She did not have to engage in rhetorical transvestism to access feminized grief. I contend that class conflict is a key element of Sand's experience and understanding of the oppression she would engage in her novels. Torn between the pressures of a commoner

¹³² Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, 42, 183.

¹³³ Charles Baudelaire, "Mon coeur mis à nu," in *Journaux intimes*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:702.

¹³⁴ Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, 43.

mother and aristocratic grandmother, Sand would inherit the family estate over the heads of her illegitimate half-siblings and become the wife of an often drunk and sometimes explosive husband who squandered their money and seduced the maids. The biographical context immediately preceding *Indiana*'s creation is, of course, that Sand had just left her husband in 1831. With *Indiana*, Sand strikes a significant blow at the authoritative legal and religious institution of marriage. Her choice is to portray the wider pitfalls of arranged marriage through individual tragedies—she is using the particular to point to a larger ideal. American critics correctly discerned the nature of Sand's project, albeit chastising her in the harshest of terms:

She is totally without principle or religion, an anarchic soul in revolt against marriage, which in France is a 'system of legal prostitution.' [Her books] were written because she was smarting under disappointment, their purpose being to prove the laws of God and society all wrong.¹³⁵

Others were more understanding. Delphine de Girardin wrote that Sand was not at fault if her "âme est désenchantée...Un poète...chante ce qu'il éprouve...Ne lui reprochez point de haïr la société; reprochez à la société d'être arrivée au point d'inspirer avec raison cette haine."¹³⁶ [*soul is disenchanted...A poet...sings their own experiences...Do not reproach her for hating society; reproach society for having rightly inspired that hate.*] Here we see the degree to which contemporary observers understood that Sand had

¹³⁵ Howard Mumford Jones, "American Comment on George Sand, 1837-1848," *American Literature* 3, no. 4 (1932): 398.

¹³⁶ Delphine Gay de Girardin, *Lettres Parisiennes du Vicomte de Launay* (Mercure de France, 1986), 135-136.

drawn her portrayals of unhappily married women from her own marital discontents; some critics were also alert to her subversion of formal religion (here caught up with the legal questions surrounding marriage).

Given this context, I contend that throughout *Indiana* Sand's two main female characters are, in her signature idealist style, symbolic figures indexed to socially subordinate identities whose clothing also sometimes carries a deep representative power. In direct contravention of the process traced by Jones and Stallybrass, wherein clothing lost much of its fetishistic influence in the early modern period and became an empty commodity,¹³⁷ these key characters' dress and appearance are deeply significant—imbued, unlike commodities, with memory and meaning. Some of the clothing in *Indiana* is in fact so powerful that it can produce social commentary through mimetic doubling, as we will see in the characters of Indiana and her maid Noun. The class and race of these characters matters, as does their gender. In his analysis of *Indiana* Didier traces Sand's representation of law, opinion, and illusion through the three main male characters of the novel, with Indiana herself, in Sand's own words, representing "...la femme...*les passions comprimées, ou...supprimées par les lois; c'est la volonté aux prises avec la nécessité; c'est l'amour heurtant son front aveugle à tous les obstacles de la civilisation.*"¹³⁸ [*...womanhood...the passions compressed, or...suppressed by laws; she is willpower battling necessity, love charging its blind forehead against all of civilization's obstacles.*] Romantic sentimentality is peeled back in this description to reveal its

¹³⁷ See Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹³⁸ George Sand, *Indiana*, 40.

affective source: the raw emotional response that marginalized individuals do not have to affect via transvestic literary posturing, but which rises inevitably from their actual, physical subjugation in French colonial culture. That older men should habitually take teenaged brides like *Indiana's* eponymous character, or that colonized people like Noun should live under the *métropole's* domination, proves for Sand that nineteenth-century French society had engaged itself in a systematic sacrifice of certain groups for the advantage of others. In her introduction to the edition of 1842 Sand articulates this in kind of proto-intersectionalist statement that also recalls Hegel's master-slave dialectic:¹³⁹

...le malheur de la femme entraîne celui de l'homme, comme celui de l'esclave entraîne celui du maître, et j'ai cherché à le montrer dans *Indiana*. On a dit que c'était une cause individuelle que je plaidais; comme si, à supposer qu'un sentiment personnel m'eût animé, j'eusse été le seul être infortuné dans cette humanité...!¹⁴⁰

...the unhappiness of the woman causes that of the man, as that of the slave causes that of the master, and I have tried to show this in *Indiana*. They said that I was only pleading my individual cause; as if, simply because personal feeling had motivated me, I was somehow the only unfortunate being in humanity...!

Against the multiply gendered and raced oppression of contemporary French society, as epitomized in her female slave and subordinated wife characters, *Indiana* stands as

¹³⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel et al., *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 111.

¹⁴⁰ George Sand, *Indiana*, 46.

George Sand's first great statement of rebellion. In it she attacks racial and gendered issues under the rubric of class—her perennial obsession—and I argue that she does so partly by imbuing the clothing of her main characters with affective and symbolic significance.

Indiana is important not only because it made Sand famous, but also because it clearly delineates how suicide becomes a valid choice in societies arranged to facilitate the routine, ritualistic sacrifice of marginalized individuals on a modernized scale. Its title character is a French noblewoman who comes from a tropical French colony (the modern-day island of Réunion near Madagascar). Indiana has been raised alongside a Creole girl of the exact same age: “Nous sommes nées presque le même jour,” [*We were born almost the same day*] Noun explains to Raymon, “elle est ma soeur de lait. Nous ne nous sommes jamais quittées, elle ne voudra pas que je la quitte...”¹⁴¹ [*she is my milk sister. We have never left each other; she would never want me to leave her..*] This is to say that Noun's mother was probably Indiana's wet nurse. The two women are thus connected by their very essence. When it becomes apparent that Indiana is slowly dying of misery—caused by her loveless arranged marriage to an ex-soldier forty-one years her senior—she remarks on the fact that Noun seems to feel her distress more than she does.¹⁴²

For Sand, Noun and Indiana function as two halves of the same person, respectively cast as body and soul. This concept is reinforced when she describes unscrupulous seducer Raymon's attraction to both women in the following terms: “Il

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴² Ibid., 60-61.

avait aimé Noun avec les sens; il aimait [Indiana] de toute son âme.”¹⁴³ [*He had loved Noun with his senses; he loved [Indiana] with his whole soul.*] Sand’s portrayal of these women as mirror aspects of a single self is immediately complicated by the chaos that Raymon brings into their relationship. Because his desire shifts from Noun to Indiana, and because both are in love with him before either realizes that he has seduced the other, he is at first able to prevent Noun from learning that he now loves her mistress, and Indiana from realizing that her maid is pregnant with his child. A multilevel narrative of classed and racialized exploitation is thus constructed. Raymon explicitly wants to trade up from black¹⁴⁴ maid to white mistress: “La femme d’un pair de France...serait une conquête précieuse; mais une femme de chambre!...La femme de qualité vous sacrifie vingt amants qu’elle avait; la femme de chambre ne vous sacrifie qu’un mari qu’elle aurait eu.”¹⁴⁵ [*The wife of a French noble...would be a precious conquest; but a chambermaid!...The woman of quality sacrifices her twenty lovers for you; the chambermaid only sacrifices the husband she could have had.*]

When Noun discovers Raymon’s betrayal shortly after Indiana has unwittingly offended her, she is so shocked by both instances that she promptly commits suicide in the river. She has realized that Raymon no longer loves her except as a possession of his

¹⁴³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion of textual evidence pointing to Noun’s African heritage and the importance of claiming her blackness in current scholarship, see Doris Kadish, “Representing Race in *Indiana*,” *George Sand Studies* 11. 1-2 (1992): 22-30. On page 22 Kadish points out that while *Indiana* certainly demonstrates many contemporary “ideological limitations” and “blind spots” when it comes to racialization, it is also a “strong, albeit implicit, identification with and appeal on behalf of persons of color and the disempowered in society generally.”

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 75.

new love interest, Indiana. Noun removes herself from this mimetic triangle through suicide. Here it is important to note that Noun kills herself as an objection, not necessarily to the position of sacrificial victim in general, but specifically to the *type* of sacrificial victim she has become. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Raymon perceives their relationship as an economic transaction (pointing to colonial capitalist tendencies), while Noun understands it as a noble, non-commercial sacrifice for love (and we have seen, in the previous passage, how little value Raymon places on this sacrifice when it comes from a socially and economically disadvantaged woman). When the two systems clash, crisis occurs—and that crisis is expressed through a transmission of class-based identity via clothing, as Indiana temporarily *becomes* Noun in a sort of quasi-possession ritual.

In an episode preceding her death, Noun has more or less tried on Indiana's identity by sneaking Raymon into the house, then spending a night with him in her mistress's bedroom while also wearing Indiana's clothes.¹⁴⁶ The mimetic nature of that scene is now echoed, after Noun's suicide by drowning, as Indiana welcomes Raymon back to her fateful bedchamber dressed in Noun's clothes and holding a bundle of the dead girl's hair. She seems almost to invite Noun's ghost to possess her body through assimilating her material synecdoches. This sends a clear and instant message to Raymon: Indiana has discovered his betrayal of her maidservant and rejects his hierarchical evaluation of their worth. The implication is that the two women are mimetic doubles whose affinities persist across their class differences, meaning that Raymon cannot mistreat one without affecting the other:

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 100-105.

Indiana lui tournait le dos, elle était enveloppée d'une pelisse doublée de fourrure. Par un étrange hasard, c'était la même que Noun avait prise à l'heure du dernier rendez-vous pour aller à sa rencontre...[Raymon] resta sur le seuil, attachant son regard effrayé sur cette figure immobile, et tremblant comme un poltron qu'en se retournant elle ne lui offrit les traits livides d'une femme noyée...Il se pencha, et vit une masse de cheveux noirs irrégulièrement longs qui semblaient avoir été coupés à la hâte et qu'Indiana rassemblait et lissait dans ses mains.

...Vous me demandiez hier, lui dit-elle avec une espèce de sourire, si je vous en ferais bien le sacrifice.

...[Raymon dit]..."Pauvre Noun!...c'est elle qui avait le droit de se venger, et qui ne l'a pas fait. Elle s'est tuée, afin de me laisser l'avenir. Elle a sacrifié sa vie à mon repos."¹⁴⁷

[Indiana had her back to him, she was wrapped in a fur-lined cloak...it was the same that Noun had worn...[Raymon] stood in the doorway, fixing his terrified eyes on this immobile figure, shaking like a leaf at the thought that she would turn her head and show him the livid features of a drowned woman...He bent over and saw a mass of irregular black hair that had been quickly chopped off, which Indiana was holding and stroking with her hands.

...“You asked me yesterday,” she replied with a strange smile, “whether I would sacrifice my hair for you.”

...[Raymon said]...“Poor Noun!...it was she who had the right to take revenge, and who did not do it. She killed herself, in order to leave the future clear for me. She sacrificed her life for my convenience.]

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 190-193.

Here, Indiana and Noun are treated as physically intertwined, and Raymon seeks to exploit them both. Although Raymon assumes that Noun has killed herself for his convenience, I contend that she committed suicide for quite the opposite reason. Noun's inconvenient presence continues to haunt Raymon not only via conventional memory, but also through the embodied material memories facilitated by Indiana wearing Noun's clothing.

Indiana implicitly understands that Noun has removed herself from a Girardian mimetic triangle, even if she does not yet comprehend all the reasons for this decision. Witness, for example, the affective relationship between Noun's corpse and Indiana's physical reaction to its discovery. Here we may note that Indiana's husband owns an industrial factory sited on a river, making it most likely that the mill pushing Noun's body down the river is used for textile production.¹⁴⁸ I argue that this suggests an anxiety about increasing industrialization in which Sand confronts a factory system that treats people like things. This interpretation is reinforced by the scene where Indiana, seeing Noun's corpse for the first time, can only comprehend her friend's horrible death by fixating on the sodden clothing that makes her body look like a pile of rags:

Le bruit du moulin...commençait à se faire entendre derrière les saules de l'autre rive. La rivière, s'élançant dans les écluses que l'on venait d'ouvrir, s'agitait déjà à sa surface; et, comme [Indiana] suivait d'un œil mélancolique le cours plus rapide de l'eau, elle vit flotter, entre les roseaux, comme un monceau d'étoffes que le courant s'efforçait d'entraîner. Elle se leva, se pencha sur l'eau, et vit distinctement les

¹⁴⁸ Lee T. Wyatt, *The Industrial Revolution* (Greenwood Press, 2008), 127.

vêtements d'une femme, des vêtements qu'elle connaissait trop bien. L'épouvante la rendait immobile; mais l'eau marchait toujours, tirant lentement un cadavre hors des joncs ou il s'était arrêté, et l'amenant vers [Indiana]...

Un cri déchirant attira en ce lieu les ouvriers de la fabrique; [Indiana] était évanouie sur la rive, et le cadavre de Noun flottait sur l'eau, devant elle.¹⁴⁹

[The noise of the windmill...began to rise behind the willows on the opposite bank. The river's...surface was agitated; and while [Indiana] followed its course with a melancholy eye, she saw something floating between the reeds, like a pile of rags dragged slowly by the current. She stood up, leaned over the water, and saw that they were the clothes of a woman, clothes she recognized only too well. Horror froze her to the spot; but the water continued its course, slowly pushing a corpse out of the cattails where it had lodged, and bringing it towards [Indiana] ... A piercing scream brought the workers running; [Indiana] had collapsed on the riverbank, and Noun's corpse was floating on the water in front of her.]

Noun's body is described here as a bundle of wet clothing that has been processed through the textile mill, which I argue is analogous to her objectification and exploitation in an increasingly industrialized system of capitalism that has "used her up" on multiple levels—first by hierarchizing her into a state of racialized servitude, and then by virtue of that economic and social status making her vulnerable to sexual exploitation at the hands of men like Raymon. Noun's full transfiguration into a dead commodity object in this passage (a "pile of rags," the "clothes of a woman,") points to such a reading.

¹⁴⁹ George Sand, *Indiana*, 119.

No further description of the corpse or of Noun's death is provided throughout the remainder of the narrative. Later, however, we see that in "mourning for her companion, Indiana cried also for herself..."¹⁵⁰ Sand makes it clear that Raymon's callous, class-based desire to possess Indiana has triggered Noun's suicide, and in their body-soul relationship we see Sand's repetitive insistence that passion and reason should not be diametrically opposed as commonly accepted in the Cartesian tradition. Because she rejects all physical desire as inherently problematic, Indiana has metaphorically denied her bodily existence by resisting Raymon's advances. This resistance coincides with her accidental insulting of Noun and also with Noun's discovery that Raymon is using her; it also marks the point at which Raymon realizes that he no longer desires Indiana's body.¹⁵¹ Trapped in a forced marriage, Indiana must sacrifice either her honor or her bodily desires. She chooses the latter. And, in a key moment where Raymon hopes to consummate their relationship physically, Indiana rejects him by disguising herself in the trappings of the drowned Noun.

Sand's parallels are clear: Noun is a proxy victim for the violence that Indiana inflicts on herself in her efforts to avoid holding Raymon responsible for his troubling attempts at seduction. Indiana and Raymon are thus both guilty, albeit in different ways, of displacing their violence onto a colonized subject. "J'ai rejeté sur elle toute l'aigreur que je me sentais contre vous,"¹⁵² [*I placed on her all the irritation that I felt against you*] Indiana explains to him. Sand openly highlights the women's supernatural

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 126.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵² Ibid., 147.

connection in the scenes leading up to Noun's suicide: "Raymon s'enfuit, laissant chacune de ces deux femmes dépositaire d'un secret qui devait porter le désespoir dans l'âme de l'autre."¹⁵³ [*Raymon fled, leaving each of these women in possession of a secret that would bring despair to the soul of the other.*] These "milk sisters" are, in René Girard's sociohistorical theory, the archetypal monstrous doubles who make large-scale exploitative social systems possible. They "occupy the equivocal middle ground between difference and unity that is indispensable to the process of sacrificial substitution—to the polarization of violence onto a single victim who substitutes for all the others."¹⁵⁴

Indiana is primarily a novel about resisting bourgeois marriage's mercenary transaction of women and girls. Indeed, Sand will frequently equate the French dowry system with selling young brides into slavery to their husbands, much as Irigaray does in her discussions of women and children as exchange values ("Most of our societies have been built on sacrifice."¹⁵⁵) Sand takes this a step further by explicitly comparing the plight of white French women to their colonized counterparts and arguing that both oppressions, while different in severity, are part of the same system. But in tandem with this goal, I argue that its characters also implicitly question the very structure of French imperial civilization. The novel traces concentric circles of oppression in which Raymon, as an upper-class Frenchman living at the heart of the empire and enjoying all its privileges, more or less comes out on top regardless of what he does. Indiana, as a white upper-class woman, suffers primarily from her loveless marriage. It is notable that she

¹⁵³ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵⁴ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 161.

¹⁵⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 75.

begins to fight back in earnest only after dressing in her more courageous dead maid's clothing, suggesting that it has imbued her with a kind of resistant strength. In the final evaluation, I argue that it is the black, female, and thus doubly-oppressed Noun, with her class-blurring exchanges of clothing, who destabilizes colonialism's paradoxical calls for imitative assimilation alongside a "polarization of violence" onto conveniently dehumanized victims. After momentarily donning the exterior trappings of a white mistress to no avail, and finding herself exploited by a nobleman who never intended to elevate her social standing through marriage, Noun recognizes and escapes this system of oppression quite simply: by refusing to live within it any longer.

Conclusion: Return to Nohant

In an echo of *Indiana*'s proto-intersectionality, Sand explained in 1834 that she believed the proletariat class shared a common bond of oppression with women. "Il y a de mystérieuses et profondes affinités entre ces deux êtres, le pauvre et la femme," [*There are mysterious and profound affinities between these two beings, the poor person and the woman*], she wrote in *Isadora*. "La femme est pauvre sous le régime d'une communauté dont son mari est chef; le pauvre est femme puisque l'enseignement, le développement lui est refusé...ces rapports profonds et délicats...me frappent..."¹⁵⁶ [*Woman is poor under the thumb of a society in which her husband is in control; the poor person is a woman because education and development are refused to him...I find these deep and nuanced similarities very striking.*] This understanding of a common cause between gendered and classed subalterns in French society led Sand to declare, when her editor wanted to water down her political ideas, that

¹⁵⁶ Pierre Vermeyley, *Les idées politiques et sociales de George Sand*, 27.

...dans tous mes livres jusque dans les plus *innocents*...vous y verrez une opposition continuelle contre vos bourgeois...vos gouvernements, votre inégalité sociale, et une sympathie constante pour les hommes du peuple...vous ne trouveriez pas un de mes volumes où l'inégalité et le privilège (et l'argent est le premier de tous les privilèges) ne soient attaqués.¹⁵⁷

[...in all my books, right down to the most seemingly innocent...you will see a continual opposition to your bourgeois classes...your governments, your social inequality, and a constant sympathy for the people...you could not find one of my books in which inequality and privilege (and money is the first of all privileges) are not attacked.]

One of Sand's most remarkable extensions of politics beyond the literary sphere is her role in the 1848 Revolution, during which she briefly served as the interim government's Minister of Propaganda.¹⁵⁸ As ever, Sand's strides into public space—and this time public office—gave rise to a wave of reactions, among them the snarky comment from her own colleague, the poet Alphonse de Lamartine, that Sand had “perdu son sexe dans la mêlée du génie.”¹⁵⁹ *[lost her sex in the fray of genius.]* One contemporary newspaper caricature portrays Sand as a Russian doll (“gigogne”) producing hordes of childlike politicians from under her skirts (Fig. 13). This is, the image suggests, what Sand's supposedly undue influence and nepotism has unleashed in the wake of the revolution. Such images cast Sand as a monstrously inverted, domineering maternal figure displaced

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵⁸ Martine Reid, *George Sand* (Gallimard, 2013), 92-180.

¹⁵⁹ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Cours familier de littérature: une entretien par mois* (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1869), 92.

from her proper domestic sphere. Sand does not even need to be wearing male attire to portray the intended message; her masculine stance, one leg propped up with a riding crop resting across her knee (and a sarcastic halo of light around her head) is enough to physically mark the code switch of a woman assuming male dominance in a public role that, as the image suggests, has made her problematically powerful. Another caricature (Fig. 14) plays on Sand's well-known early career transvestism by placing a top hat in the background as she writes one of her ministerial bulletins, dressed in a Greek costume and holding a poet's lyre. "Comme elle engraisse, notre muse" [*How she fattens up, our muse*] the caption reads. This wordplay casts Sand as both physically hungry and power-hungry, qualities that mark her body as supposedly unattractive (and thus unfeminine) in its appetites. The background top hat suggests that Sand has thrown off her masculine disguise to briefly present herself as feminized and as a literary genius; these last two identities are thrown into question by her unflattering portrayal and by the suggestion that she will return, once she is done playing the sartorial part of muse and poet, to her original or primary status as a transvestite. Both images communicate a deep-seated fear of Sand's ability to play multiple social roles—and the power boost that her new ministerial post could potentially give to this boundary-crossing energy.

Such fears were perhaps not unfounded. Sand did in fact want the new government to break down and reconfigure social classes. Her hope for the Revolution, as Sand later wrote, was that it would find a way to "voir arriver le moment ou le producteur et l'exploiteur voudront tous deux, de bonne foi...signer un acte

d'association...¹⁶⁰ [*see the moment arrive when the producer and the exploiter will both wish, in good faith...to sign a treaty of association...*] When Napoleon III's *coup d'état* toppled the fledgling Republic in 1851, it came as a heavy blow. "J'avais rêvé dans un avenir prochain...une crise sociale toute pacifique ou les deux classes...pourraient faire un pacte d'étroite solidarité..." [*I had dreamed of a near future in which...a peaceful social revolution would bring the two classes into a pact of close solidarity...*] But it was not to be. As Martine Reid points out, 1848 saw the reality, for a few golden months at least, of "le bel idéal politique de Sand et de ses amis républicains et socialistes; la chute, toutefois, a été particulièrement rude..."¹⁶¹ [*the beautiful political ideals of Sand and her republican and socialist friends; the fall, when it came, was particularly painful...*] Sand bemoaned the fact that "Ce coup d'Etat...ne nous a conduits qu'à un affaissement tumultueux à sa surface, pourri en dessous..."¹⁶² [*This takeover has brought us to a tumultuous collapse on the surface that is rotten underneath...*] Stunned and crestfallen, Sand went back to her estate. She wrote to Charles Poncey that she was "accablée d'abord d'un tel dégoût en quittant Paris...que j'ai été malade et comme imbécile pendant des jours. Ma santé se rétablit, mais mon âme restera à jamais brisée..."¹⁶³ [*weighed down by such a great disgust on leaving Paris...that I was sick and almost insane for days. My health has returned, but my soul will forever be broken...*]

¹⁶⁰ George Sand, *Impressions et souvenirs par George Sand* (Michel-Lévy Frères, 1873), 35.

¹⁶¹ Martine Reid, *George Sand*, 192.

¹⁶² George Sand, *Impressions et souvenirs par George Sand*, 18.

¹⁶³ Martine Reid, *George Sand*, 190.

Some of Sand's contemporaries, such as Eugene de Mirecourt, believed that Sand retained aspects of cultural masculinity after her return to Nohant. Mirecourt's 1854 series "Les Contemporains" includes a work entitled *George Sand* wherein the critic describes Sand's life at her estate as "patriarchal."¹⁶⁴ Mirecourt's use of this term corresponds to Rubin's definition of it as "a specific form of male dominance" such as that found in the Old Testament,¹⁶⁵ which is precisely how he interprets Sand's assumption of the rights and privileges attached to running her estate after winning it back from her estranged husband. In this paradigm Sand has traded life as a young dandy for the quieter one of a gentleman farmer—from one mode of male-coded behavior to another. In fact, Mirecourt is so impressed with Sand's lordly attentions to the village peasants that he casts her as another Jesus: "They look to her as a savior always certain of being succored." After recounting how Sand cured a local woman of leprosy, he adds, "Such deeds need no comment; it is a page out of the Gospel."¹⁶⁶ From this viewpoint Sand's behavior extends the masculinity assumed by wider culture to be either the cause or effect of her youthful cross-dressing; by middle age Sand has, according to Mirecourt, mastered the "patriarchal" mode of male Christian lifestyle and behavior. It is notable, however, that through the village peasants Sand is also extending help to the common people with whom she identifies most closely in her autobiography. In this reading she may not be functioning in a male patriarchal mode after all. She may be, in other words,

¹⁶⁴ Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 180.

¹⁶⁵ Gayle Rubin, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex*, in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Monthly Review Press, 1975), 168.

¹⁶⁶ Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism*, 180.

transcending gendered notions of class to create the kind of social utopia evoked in much of her work. Interestingly enough, Sand draws parallels between this egalitarianism and the birds raised by her mother's working-class ancestors. If Sand has always enjoyed a special affinity with birds because, as she claims, her mother's bird-selling family also had this inborn gift,¹⁶⁷ her attraction to them is equally philosophical and political:

...l'oiseau, je le soutiens, est l'être supérieur dans la création...Il a des instincts d'amour conjugal, de prévision et d'industrie domestique...C'est la principale espèce où le mâle aide la femelle dans les devoirs de la famille, et où le père s'occupe...de construire l'habitation, de préserver et de nourrir les enfants...il est le plus fidèle des animaux. Dans la race canine si vantée, la femelle seule à l'amour de la progéniture, ce qui la rend supérieure au mâle; chez l'oiseau, les deux sexes, doués d'égales vertus, offrent l'exemple de l'idéal dans l'hyménée. Qu'on ne parle donc pas légèrement des oiseaux....L'homme-oiseau c'est l'artiste.¹⁶⁸

[...birds, I maintain, are the superior beings of creation...They have instincts for conjugal love, foresight and domestic industry...It is the main species in which the male helps the female with family duties, and in which the father takes care...to build a home, protect and nourish the children...birds are the most faithful of animals. In the much-vaunted canine race, only the female loves the offspring, which makes her superior to the male; with the birds it is both sexes, possessed of equal virtue, that offer us an ideal example of marriage. Let us no longer speak lightly of the birds...The human version of the bird is the artist.]

¹⁶⁷ George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 25-27.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

Sand's description of birds as exemplary models for humans reiterates the qualities of her ideal society, in which gender egalitarianism and social justice are ultimately intertwined. And it is undoubtedly Sand's ability (as we have seen) to consistently combine classed and gendered social roles into hybridized versions—seen, for example, in the real-life and literary instances of sartorial code-switching we have reviewed—that makes her critics so nervous. One critic, writing in the 1920s, patronizingly insists that Sand would have led a happier life if she had given herself over to “resignation” and accepted her original fate (presumably the contemporary performance of social womanhood). If only she had resigned herself in this way, he suggests, Sand would have found her utopia, because resignation is “a manly acceptance of moral law and also of the laws essential to the social order.”¹⁶⁹ Yet it is precisely in sermonizing on the benefit Sand would have derived from accepting her femininity *like a man* that this critic also accidentally betrays his subconscious identification of Sand with male qualities, along with an apparent anxiety about her ability to perform power moves that were coded masculine in contemporary culture. In such attempts to put her behavior and appearance back into socially comprehensible categories, then, we see a lingering cultural unease about Sand's potential for disrupting the status quo with her hybridity.

¹⁶⁹ Stuart P. Sherman, “Introduction,” in *The George Sand-Gustave Flaubert Letters* (Boni and Liveright, 1921), xvi.

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Appendix

Fig. 1—Louis-Auguste Brun, *Equestrian Portrait of Queen Marie-Antoinette in Hunting Costume*, 1783. Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.



Fig. 2—Nicolas Arnoult (publisher), Untitled, engraving, c. 1700. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Fig. 3—Nicolas Guérard (engraver and publisher), *Le Carnaval perpétuel*, c. 1705. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la photographie.



Fig. 4—Illustration of the stereotypical *flâneur* from Louis Huart's *Physiologie du flâneur*, 1841. The caption defines "Man" as "An animal with two feet, no feathers, wearing an overcoat, smoking and strolling [*flanant*]." This definition would include, in her *flâneur* "disguise," George Sand (who also engaged in the then-masculine activity of smoking).

faitement raison de définir l'homme : — *Un animal à deux pieds, sans plumes, à patetot, fumant et flanant.*



Figs. 5 & 6—Bernard-Romain Julien, *George Sand*, supplément au *Voleur*, n° 37, 1837 (left) and *George Sand*, 1838 (right).

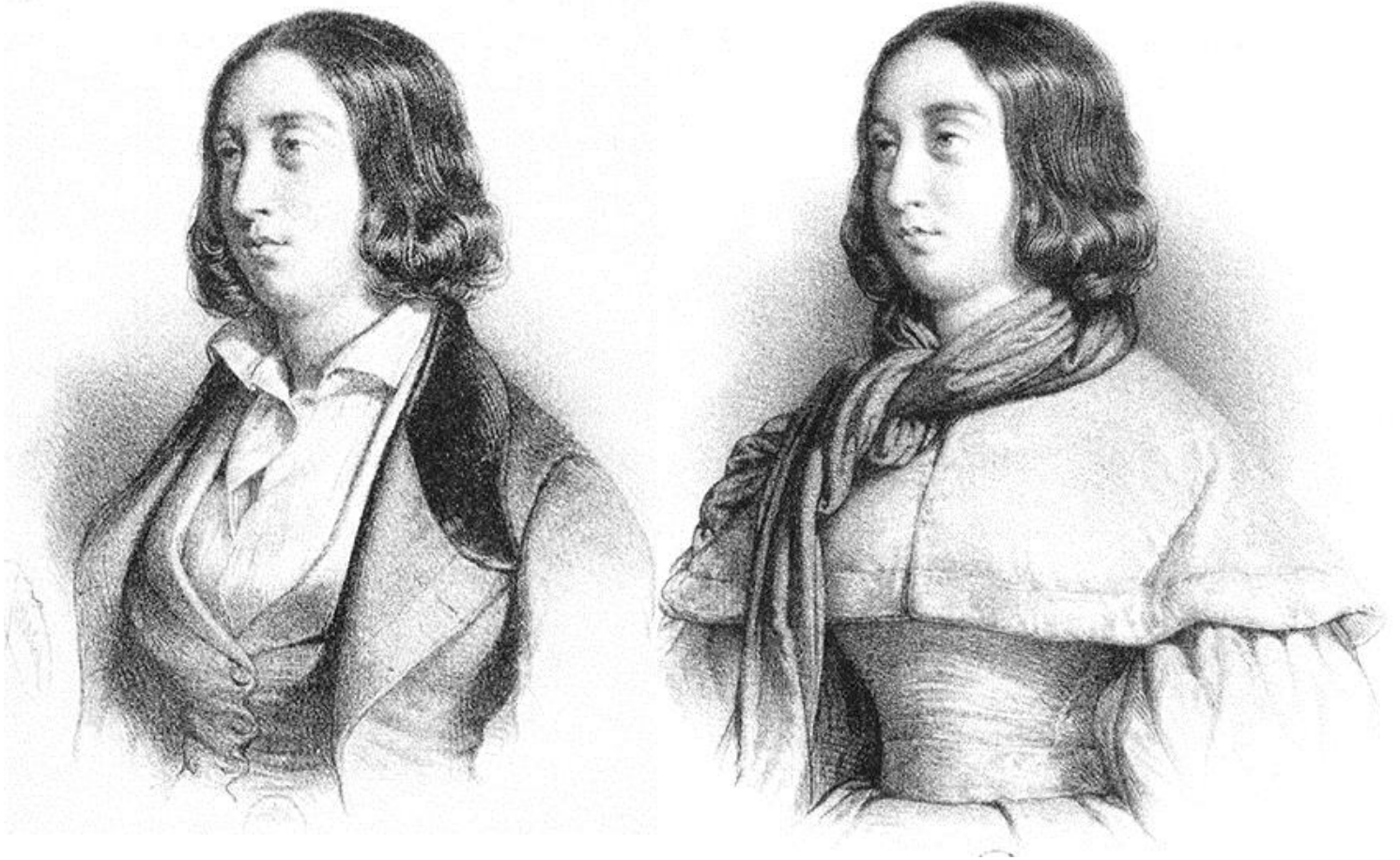


Fig. 7—The *passage Choiseul*, a typical 19th-century arcade in the 2nd *arrondissement* of Paris. Creative Commons.



Fig. 8—Alcide-Joseph Lorentz, caricature of George Sand in the *Miroir drolatique*, 1842. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie.

Caption translation: “If this portrait of George Sand leaves one a little perplexed, that’s because Genius is abstract and has no sex.”

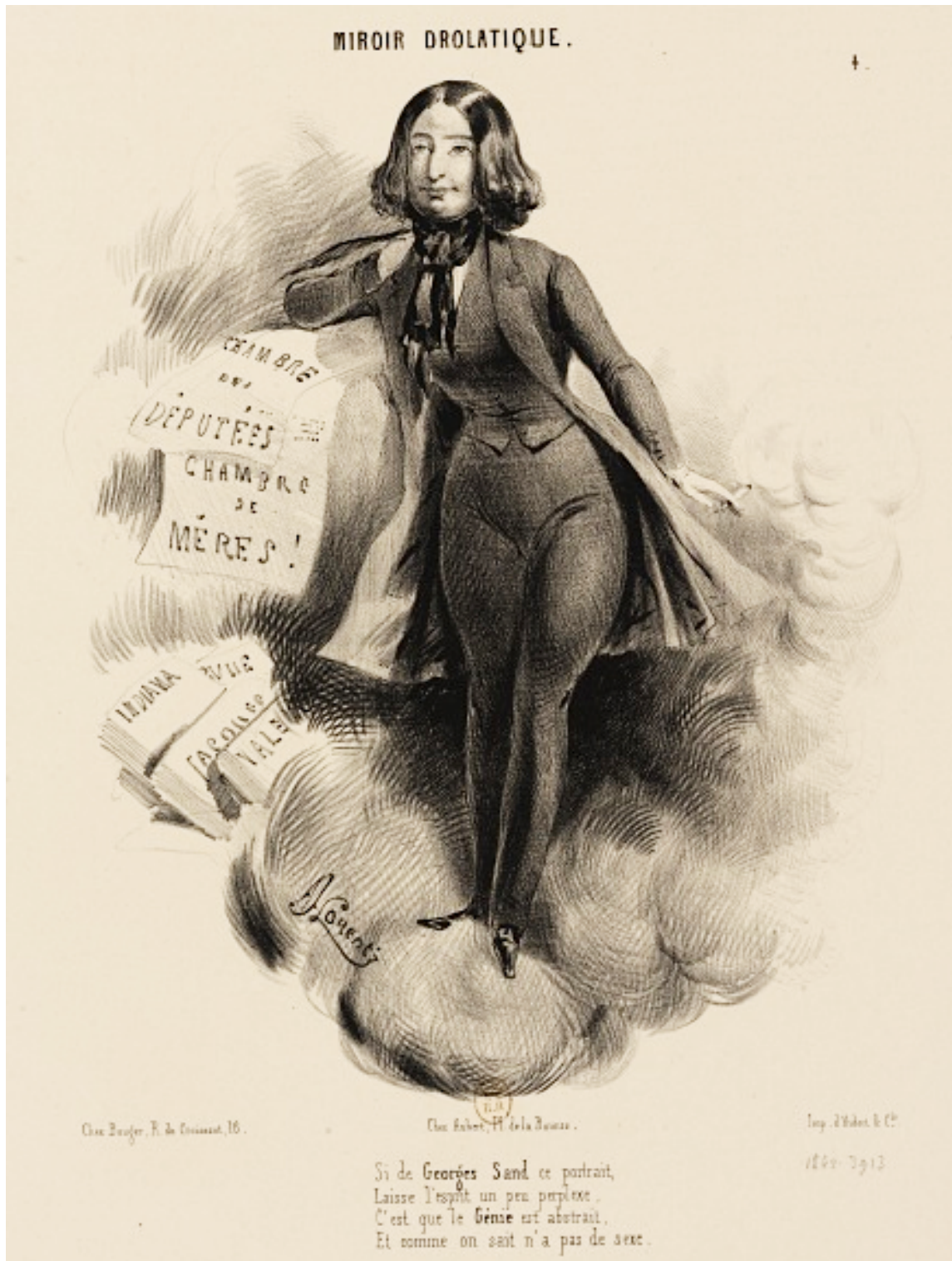


Fig. 9—*Le lion* (“The Dandy”), circa 1830, in *The Corset: A Cultural History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 38.



Fig. 10—“He Studies Law,” anonymous print illustration showing a stereotypical *grisette* and student in a Latin Quarter attic room. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Fig. 11—A *grisette* working as a delivery girl for the fashion trades (left). Her downcast eyes and modest posture are designed to avoid the attentions of male passersby; they signal that although she may be out in public, she is unavailable. From *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1841). Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Fig. 12—“The Prostitute” (right). Her direct gaze and open body language broadcast her purpose in public space: to provide sexual services for passing men. In *Les Abus de Paris* (1844), M. and Francis Girault. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Fig. 13—Eugène Gaucher, newspaper caricature of Sand first printed at Bourges in 1848, reproduced in *Le Monde illustré*, 1884. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme.



Fig. 14—Tony Johannot, illustration for the political satire book *Jérôme Paturot à la recherche de la meilleure des républiques* by Louis Reybaud, 1849. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Littérature et art.



CHAPTER 2

**Dressing Up the Truth:
Sarah Bernhardt as a “little Madonna”**

Sarah Bernhardt’s name is synonymous with eccentricity. Her staggering reputation as arguably the best actress of the late nineteenth century proves one fact above all others: that she was, if nothing else, inarguably the most well-known. This was due not only to Bernhardt’s talent but also her penchant for pure shock value. If she wasn’t sleeping in a coffin (Fig. 1) or wearing a taxidermied bat on her head (Fig. 2) Bernhardt might be found painting or sculpting in her custom-made trouser suit (Fig. 3). And yet this sartorial commonality is not highlighted in Bernhardt’s reminiscences about George Sand, whose numerous Odéon plays boosted her early career. Instead, Bernhardt uses her 1907 memoir *Ma double vie* to cast herself as Sand’s intimate *protégée*¹⁷⁰ in the following terms:

I would watch [Sand] with a romantic tenderness. Had she not been the heroine of a beautiful love story? I would sit very close to her. I would take her hand and hold it as long as possible in mine...[Prince Napoléon] began to laugh and cried out ‘This little girl’s in love with

¹⁷⁰ Bernhardt seems to have been completely unaware that Sand, in a private journal she kept while they worked together, found the young actress quite irritating. Sand mentions having to “scold” her, referring to Bernhardt as “sulky,” a “good girl, but decidedly stupid,” “dotty,” etc. On one occasion Sand writes angrily that “Mlle Sarah keeps us waiting, really doesn’t give a damn...hasn’t worked, and interprets her role like the great tart she is...How stupid these creatures of the theater are!” (Gold and Fizdale, 80).

you!’ George Sand gently stroked my cheek. ‘She’s my little Madonna, don’t torment her.’¹⁷¹

Bernhardt’s theatrical fascination with Sand as the “heroine of a beautiful love story” extends almost seamlessly into her own presentation of self, but with one notable exception: as many critics have remarked, *Ma double vie* is curiously devoid of references to her own multiple love stories. “I wish to set aside in these memoirs everything that directly touches intimacy in my life,” Bernhardt bluntly states, while at the same time framing her narrative as a privileged glimpse into her secret world.¹⁷² Yet despite the memoir’s tantalizing title, and as if to emphasize her status as Sand’s pure “little Madonna,” Bernhardt remains true to her word and glosses over details contemporaries would have found scandalous. This includes the birth of her illegitimate child (named Maurice, just like Sand’s son), who appears out of nowhere as a grown boy halfway through the narrative without any mention of his father, childhood, or the event of his birth—an immaculate conception indeed.

What Bernhardt does fixate on, however, is personal appearance and its implications. At several moments in her autobiography she pauses to describe her own clothes and hairstyle at length; *Ma double vie* devotes several pages specifically to descriptions of her costumes, as well as meticulous details about what she and others wore at important narrative moments. Victoria Tietze Larson notes that these factors give Bernhardt’s narration of her own life a detached, almost third person feel:

¹⁷¹Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt* (Heinemann, 1907), 90.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, viii.

It is striking...how often...she refers to her physical appearance, indicating a self-conscious tendency to see herself, as though by an audience on a stage...her repeated emphasis on her [waifish] physical traits, along with her insistence on her early religious mysticism, creates a stereotypical Jeanne d’Arc-like image...of fragile, innocent vulnerability.¹⁷³

Tietze suggests that this idealized, religiously-inflected persona is probably meant to counteract the harsh realities of Sarah’s early life. Born into a family of Jewish courtesans who had come to France from Holland, she would have been viewed as something of a racial and national outsider, and by most accounts she joined her mother and aunts’ profession at a young age.¹⁷⁴ In her own retelling of her life, however, all such salacious details are obscured and Bernhardt’s emphasis on Sand’s perception of an essentially sweet, innocent young girl exemplifies the tone she maintains throughout the book.

And yet, as all of Paris knew, Sarah Bernhardt was anything but a bourgeois *mademoiselle*. If Bernhardt shared Sand’s exceptionalist attitude toward other women and critiqued female cyclists for wearing bloomers—they might ride off and leave their families!¹⁷⁵—she also frequently wore *le pantalon* herself, and not just for sculpting. Apart from her notorious penchant for playing breeches roles onstage, she habitually

¹⁷³ Victoria Tietze Larson, preface to *My Double Life: The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, by Sarah Bernhardt, edited by Victoria Tietze Larson (State University of New York Press, 1999), ix.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁷⁵ Christine Bard, *Une histoire politique du pantalon* (Points, 2014), 221.

donned *culottes* for equestrian activities.¹⁷⁶ In fact, Bernhardt was one of the few women in mid-nineteenth century Paris to successfully obtain a *permission de travestissement*, or official permit required to wear pants in public during a time when doing so was illegal for the average woman.¹⁷⁷ But of course Sarah Bernhardt was not average, even when she pretended to be. As H  l  ne Soumet has pointed out, Bernhardt’s theatrical background would have made her comfortable with slipping in and out of various social *r  les*: “Au th   tre, tout est travestissement: hommes et femmes se griment, se costument, ce qui ouvre la porte    la confusion des genres.” [*In theater, everything is transvestism: men and women paint themselves [and] play dress up, which opens the door to gender confusion.*]¹⁷⁸ In other words, most readers of Bernhardt’s book would have recognized—even if its author had not directly informed them—that many key details of her life were missing from its pages.

Portrait of the Artist as an Autobiographer

I argue that *Ma double vie*’s title references its performative doubleness. At first glance Bernhardt’s autobiography may appear to promise a tantalizing glimpse behind the curtain at the “real” Sarah Bernhardt; here the “double” would refer to her private and public lives, catering to appetites for celebrity gossip. But in announcing her intention to “set aside” certain aspects of her life, Bernhardt has already broken what Philippe

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁷⁷ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 84.

¹⁷⁸ H  l  ne Soumet, *Les Travesties de l’Histoire* (First   d., 2014), 247.

Lejeune terms the “autobiographical pact,”¹⁷⁹ an implicit “affirmation made by the autobiographer asserting the veracity of the narrative.”¹⁸⁰ Bernhardt immediately alerts her readers that she will not follow this rule. As one critic has dryly remarked, “Sarah...ment comme elle respire...travestit tout au nom de “l’art”...[elle est] une vérité qui a choisi de dire des mensonges.” [*Sarah...lies as easily as she breathes...travesties/cross-dresses everything in the name of “art”...she herself is a lasting truth that has chosen to tell lies.*] He also cites a young Bernhardt explaining to a disapproving member of her family that “Ma vie privée ne regarde que moi, et c’est beaucoup plus amusant d’en inventer une autre!” [*My private life is my business, and it’s much more fun to invent a different one!*]¹⁸¹ But I argue that this very habit of spinning artistic illusion from life’s material is what puts her in the same category with Rousseau’s not-strictly-true *Confessions*, which as Marcus Moseley has shown constituted a groundbreaking “desacralization of the religious confessional” that replaced Catholic priests with popular readerships. The result was a genre shift toward prioritizing verisimilitude in autobiographical works rather than full transparency.¹⁸² I suggest that French autobiographies following in this vein are extremely performative—making them (in an already performative genre) perhaps even more than usual a “game of mirrors that

¹⁷⁹ See Philippe Lejeune, *L’autobiographie en France* (Collection U2, No. 180. Paris: A. Colin, 1971), and *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (Poétique. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975).

¹⁸⁰ Kathleen R. Hart, “Rêveries des promeneuses solidaires: Flora Tristan and the French Autobiographical Tradition,” *French Forum* 19, no. 2 (1994): 134.

¹⁸¹ Philippe Nourry, “Sarah Bernhardt: Vérités et mensonges.” *Le Figaro*, April 1976, 1.

¹⁸² Marcus Moseley, “Jewish Autobiography: The Elusive Subject,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 23.

demonstrates that sincerity is learned, originality imitative.”¹⁸³ *Ma double vie* therefore deliberately works against the fundamental principle of its originating genre while remaining within a very French tradition of doing so, and I contend that this paradox is key to understanding its true function.

I propose that the performative self-undoing of Bernhardt’s autobiography intentionally mirrors her own complex hybridity. In its pages she is simultaneously public and discreet, Jewish and Catholic, virtuous and unconventional, a public figure hiding aspects of her life even as she allows readers into it, and an actress who dissimulates for a living but now simulates truth-telling. Bernhardt does this, moreover, in a way that confirms her Frenchness—by deploying the autobiographical self-exploratory and confessional modes that had a centuries-long tradition in France by the time of *Ma double vie*’s publication in 1907.¹⁸⁴ As James Olney has noted, French autobiographers and Rousseau in particular “fragmented the I and dispersed it...cut the self loose, leaving it without ties, anchor or direction...a free-floating self, uncentered except in itself, and quite unreal.”¹⁸⁵ This is a description of the self as performatively multiple. And note the specific terms Rousseau uses to describe his autobiographical undertaking: “I will depict doubly (*je peindrai doublement*) the state of my mind, that is both at the moment the

¹⁸³ Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France*, 47.

¹⁸⁴ See, for instance, the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1580), Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782), Chateaubriand’s *Memoires d’outre-tombe* (1849), and so on.

¹⁸⁵ James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 207-8.

event happened to me and the moment I describe it; my style...will itself form a part of its story.”¹⁸⁶

The “double” of *Ma double vie*’s title, then, does not refer to a separation between Bernhardt’s public and private lives. Instead, I argue that it references Rousseau’s autobiographical doubleness to announce Bernhardt’s own multiple selfhood. In *Ma double vie* she gives what was perhaps intended to be her most lasting performance, a legacy for posterity that would apply the illustrious cultural codes of official autobiography to Bernhardt’s name while simultaneously complicating those codes in the French tradition, just as her virtuous devotion to the Virgin Mary in its pages exists alongside a simultaneous attachment to her Jewishness, and Catholic piety exists alongside the publicity-rich scandal she often encouraged in everyday life.¹⁸⁷ Bernhardt’s autobiography is thus a prime example of metaphorical code-switching between and across cultural categories that often force them together to create new ones. Importantly, in *Ma double vie* I also argue that Bernhardt practices a type of imaginary sartorial code-switching which involves building up an image of bodily dress, appearance and behavior in the reader’s head. These strategies result in a sort of mental costume enabling Bernhardt to perform her chosen narrative for an audience that is reading instead of watching her. In this endeavor Bernhardt’s most significant code switches (both sartorial and general) occur in moments where she protectively transfers the Madonna’s qualities to herself.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 168.

¹⁸⁷ Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity* (Princeton, NJ; Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2019), 29.

Bernhardt is a prime example, then, of what Judith Butler has termed performativity—existing in a constant, uncertain mode or state of “performance-ness” that blurs the boundaries between everyday self and social persona.¹⁸⁸ Bernhardt’s constant performative fluidity is to some degree a matter of personal necessity when we consider that she was also, like Proust, negotiating the complexities of life as an assimilated Jew in French society during the explosive years leading up to the Dreyfus Affair.¹⁸⁹ Despite her general discretion on this point in her memoirs, rumors of Bernhardt’s cross-dressing (in addition to her many other publicized eccentricities) would only have magnified nineteenth-century interpretations of her Semitic heritage as fundamentally alien. I propose that it is largely because of this pressure that Sarah utilizes her autobiography as a moment of self-redemption, and that the mediating figure of the Virgin Mary in her memoirs is echoed by her choice of certain similar stage roles. Collectively, these narrative strategies—both on- and offstage—are designed to actively reshape Bernhardt’s societal Otherness into a clear message of national and cultural in-group belonging.

Although this project may not have been able (or willing) to fully eliminate the unconventional aspects of Bernhardt’s legacy that assisted her rise to fame, it did cement her already legendary status. Critic Aristide Quillet, giving an overview of her life just after Bernhardt’s passing in 1923, concluded that she was without question “la plus grande reine du théâtre” [*the greatest queen of the theater*], and that this was true “[m]algré ces excentricités aussi également connues du public que les traits de sa

¹⁸⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 171-90.

¹⁸⁹ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette*, 83.

physionomie” [*despite those eccentricities as well-known to the public as her physical characteristics*]. Note here how Bernhardt’s physicality is grouped together with her “eccentricities,” on which more later. But after all, as Quillet continued, it was hard not to feel sympathy for such talent and perseverance—and he argued that Bernhardt had only received the Légion d’Honneur so late in life because, as her autobiography demonstrated, “toute sa vie...elle eut à lutter contre des ennemis qui ne lui laissèrent jamais un instant de répit.” [*all her life...she had to struggle against enemies who never gave her a moment’s rest.*] Quillet concluded that *Ma double vie* had been and would continue to be a lasting contribution to Bernhardt’s legacy, a resounding success in which “elle a tout si bien imaginé pour se présenter en bonne posture devant la postérité” [*she has imagined everything perfectly in order to present herself in good standing for posterity.*] Is this a tacit admission that it was also somewhat constructed? Perhaps, but Quillet insists that *Ma double vie* still decisively confirms Bernhardt as “la plus grande artiste du dix-neuvième siècle” [*the greatest artist of the nineteenth century.*]¹⁹⁰ In this chapter I will argue that a significant part of what Quillet calls *Ma double vie*’s “bonne posture devant la postérité” hinges on Bernhardt’s usage of personal appearance and religious iconographic imagery, which enabled her to successfully navigate readers’ knowledge of her Dutch Jewish heritage, conversion to Catholicism, and status as an unwed mother in late 19th-century France.

Representations of the Racialized Other

¹⁹⁰ Aristide Quillet, “Sarah Bernhardt: Deux documents peu connus sur sa vie,” *Floréal: l’hebdomadaire illustré du monde du travail*, April 7, 1923, 215.

In his 1899 introduction to Jules Huret's biography of Bernhardt, Edmond Rostand admits that even for him, a close friend and noted admirer, her uniqueness is staggering. "Your brain reels. There is something positively alarming about this impetuous feminine hand that wields scepter, thyrsus, dagger, fan, sword, bauble, sculptor's chisel, and horsewhip. It is overwhelming."¹⁹¹ Rostand's dazed confession ("alarming," "overwhelming,") is proof that even members of Bernhardt's inner circle, close friends and admirers, could find her sheer charisma unsettling. Sarah is, the poet goes on to say, nothing less than a present-day manifestation of the supernatural:

What a way she has of being both legendary and modern! Her golden hair is a link between her and fairyland, and do not words change into pearls and diamonds as they fall from her lips? Has she not worn the fairy's sky-blue robe, and is not her voice the song of the lark at heaven's gate?...she is...a star fallen from the sky of the Thousand and One Nights, and something of the mysterious blue ether still floats about her.¹⁹²

And yet, as Rostand freely admits, perhaps the most shocking thing about Sarah is that she "has no protecting fairy but herself. Sarah is her own godmother. Inflexible will is her only magic wand." Rostand's rhetoric suggests that Bernhardt is solely responsible for her own celebrity status. The poet continues in this vein until he has elevated his idol to

¹⁹¹ Jules Huret, George A. Raper, Edmond Rostand, et al., *Sarah Bernhardt* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1899), viii.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, ix.

quasi-divinity. “To guide her through so many strange and wonderful events to her final apotheosis, she has no genius but her own.”¹⁹³

Faint echoes of (albeit worshipful) dehumanization abound in Rostand’s analysis of Bernhardt, whose performance as the title character of his *Princesse Lointaine* made his reputation long before he wrote *Cyrano de Bergerac*. She is, according to his description, a dose of the “legendary” transposed jarringly into the “modern” world of late-nineteenth century Paris; physical marks of “fairyland” persist in her famously wild hair, and her unusually sonorous voice becomes “pearls and diamonds...the song of the lark.” Indeed, Sarah’s appearance and personality are so exotic that she must be a transplant from French Orientalism’s most cherished text, the *Thousand and One Nights*—probably an allusion to her Orientalized Jewishness. Finally, Bernhardt turns out to be a fallen star trapped in the flesh of that “impetuous feminine hand,” not a mere mortal and therefore not exactly human, but rather a self-rescuing fairy godmother of exceptional genius: decidedly a being apart.

Flattering as this ode may be, it builds on contemporary cultural assumptions about gender and race that Rostand has only redeployed for his purposes. Understanding widespread notions of Jewishness in Europe leading up to and during Bernhardt’s career will contextualize her performative negotiations of those stereotypes. As John Efron has noted, “...the curious feature about the representation of Jews in late nineteenth-century medical literature, even when they were being praised...[is that] their success heralded their abnormality. They resided isolated and alone, outside behavioral and pathological

¹⁹³ Ibid., ix.

norms.”¹⁹⁴ Although he is not producing medical literature, Rostand’s ode to a supernatural Bernhardt still perpetuates the exceptionalism Efron identifies. Second Empire tropes painted a similar portrait of paranormal Jewish women, often as otherworldly sexual fantasies—for example *la belle juive* trope epitomized by *Ivanhoe*’s Rebecca. Gender interacted strongly with “race” in these portrayals. Although male Jewish stereotypes had been around for centuries, Janis Bergman-Carton has traced the emergence of the first cohesive European stereotypes of female Jews in the late 18th century, which were initially both flattering and fetishizing.¹⁹⁵ Even at the very end of the nineteenth century when views of female Jewishness had shifted more strongly toward negativity, Anti-Dreyfusard Paul Bourget was able to differentiate between his hatred of male Jews who had “crucified Christ” and his adoration for Jewesses who “wept for him.”¹⁹⁶ This dichotomy was even more widespread earlier in the century, when female Jews were categorized separately from their hyper-racialized male counterparts. Chateaubriand asserted in 1825 that “Jewesses have escaped from the curse of their race” because “[n]one of them were...in the crowd that insulted the Son of Man...The reflection of some beautiful ray will have rested on the foreheads of Jewesses.”¹⁹⁷ His sexually charged pedestalization of female Jews as mystically perfect beings echoes Rostand’s

¹⁹⁴ John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 112.

¹⁹⁵ Janis Bergman-Carton, “Negotiating the Categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the Possibilities of Jewishness,” *Art Journal*, vol. 55, no. 2 (1996): 55.

¹⁹⁶ Maurice Paléologue and Eric Mosbacher, *An Intimate Journal of the Dreyfus Case* (Criterion Books, 1957), 104.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

ecstatic praise of Bernhardt at the turn of the twentieth century. Such psychological compartmentalization allowed anti-Semites to take pleasure in Jewish female beauty while simultaneously hating male Jews as a stand-in for their entire ethnic group.

Because of this paradox, Sander L. Gilman has shown that most European stereotypes of Jewishness since the Middle Ages have been both coded male by default and negative to the point of vitriol, an attitude which would evolve somewhat in scope and intensity throughout the nineteenth century. Marie Lathers elaborates on the further cementation of anti-Jewish tropes in France after a cultural shift in the mid-1800s, noting that

Whereas during the first half of the [nineteenth] century Jews were still for the most part viewed as morally flawed—and thus redeemable through conversion—by the end of the century Jews were represented by French writers as unredeemable—they were racially and thus essentially flawed.¹⁹⁸

This supposedly fixed “racial” component allowed a coherent anti-Semitic pseudo-science to fully emerge by the late 1800s. Stereotypes and medical symptomatology were henceforth mutually reinforcing when it came to marking European Jewry, especially its male members, as outsiders. Jewish men were assigned a host of non-ideal characteristics: they were supposedly greedy, conspiratorial social climbers, unnaturally obsessed with money, shifty,¹⁹⁹ and sexually frustrated.²⁰⁰ Sophia Menache has traced the

¹⁹⁸ Marie Lathers, "Posing the 'Belle Juive': Jewish Models in 19th-Century Paris." *Woman's Art Journal* 21, no. 1 (2000): 27.

¹⁹⁹ Gerald Krefetz, and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *Jews and Money: The Myths and the Reality* (New Haven: Ticknor & Fields, 1982), 6-7.

medieval roots of an enduring belief among European Christians that Jews performed secret black magic rites, including ritual murders (“blood libel”) and sacrilegious use of communion wafers (“Host libel”). These myths persisted for centuries, constituting, in the eyes of many, a clear “Judeo-Satanic threat.”²⁰¹ She notes that “[t]ogether with...Moslems and lepers, [Jews] embodied the powers of evil which threatened the well-being and the very existence of Christian society.”²⁰² We will see later how Bernhardt’s penchant for Gothicism played into these perceptions.

Identifying Jews became an important skill in Western Catholic society because of their supposed threat to it. Post-Enlightenment Europeans developed a physiognomic set of features for doing this: Jews were believed to have large beaked noses, hooded eyes, wild curly hair, *the foetor judaicus* or odd “sweetish smell,”²⁰³ be fat or extremely thin, have poor hygiene, display effeminacy, physical deformity, hysteria or “hyper-nervousness,” have an air of general sickliness from forced urbanization in ghettos, and so on.²⁰⁴ These traits collectively produced a miscellaneous type that served as a convenient foil for Christians, by defining Jewishness as “that which the Aryan neither was nor ever would be. The Jew [became] the projection of all the anxieties about control

²⁰⁰ John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: A History*, 139-40.

²⁰¹ Sophia Menache, "Faith, Myth, and Politics: The Stereotype of the Jews and Their Expulsion from England and France," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 75, no. 4 (1985): 357, 364.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 370.

²⁰³ Randall Bytwerk, translator, “How to Tell a Jew,” *Der Giftpilz*, by Streicher Julius, 1938, 1.

²⁰⁴ John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: A History*, 105, 126, 129, 139, 141, 142.

present within the Aryan,²⁰⁵ a conglomerate stereotype of physical and moral deviance. These attributes functioned as two sides of the same coin, providing a useful cultural safety net that allowed the lowliest of non-Jewish men to always feel superior simply by virtue of not being *israélite*, while simultaneously clearing a path for less guilt-laden lusting after *la belle juive*—since, theoretically at least, a Catholic man’s romantic advances would simply rescue her from the stereotypical Jewish male’s clutches. And yet, I contend that Bernhardt is unique precisely because her detractors portray her not as categorically male or female, but as a hybridized combination of various Jewish gender stereotypes. In doing so, they implicitly (and perhaps accidentally) acknowledge Bernhardt’s powerful ability to defy social boundaries—as she would do with the metaphorical sartorial code switch of *Ma double vie* that is, I argue, designed to complicate precisely such portrayals of her as a pathological, multiply-stereotyped Other.

Pathological Physicality

One important element of contemporary anti-Bernhardt caricatures, both in print and visual media, is how her detractors merged various stereotypes into a multivalent projection. Gilman has remarked on the “circumcised [male] Jew” as “representative of the anxiety-provoking masculine” for non-Jewish Europeans, a symbol of “a world out of control and threatening” to the self-identified Aryan.²⁰⁶ If increased Jewish immigration throughout the nineteenth century stoked fears of racial impurity among right-wing

²⁰⁵ Sander L. Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the 'Modern Jewess'". *The German Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1993): 196.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

French nationalists, gender subversion was perhaps the only other panic-inducing cultural factor that could compete with it, particularly the specter of the emancipated New Woman.²⁰⁷ To combat these fears, Jewish males' circumcised masculinity was often characterized not as true manhood, but as a 'third sex' unidentifiable with Gallic manliness. The man-eating prostitute and the virile female intellectual likewise transgressed their complementary feminine roles, encroaching on male territory to such an extent that they, too, became threateningly masculinized, third sex androgynes in the European cultural imaginary.²⁰⁸ Women who refused to keep to their proper place, in other words, were often assumed to be physically deviant to the point of sexual monstrosity. At the same time, progressively greater waves of immigration led to a new anxiety about female Jews, mothers of an invading horde who would produce Jewish infants on French soil. By the time European anti-Semitism took a more extreme turn in the 1880s, then, the *belle juive* stereotype had merged with that of the *femme fatale*, characterizing her seductive charms as little more than a poisonous trap—and, for the first time, many Jewish women were now considered worse than their male counterparts. Witness anti-Semite H.G. Nordmann, for example, writing in the 1880s that “the Jewish nature of a woman is even more repellent than that in a man...it is even more unfeminine as it is inhumane.”²⁰⁹ Traditional notions of male Jewish pathology are here extended to overlap with tropes of female seduction and corruption found in many Christian

²⁰⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 124-25.

²⁰⁸ Sander L. Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the 'Modern Jewess'", 196.

²⁰⁹ H.G. Nordmann, *Die Juden Und Der Deutsche Staat* (Chiminitz: Schmeitzner, 1883), 76.

interpretations of Eve's original sin. The result is a potent image of the Jewish female as exponentially evil.

Towards the beginning of her career, Bernhardt sometimes played into these associations rather than working against them as she would in *Ma double vie* decades later. As evidenced by Bernhardt's bat hat and coffin, her youthful aesthetic was darkly Gothic, obsessed with death and often referencing Satanic imagery. In 1880, around the same time that anti-Semitism took a more extreme turn throughout Europe, a promotional biography for her New York tour made a show of denying (perhaps in order to help capitalize on) what were by then common rumors about Bernhardt: that she regularly slept in her coffin, that her favorite foods were "burnt cats, lizard's tails, and peacock brains," that she used human skulls as croquet balls, that she kept the skeleton of a suicide in her room, and so on.²¹⁰ Bernhardt is practically a witch in these portrayals. Some of her own self-representations boosted that perception, for example Bernhardt's Salon sculpture *Encrier fantastique* [Fantasy inkwell] (Fig. 4). It features the actress' head on a reptilian body with dragon wings and claws, clutching a cauldron adorned with rams' horns (traditional symbols of Baphomet) and a horned skull. This is clearly not a code switch designed to allay fears of Bernhardt's anti-Christian or occult tendencies. It is instead a defiant, Satanically-inflected assertion of her independence from mainstream French Catholic society. These associations would persist even as Bernhardt aged and became an accepted French institution, with one reporter referring to her in 1905, two years before the publication of *Ma double vie*, as a sort of deathless vampire. Bernhardt

²¹⁰ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 394.

seemed “like something supernatural” who did not age, he wrote of the sixty-year-old actress; she “might be any age or no age at all.”²¹¹ Such negative perceptions are the flip side of positive portrayals like Rostand’s that nevertheless also cast Bernhardt as superhumanly Other.

Bernhardt’s public distance from the Church was further complicated by the fact that she began her career at a time when the word “actress” was still synonymous with “prostitute.” Old Regime Catholicism had traditionally excluded actors from communion with the Church, making them social outcasts.²¹² Rousseau’s injunction against actresses rested on the belief that women were naturally deceitful, and as practitioners of theatrical artifice doubly so, making the actress a special kind of abomination. Any woman who “puts herself up for sale in her performance,” Rousseau claimed, must certainly be doing “the same in person.”²¹³ Bernhardt herself expressed a more sympathetic view of the actress’s persecuted situation that reveals her underlying beliefs about women’s relationship to socially performative activities like theater and sartorial code-switching. “I think that the dramatic art is essentially feminine,” she writes in *Ma double vie*. “To paint one’s face, to hide one’s real feelings, to try to please and to endeavour to attract attention—these are all faults for which we blame women...”²¹⁴ Thus, post-1789 French culture carried forward many aspects of Old Regime prejudice against actresses, even as

²¹¹ Ibid., 396.

²¹² Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France*, 12.

²¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau and L. Brunel, *Lettre à M. D’Alembert sur les spectacles* (Librairie Hachette, 1896), 136.

²¹⁴ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 328.

their popularity increased exponentially throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Sarah's courtesan mother and aunts having inducted her into their profession at a young age would only have cemented these overlapping stereotypes about the promiscuity of actresses and Jewesses in many people's minds. Archival records of the Parisian *police des moeurs* [vice police] show that Bernhardt was among several young women whom police agents tracked throughout the 1870s and 1880s on suspicion of prostitution. According to these documents her many wealthy clients included a count, a politician, and a finance mogul.²¹⁵ Notably, one report from 1874 demonstrates that the agent tracking Bernhardt often fixated on her appearance as an indicator of moral deviance. He takes care to write that one of her nicknames is "Sarah retour des os," [*Bony Sarah*] due to extreme thinness; he also notes that Bernhardt owns a luxurious coffin in which she sometimes sleeps, keeps a skull on a silver platter in her living room, and is guilty of habitually wearing a skull brooch named Sophie. All of this evidence points to the fact that, as the police agent declares, Bernhardt "aurait des idées les plus lugubres." [*appears to have the most sinister ideas.*]²¹⁶

Caricatures of Sarah Bernhardt as a de-sexed or horribly skeletal virago (Fig. 5) are thus simultaneously a critique of her Jewishness and her status as an unmarried, independent, sexually promiscuous woman—and one who was not afraid, as we have seen, to embrace edginess or court controversy even in her own self-representations. In others' portrayals of her deviance, however, Bernhardt becomes the target of male as well

²¹⁵ Gabrielle Houbre, *Le livre des courtisanes: archives secrètes de la police des moeurs, 1861-1876* (Tallandier, 2006), 39.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

as female anti-Semitic stereotypes along with the criticism heaped on unconventional women in general. Each popular anti-Jewish visual trope deployed against Bernhardt tends to merge almost indistinguishably with those of emancipated women whose independence (for example, Bernhardt's lifelong financial self-reliance and reluctance to marry) had supposedly transformed them into uncategorized monsters. Paradoxically, Bernhardt is thus often simultaneously portrayed using the stereotypes assigned to feminized Jewish men, as well as the over-masculine traits of non-conforming women. Racial and gendered clichés overlap on Bernhardt's socially imagined body in sometimes harmonious, sometimes contradictory ways to make a cultural monstrosity of her.

A good example of this is an image from the *Supplément du Monde* around 1882, when anti-Semitism had begun its more extreme turn in France (Fig. 6). It shows a stick-thin Sarah metamorphosed into an actual broom whose only concern is sweeping up piles of gold, in keeping with stereotypes of male Jews as greedily money-obsessed. Bernhardt's gaunt face and enlarged nose work together with the vaguely Davidic star framing her head to suggest that this is indeed a simultaneous critique of her financial independence, Jewishness, and slender physique (often exaggerated, as it is here, to signify that the actress was not properly feminine). We find similar themes in an image from Marie Colombier's *Les Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* (Fig. 7) that mocks Bernhardt's departure from the Comédie Française for her first American tour. "Modeste à l'arrivée...arrogante au retour" the caption chides [*Modest upon arrival, arrogant upon return*]. Front and center is a disproportionately tall, emaciated Sarah, holding a finger to her lips as large gold coins pour from her mouth onto the floor. This represents Sarah's famous "voix d'or" [*golden voice*], now become nothing more than a

“machine à dollars” [*dollar machine*] to capture the crass yet lucrative American public. On the left, a relatively modest-looking Sarah disembarks the boat from France under her shadowy impresario’s watchful eye. Head tilted coyly and a pleasant smile on her face, she leans forward in a posture best described as ingratiating, as if to minimize her physicality and make herself attractively smaller. Her hips and bust are also more curvaceous in this posture. On the right, under a banner announcing the staggering total of her “cash receipts in America,” is a new, more elegantly dressed Bernhardt casting one last disdainful look over her shoulder as she departs for home. This second Sarah’s upright posture denotes a reprehensible new attitude of superiority. Significantly, in addition to the feathered hat and fur muff that function as conspicuous markers of her freshly-enhanced wealth, Sarah has also grown *thinner*—and this is a clear indicator of her deviancy. Physical reduction of her womanly curves signals to viewers that Bernhardt’s femininity itself has been diminished by money-grubbing activities in the New World. The tall central figure’s stick-thin torso and arms emphasize this lack of femininity, as does the sheer intimidation caused by its staggering height; Bernhardt’s larger-than-life status is presented here as another aspect of her freakishness. Additionally, the central figure’s frizzy hair, gaunt cheekbones, and subtly prominent nose combine with her apparent greed for gold to once again create a classic anti-Semitic conglomerate of traits.

The general effect of both images analyzed above is a circumscribing of Bernhardt’s new financial and artistic independence (few actors of the time would dare break contract with France’s prestigious national theater) into a series of pre-set gendered and racialized boxes—each paradoxically reinforcing the others, as we have seen, through

associations between Jewishness and effeminate moral weakness as well as between independent women and unnatural mannishness. Here, Bernhardt is somehow all of these things at once. Such images are essentially two or three damaging stereotypes for the price of one; their function is to reduce Bernhardt's threatening, multifaceted nature to a series of familiar labels that can be easily dismissed through laughter. In Fig. 8, Bernhardt's career and commercial successes are similarly recast. Once again portrayed as ludicrously skeletal (Fig. 9 shows photographic evidence of her actual appearance), Bernhardt's beaked nose and wild hair are (also again) juxtaposed with material greed to translate her cultural nonconformity into a visually legible Jewishness. Bernhardt's throne of wine bottles, the empty bottle on a stick she holds as a scepter and the champagne glass she wears as a crown all function to mark the ridiculousness of her would-be dominance. She is, the image suggests, nothing more than a tipsy Carnival queen presiding over a foolish commercialized frenzy. The world is clearly upside down as gender roles are reversed; submissive, effeminate men offer opera houses to Queen Sarah and beg her to "Use some of this! Taste this champagne! Drink my whisky! Smoke this cigar for me! Try my polish! Look at this toothbrush!" The very real advertising power of Bernhardt's (often unauthorized) image is here trivialized as a form of mass hysteria akin to nonsense. The intimidating fact that her name and face could and did sell anything (in Fig. 10, for example, we see a claim that *even Bernhardt* had gained attractive curves with the advertised product) is here dismissed as a passing fad. Bernhardt is also thus marked as a non-entity, an empty commercial shell whose characteristically Jewish material greed disqualifies her from being taken seriously as an artist.

In Fig. 11, this anti-Semiticly-inflected criticism goes a step further and questions whether Bernhardt is even human. Published in the American satirical newspaper *Puck* during her aforementioned tour, its premise is that Sarah's degeneracy has prematurely aged her until she is little more than a walking corpse. Titled "*La verité sur Sarah*" [The truth about Sarah], it purports to show Bernhardt getting "assembled" backstage by a team of four young assistants while intrepid journalists hide in the background. One assistant holds a bowl of paint (possibly referencing the longstanding negative associations between makeup and prostitution²¹⁷) while another stirs a vat of enamel—suggesting that for this level of physical and moral corruption, simple paint will not be enough. The great Bernhardt is so far gone that she must literally be *shellacked*. A third assistant positions a curly wig over the actress's oversized bald head, while a fourth pulls the laces of a corset which, interestingly enough, is padded out to give the impression of womanly curves. It hangs loosely around Bernhardt's skeletal frame. The message is clear: Bernhardt is so thin that she paradoxically requires a corset to *fatten* her and provide the requisite disguise of a womanhood she clearly does not possess. In addition to her hugely protruding nose and apparent Adam's apple, the baldness and thinness of her caricature here suggest that Bernhardt is simultaneously devoid of femininity and of racial purity. Anti-Semites held that a certain type of "frail, undersized, emaciated body, with a long, narrow, flat chest" was "characteristic of a large number of Jews," and this pathological Jewish thinness would often include very specific details, for

²¹⁷ Kathy Peiss, "Making Up, Making Over: Cosmetics, Consumer Culture, and Women's Identity," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 316.

example “shoulder blades [that] project in the back like two wings.”²¹⁸ Not only is Bernhardt’s body in this image a clear reference to such anti-Semitic notions of Jewish physicality (one theater critic had described her as a “lanky Jewess”²¹⁹), but as an independent woman and actress, her pernicious influence on her assistants is portrayed through their ambiguously tight skirts, which cling to their legs in an echo of Bernhardt’s trouser-like bloomers. As these young women help Bernhardt disguise her horrifyingly de-sexed, pathologically Semitic body, they have begun to stray from the path of proper feminine appearance themselves.

The notion of Bernhardt in a corset for any reason is intriguing precisely because it was common knowledge that the actress did not need one. Her natural slenderness precluded its use for waist-tightening. Partly as a result of this unique ability to move without the constraints of corsetry, Bernhardt was also known for her sinuous “S-curve” posturing both on and off the stage.²²⁰ Some even credited her with inspiring the famously curvaceous Art Nouveau style that would make her a new kind of icon with the help of artists like Alphonse Mucha,²²¹ and her widely publicized role as Cleopatra in 1890 featured a live snake, cementing cultural associations between the actress and all things serpentine.²²² However, Bernhardt’s characteristic S-curve was not always viewed

²¹⁸ John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: A History*, 126.

²¹⁹ Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity*, 30.

²²⁰ Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France*, 190-91.

²²¹ William A. Emboden, *Sarah Bernhardt* (1st American ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975), 83.

²²² Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France*, 191.

in a flattering light. Some believed that such a flexible spine could only indicate an equally flexible or nonexistent moral center, and that perhaps “her soul [was] just as malleable as her body.”²²³ Biblical associations between women, snakes, and sin also give images of Bernhardt as a serpent more troubling undertones—for example, the half-woman, half-snake depiction in Fig. 12 that is typical of many Bernhardt caricatures throughout her career. In essence, the suggestion here seems to be that Bernhardt’s supernatural versatility, both bodily and theatrical, can only mean she is something other than human under the surface. One newspaper critic wrote in 1890 that Bernhardt “descends in a curvy line from the serpent who corrupted Eve,” and he was not alone in this belief.²²⁴ Stunts like her Gothic half-devil sculpture piece fed into such associations.

If the Biblically-inflected notion of the great actress as a sinful temptress/serpent is somewhat harsh, other images reinforce the rhetorical opposition between Bernhardt and the Church in sometimes more subtle ways. Another Puck caricature, for example (Fig. 13), gives us a quasi-sympathetic view of Bernhardt the protective mother, defending her illegitimate son from priest-vultures as he hangs in the stocks of “Public Prejudice.” The caption, however, suggests otherwise: “Tout fait réclame! mais celle-ci est la bonne.” [*Everything makes good publicity! But this one is the best.*] Viewers are left to wonder whether it was Bernhardt who put her own son on display so that she could perform devoted, protective motherhood for her scandal-hungry public. The ghoulish expression on her face as she presumably screams back at the priest/vulture facing her is

²²³ Ibid., 192.

²²⁴ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, 395.

also less than flattering; this and her once-again pathologically stick-thin arms and dramatically ineffective stage pose work together to suggest that Bernhardt is perhaps manipulating her well-known status as an unwed mother to gain publicity. Indeed, Bernhardt often brought Maurice to social events and took him with her while traveling, an unusual step for a single mother in a time when love children were often hidden from polite society.²²⁵ But the most important aspect of this caricature is that it casts Bernhardt as incompatible with Catholic religious belonging. Images like these, although sympathetic toward Maurice Bernhardt as a potential child victim of publicity, nevertheless continue to portray his mother in an unflattering light. Despite her well-known conversion as a child, the assumption here is one of complete antagonism between Bernhardt and Catholic culture for being Jewish by birth and the unwed mother of an illegitimate child whom she refuses to hide away with proper shame. The tensions at work in this image provide a better understanding of why Bernhardt would performatively adopt certain religious visual and cultural codes throughout *Ma double vie*.

Performing Piety: the Madonna in *Ma double vie*

Sarah Bernhardt clearly designed her autobiography to neutralize damaging portrayals of her. For example, in 1906 (the year before *Ma double vie*'s appearance), an unsympathetic Boston newspaper critic repeated the by-then widespread (and erroneous) claim that Bernhardt “never portrays the character of a conventionally chaste and healthy-minded woman.”²²⁶ I argue that in *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt responds to such criticisms by doing precisely what her most suspicious detractors viewed as an impossibility—

²²⁵ Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity*, 40.

²²⁶ “Two Plays,” *Boston Daily Globe*, January 21, 1906.

performing a version of herself that, in all its headstrong impulsivity and eccentricity, is nevertheless covered by a veneer of safely French piety. This explains why Bernhardt's narrative is punctuated by episodes of staunch Catholic identity performance centering on the Virgin Mary. Although deployed in various ways, the Madonna trope consistently does for Bernhardt what the scandalous side of her reputation and her Semitic parentage cannot: it creates a sense of belonging, asserting her status as part of the Catholic cultural in-group that was (and in many ways, still is) so fundamental to being seen as truly French.

Throughout her autobiography, then, at each moment where the Madonna motif appears we may be sure to find some threatened aspect of Bernhardt's public image also present. Take, for example, an episode in which young Sarah runs away to Spain without a chaperone, which in bourgeois society would have compromised her virtue. Bernhardt is careful to note that despite the "fit of despair and wild determination" that impelled this decision, before leaving she "rushed once more to my room to get my little Virgin Mary, which went with me everywhere."²²⁷ The pointed insertion of the Madonna here communicates Bernhardt's underlying piety—she seems to be reassuring her readers that, despite appearances, this will not be the sexual misadventure of a future courtesan. Her deflection of potential criticism continues when, in a Spanish hotel, a strange man does in fact try to enter her room in the middle of the night. "I gave a shrill cry, seized my little Virgin Mary, and waved her about, wild with terror," Bernhardt relates. The Madonna's mysterious power worked instantly. "The man disappeared, and the house was soon

²²⁷ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 112.

invaded by the police.”²²⁸ These excerpts are typical of the way Bernhardt uses the Madonna motif in *Ma double vie*; at certain times when a bourgeois reader could potentially judge her actions as scandalous, the Virgin Mary appears (whether subtly or overtly) to rescue Bernhardt’s reputation.

This process of supplementation starts almost immediately. Bernhardt begins *Ma double vie* by tacitly admitting that she was born out of wedlock, remarking how much her teenage mother “loved to travel” while her father “had been in China for two years—why, I have no idea.” The extended family was not much better. “My young aunts would promise to come and see me,” Sarah remembers, but they “rarely kept their word.” Her mother, however, was the most heart-wrenchingly distant of all; Bernhardt relates that “she would come home to kiss me and set off again” for months or even years at a time.²²⁹ As biographer Robert Gottlieb points out, two of the most prominent themes in Bernhardt’s autobiography are as follows: “Her mother didn’t love her, and she had no father.” This information is presented bluntly and immediately, he argues, in order to impress the reader with Bernhardt’s ability to overcome her difficult childhood.²³⁰ In this construction, Bernhardt is not a girl of “bad breeding” tainted by her early life circumstances—she is rhetorically transcendent of her origins.

All of this is true, and yet we find curious levels of damage control operating in the same passages discussed by Gottlieb. The second page of *Ma double vie* paints a reproachful portrait of Sarah’s young, frivolous mother rushing to her side following an

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²³⁰ Robert Gottlieb, *Sarah: The Life of Sarah Bernhardt* (Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

accident resulting from months of neglect. Left to her own devices by a harried wet nurse, three-year-old Sarah has fallen into the fire. The incident could have proved fatal, and yet Bernhardt hastens to balance this maternal failure with a more flattering image:

Mother, adorably beautiful, *looked like a Madonna*, with her golden hair and her eyes fringed with such long lashes that they made a shadow on her cheeks when she looked down...She would have given her golden hair, her slender white fingers, her tiny feet, her life itself, in order to save her child.²³¹

Julie Bernhardt, called Youle by family and friends, is obviously being partially rehabilitated in almost the same moment that her failure as a parent is made known. Indeed, Sarah's disappointment with her mother begins in the first paragraph of her autobiography and saturates its pages to such an extent that maternal disillusionment functions as a primary motif of *Ma double vie*, as noted above. Why, then, choose this moment to compare Youle to the Virgin Mary? After introducing her as a promiscuous teenager who would abandon her child to travel with wealthy men, why linger (in religiously-inflected terms) over Youle's sudden, saint-like willingness to sacrifice herself for a previously-neglected child, when Bernhardt could so easily have continued tilting the narrative toward wholesale excoriation? The answer may lie in Youle's status as the triple source of Sarah Bernhardt's Jewishness, illegitimacy, and youthful career as a courtesan. Glenn Altschuler notes that Sarah's origins initially made her "a figure of scandal" in society; she stood out as "the fatherless daughter of a Jewish courtesan, who

²³¹ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 2-3, emphasis added.

was promiscuous herself.”²³² Robert Gottlieb adds that while Youle was certainly “never one of the great courtesans—*les grandes horizontales*—she nevertheless always had one or two well-to-do ‘protectors’ to squire her around the elegant spas of Europe.”²³³ These included Baron Larrey, the Emperor’s personal doctor; well-known composer Rossini; Alexandre Dumas *père*; and the powerful Duc de Morny, illegitimate half-brother to Napoleon III.²³⁴ Youle’s profession would have been common knowledge to her contemporaries. This would only have confirmed suspicions (or reinforced certitude) about the nature of Sarah’s relationships with wealthy men.

As we have seen in our review of stereotypes and anti-Semitism, Youle’s Jewishness would also have had problematic associations for some of Bernhardt’s readers. Traditional Judaic law held that religious identity was passed down matrilineally, meaning that only the child of a Jewish mother could be considered Jewish. *Ma double vie* was first published in 1907; already by the late nineteenth century the new pseudoscience of race firmly believed in a kind of Semitic one-drop rule wherein “Jewishness...could be transmitted through the blood” of any relative whatsoever²³⁵—almost as if it were a contagion. By both of these standards, and despite the comparatively greater assimilation of French Jewry, Youle’s religious and ethnic identity (particularly as a foreigner from Holland) would have rendered Sarah indelibly Other in

²³² Glenn Altschuler and Robert Gottlieb, “Sarah Bernhardt’s Dramatic Life, Onstage and Off,” *NPR*, NPR, September 24, 2010, 1.

²³³ Robert Gottlieb, *Sarah: The Life of Sarah Bernhardt*, 2.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²³⁵ Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-century France* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 245.

nineteenth-century France. In addition, as we have seen, Youle's courtesan status would have implicated Bernhardt's own later foray into prostitution. It also compounded some of the stereotypes we have already seen that gave young Jewish women like Bernhardt's mother a *belle juive/femme fatale* reputation as "oversexed...indulgent...sexually promiscuous...carriers of sexually transmitted diseases, and...seducers of Aryan men"²³⁶ like Bernhardt's French Catholic father. The renewed nineteenth-century popularity of certain Biblical narratives, particularly Salomé's request for John the Baptist's head and Judith's decapitation of Holofernes (often muddled together in the anxieties of contemporary culture), reflected and reinforced the notion among French Christians that, as previously discussed, female seduction and the Jewish demographic threat overlapped in dangerous ways.²³⁷

There were thus some very real negative perceptions of Sarah's genetic and cultural heritage from Youle to deal with. What could be done about this? *Ma double vie* constituted an important opportunity for Sarah to (re)define herself for posterity—and, as an unavoidable part of her origin story, Youle could not be entirely inseparable from the creation of Sarah's public image. Without giving her mother a free pass, Bernhardt nevertheless chooses to balance her social vulnerabilities by performing a code switch that puts Youle, however briefly, into the same category as the most potent of French maternal symbols. Ever the actress, Bernhardt does this by constructing a mental picture for the reader—in other words, she *stages* Youle's character. Jules Huret reports a similar

²³⁶ Katherine Wehby, "The Jewess Question: The Portrayal of Jewish Women in Nazi Propaganda," Honors Projects (2012), 2-3.

²³⁷ Sander L. Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the 'Modern Jewess'", 204.

staging in one of his private conversations with Sarah; according to him, she began with “My mother, as you know, was a Dutch Jewess,” but made sure to emphasize that Youle “had a pretty face and beautiful blue eyes.”²³⁸ In this paradigm the transgressive young mother may not always behave like the Madonna her appearance evokes, but from a theatrical standpoint she possesses the requisite beauty and innocent sweetness to play the part. In his discussion of stereotypes, Gilman points out how strong a maternal archetype can be when positioned correctly: “...the image of the introjected ‘bad’ Other, [is] always linked to the image of the ‘good’ [m]Other. Here is where the inclusionary image of the woman is most powerful.”²³⁹ And in nineteenth-century France, what inclusionary female image could be more powerful than the Madonna?

This virtue-by-association ploy reoccurs throughout *Ma double vie*. Perhaps the Madonna’s most obvious function in Bernhardt’s self-fashioning narrative is that it provides proof of her loyalty to Christianity. When young Sarah is sent (at her father’s request) to a convent school, she emphasizes the sincerity of her youthful devotion to Catholicism by filling a long paragraph with descriptions of the Virgin statue in her dormitory and her continual enthusiasm for decorating its niche.²⁴⁰ The Madonna also reforms her bad behavior. After a disruptive episode involving a local soldier, which results in Sarah’s being left atop the convent wall all night, she recalls how she “appealed to the Holy Virgin to help” and vowed to “say three supplementary Aves, three Credos,

²³⁸ Jules Huret, George A. Raper, Edmond Rostand, et al., *Sarah Bernhardt*, 5.

²³⁹ Sander L. Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the ‘Modern Jewess’", 196.

²⁴⁰ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 22.

and three Paters every day.”²⁴¹ But perhaps most striking in this regard is Sarah’s relationship with Mère St. Sophie, one of the convent nuns. Sarah clearly marks her as a substitute maternal figure (the “good” mother who would temporarily replace her “bad,” neglectful one), and ascribes quasi-magical powers to her that mesh with those of the Virgin. One day, after a nun has inadvertently combed Sarah’s unruly mass of hair too hard and thrown her into fits of pain and rage, Mère St. Sophie is called in to deal with the impossible child. “All the others had gone,” Sarah remembered, “and I was quite alone with her and the Holy Virgin in the niche. From that day forth Mother St. Sophie had an immense influence over me.”²⁴² The pain caused by one nun’s mishandling of Sarah’s stereotypically thick, curly Jewish hair (referenced subtly but continually by an adult Bernhardt as a motif for the less conventionally Christian aspects of her personality), is symbolically resolved through another nun’s intervention. This mystical experience, in which Sarah transfers her devotion from a courtesan Jewish mother to a virginal Catholic surrogate—whose very presence is enough to compensate for the absence of the former—significantly takes place under the watchful eye of the Madonna. It has all the hallmarks of a spiritual conversion narrative.

The story of Bernhardt’s official conversion to Catholicism is a bit less straightforward. Presenting her baptism at age thirteen as a classic transformation of self, Bernhardt relates that from the moment Archbishop Sibour promised to be there, the prospect of her baptism filled her with “an ardent love for mysticism”²⁴³ that not only

²⁴¹ Ibid., 43.

²⁴² Ibid., 23.

²⁴³ Ibid., 34.

fired her enthusiasm for becoming a Catholic, but convinced her that it was her religious calling to become a nun. Young Sarah pictures her initiation in true theatrical style:

[The] baptismal ceremony was the prelude to my dream. I could see myself like the novice who had just been admitted as a nun. I pictured myself lying down on the ground covered over with the heavy black cloth with its white cross...and I planned to die under this cloth. How I was to do this I did not know...But I made up my mind to die like this.²⁴⁴

Here Bernhardt presents her youthful passion for Catholicism as so all-defining that it fulfills her life's purpose; she has no other wish than to become a nun, the highest calling she can achieve within the Church, and then die. Significantly, she also implicitly asks her readers to picture her covered in the black initiation cloth with its white cross, as if to cover over her previous life with a physical synecdoche of Catholic conversion that will affect their perception of her going forward. To confirm that this religious devotion has continued in her adult life despite her decision to become an actress, Bernhardt then emphasizes the divine approval she feels she has received for her eventual career. She begins by recalling, through a series of material objects, the seriousness with which she intended to become a nun:

In my fancy I proudly rejected...princes...kings...pearls and palaces, and declared that I was going to be a nun...Yes, *mon Dieu!* I preferred to the pearls that were offered to me by princes the pearls of the rosary I was telling with my fingers; and no costume could compete in my mind with

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

the black barège veil that fell like a soft shadow over the snowy-white
 cambric that encircled the beloved faces of the nuns...²⁴⁵

This passage is a prime example of metaphorical sartorial code-switching. Despite the fact that she never wore a nun's habit, Bernhardt's reader/audience nevertheless now pictures her trying on and rejecting the trappings of royalty before donning her black veil and white cowl. If the nun's attire is here opposed to its rhetorical opposite, the theater costume, it nevertheless functions as a theatrical disguise in some ways, allowing Bernhardt to rhetorically "put on" pious devotion. In this passage Bernhardt's religiosity is expressed through an imaginary costume change whose (very effective) constructedness suggests that for her, Catholicism may also be a simple change of dress—an ambiguous duality between sincere and surface religiosity that once again echoes *Ma double vie*'s title.

Some weeks later, when she has been accepted to the Comédie Française, a deliriously happy Sarah justifies her sudden change of plans by asking the Virgin's permission to renounce convent life. As we have seen, in the eyes of nineteenth-century French culture there was perhaps no wider gap possible than the one between nun and actress. In order to combat this apparent fall from grace to sinfulness and reinforce an impression of religious sincerity, Bernhardt details how she

...made a long speech to the Virgin Mary at the head of my bed. I
 adored the Virgin Mary, and I explained to her my reasons for not
 being able to take the veil, in spite of my vocation. I tried to charm and

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

persuade her, and I kissed her very gently on her foot, which was crushing the serpent.²⁴⁶

Note that this Madonna statue appears to be a specific version where Mary is portrayed dominating a Satanic serpent. This seemingly small detail would nevertheless cue readers who were aware of Bernhardt's physical association, as we have seen, with snake symbolism and its connotations of sinfulness in contemporary culture. I suggest that an older Bernhardt provides this visual detail of her religious statue quite purposefully, and that it works to balance aspects of her reputation not found explicitly in *Ma double vie* but familiar to the book's audience. Now that she has, in her narrative, received the Madonna's blessing, Bernhardt proceeds with her unorthodox life plan as part of France's national theater. This episode reaffirms her true commitment to Catholicism in the face of all cultural suggestions to the contrary—obstacles to her long-term legacy of which the adult Bernhardt who writes these memoirs is keenly aware.

Negotiating Cultural Optics

And yet if Bernhardt's goal was to steep her public image in Catholicism by completely rejecting the potential liability of her Jewishness, many aspects of her life and career—along with her presentation of them—would have been handled differently. First and foremost is her decision to use the name Sarah. It would have been easy enough to keep all or part of her given name Henriette-Rosine, but for reasons that remain unclear, Bernhardt opted against these more Christianized alternatives even after her baptism.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 90.

²⁴⁷ Janis Bergman-Carton, "Negotiating the Categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the Possibilities of Jewishness," 59.

The name Sarah was so recognizably Jewish that it often attracted attention—but then again, perhaps this was part of its appeal. Huret relates an anecdote allegedly told to him by Bernhardt herself, in which, as a teenager attempting to enter the Conservatoire, one of the professors stopped her mid-audition to ask, “Is your name Sarah?...Are you a Jewess?” and her response tellingly claims both identities: “By birth, sir, but I have been baptized.” This answer seems to please her questioner. “She has been baptized,” he repeats to the rest of the jury, “and it would have been a pity for such a pretty child not to be.”²⁴⁸ With that announcement, Sarah is informed that she has passed her entrance exams. Bernhardt’s unmistakably Jewish name here functions as an indicator of what makes her unique; Jewish by birth, but Catholic by baptism, she simultaneously fits in and stands out in just the right proportions. Walking this fine line (and of course having a recommendation from her mother’s powerful lover, the Duc de Morny), gets her noticed when it counts. I argue that this episode is framed by Bernhardt as an indicator of her early ability to negotiate the cultural codes of Catholicism and Jewishness simultaneously, on which more later.

Much of what Sarah took away from her time at the Conservatoire related to this lesson in first impressions and the subsequent importance she would place on self-presentation throughout her career. During another competition, Bernhardt expected to get first prize but was distracted by her mother’s attempts at taming her unruly hair. The hairdresser hired to make her presentable before the *concours* tellingly perceives her curls as racially unacceptable, making of them a synecdoche for the outsider status he and

²⁴⁸ Jules Huret, George A. Raper, Edmond Rostand, et al., *Sarah Bernhardt*, 11.

Youle seem eager to replace with a more mainstream, socially advantageous look. The two of them thus force a teenaged Bernhardt to code switch her appearance to achieve upward mobility. As he wrestles her “rebellious mane” into submission, the hairdresser mutters to himself, “Good Heavens, it is horrible...it might be the hair of a white negress!...Mademoiselle’s hair is stopped in its growth by this extreme curliness. All the Tangier girls and negresses have hair like this.”²⁴⁹ In keeping with the centuries-old stereotypes of Jewishness previously analyzed, in this passage we see Bernhardt’s naturally curly hair functioning as a material symbol of her Jewishness that threatens her place in nineteenth-century racial and social hierarchies. To prove that her Frenchness exists within racially acceptable bounds, then, Sarah must submit to the greasing and rolling of her too-Jewish hair into a heavy “packet of sausages”²⁵⁰ which she later rips out before the competition while crying herself hoarse. The effects of all this are predictably disastrous. When another student wins the prize she had coveted, Sarah interprets it as proof that personal appearance is its own kind of talent, and one that interacts with preconceived notions in significant ways:

...I went and sat down on the bench without uttering a word, and looked at Marie Lloyd...She was wearing a pale blue tarlatan dress, with a bunch of forget-me-nots in the bodice and another in her black hair. She was very tall, and her delicate white shoulders emerged modestly from her dress, which was cut very low...but in her case this was without danger. Her refined face, with its somewhat proud expression,

²⁴⁹ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 80-81.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

was charming and very beautiful...It was a beauty prize that the jury had conscientiously awarded to Marie Lloyd.

She had come on to the stage gay and fascinating in her role of Célimène, and in spite of the monotony of her delivery, the carelessness of her elocution, the impersonality of her acting, she had carried off all the votes because she was the very personification of Célimène...She had realised for every one the ideal dreamed of by Molière...this first lesson, which was so painful at the time, was of great service to me in my career. I never forgot Marie Lloyd's prize, and every time I have had a *rôle* to create, the personage always appears before me dressed from head to foot, walking, bowing, sitting down, getting up.²⁵¹

Bernhardt's description of her acting process is also consistent with the skills required to perform sartorial code-switching successfully. Furthermore, she makes it clear, through her disapproval of her mother and the hairdresser, that this does not always involve quashing non-ideal physical characteristics. Instead, in these passages we see the future actress learning which traits make her unique, including some aspects that contemporaries might read as negative markers of outsider status, and balancing them with narratives of belonging that help her audience visualize the coexistence of two supposedly separate spheres. (Significantly, Bernhardt's too-Jewish hair would become a key part of this success—with critics later citing her best qualities, for example, as “rhythmical movement, gesture, look, speech, hands, *hair*, body and spirit.”²⁵²)

²⁵¹ Ibid., 85-86.

²⁵² Sarah Bernhardt et al., *The Art of the Theatre by Sarah Bernhardt* (G. Bles, 1924), 7, emphasis added.

In Bernhardt's memoirs this balancing act of self-presentation includes the frequent Madonna references, but also goes beyond them. At times Bernhardt builds, as we have seen in her own description, a metaphorical costume for an imagined body. At others I contend that she constructs a similar metaphorical costume for a character's personality, helping readers associate them with certain behaviors and personality traits. In *Ma double vie* Bernhardt openly describes how she and others manage outward perceptions at key moments—for example putting on her “blue silk” (blue being the Virgin's signature color) before an important family meeting because it will make her look “more staid” despite her notoriously bad temper.²⁵³ The admission of a youthful Bernhardt's tendency to anger is here mitigated by a hint at the Virgin's calming influence through clothing. This is paralleled by Bernhardt's account of how her governess, Mlle Brabender, and longtime family friend Mme Guerard shaped her youthful personality. “[Mlle de Brabender] always declared that my voice was modulated for prayers, and my delight in the convent appeared to her quite natural. She loved me with a gentle pious affection,” Sarah relates, while on the other hand, “Madame Guerard loved me with bursts of paganism. These two women...shared me between them, and made the best of my good qualities and my faults. I certainly owe to both of them...the vision I have of myself.”²⁵⁴ Here we see a key moment in which Sarah's presents herself as a hybridized balance between the eccentricities and unorthodoxies (‘paganism’) represented by one woman's influence, and a piously performed Catholicism represented by the other. As we have witnessed in her deployment of the

²⁵³ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 48.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

Madonna motif throughout *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt obviously felt that her “scandalous” side was so disproportionately known by the public that it needed some occasional counterbalancing, just as her blue silk dress helped her fit the persona required for a meeting that would decide her future. However, Bernhardt’s description of her coexisting “pagan” and “pious” influences highlights an explicit desire not to replace one with the other, as may at first seem to be the case, but to reconcile these two seemingly dichotomous halves of herself into a unique, hybridized whole.

If anyone could stage such an unheard-of social identity, it was Sarah Bernhardt. As her career progressed and she gained more autonomy, Bernhardt took charge of all aspects of her public persona, both on and offstage. To this end, she continuously sought greater professional autonomy. After her 1890s acquisition of the Renaissance Theatre, Bernhardt’s independence grew to such a level that Gerda Taranow terms it “complete artistic control: she chose her own plays, closely supervised the *mise en scène*, often designed her own costumes, and even selected the incidental music.”²⁵⁵ Outside the theater, her ability to attract attention and make headlines in the late nineteenth century’s telegraph and newspaper mass-media age has led Heather McPherson to describe Sarah Bernhardt as the ultimate “performer, producer, and fabricator of her own image.”²⁵⁶ Even in the many situations where she could not directly control others’ responses to her, as with the malicious newspaper caricatures examined earlier, Bernhardt remained philosophical about their long-term utility in keeping her legend alive. Writing near the

²⁵⁵ Gerda Taranow, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art within the Legend* (Princeton University Press, 1972), 172-74.

²⁵⁶ Heather Mcpherson, "Sarah Bernhardt: Portrait of the Actress as Spectacle," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 20, no. 4 (1999): 410.

end of her life, the great actress recalled (in third person) how perceived flaws such as her “exaggerated slenderness” gave an opportunity for “caricaturists and imitators...to gratify themselves to their hearts' content,” but added that “far from injuring the artist in question, [they] have rendered her popular.”²⁵⁷ This attitude of nonchalance is perhaps another performance meant to demonstrate Bernhardt’s aptitude for spinning any attention, however negative, in her eventual favor. As we have seen however, when it came to her legacy Bernhardt desired a more balanced reputation. Although intense media spotlights could serve to increase her notoriety in lucrative ways, there was always the narrative tightrope of unconventional-yet-respectable to be walked; far from remaining indifferent to all “caricaturists and imitators,” at several points in her career Bernhardt found it necessary to respond to attacks with public rebuttals. Her irritation is evident, for example, in a response to one critic that was published in *Le Figaro*:

It is excessively annoying not to be able to do anything without being accused of eccentricity...I have never skinned dogs or burnt cats alive. My hair is not dyed, and my face has a sufficiently corpse-like pallor to absolve me from the suspicion of painting. I am told that my thinness is eccentric, but what am I to do? I should much prefer to be one of those happy people who are neither too fat nor too thin...I am reproached with trying to do everything: acting, sculpture, and painting; but these things amuse me...Such are my crimes.²⁵⁸

Whether this is simple frustration or, as Sharon Marcus has argued, part of Bernhardt’s publicity strategy to “obtain more press by protesting the coverage she was already

²⁵⁷ Sarah Bernhardt et al., *The Art of the Theatre by Sarah Bernhardt*, 74.

²⁵⁸ Jules Huret, George A. Raper, Edmond Rostand, et al., *Sarah Bernhardt*, 58.

receiving,”²⁵⁹ it is clear from Bernhardt’s letter to the editor that she wishes to emphasize—whether sincerely or for show—that not everything about her is constructed, that she is on some level natural and human, and that she does not deserve the automatic suspicion she so often receives. Such open attempts at controlling her public image are matched by the attention to appearances that can be seen in much of *L’art du théâtre*, the famous half-manual half-memoir for aspiring actors written the same year Bernhardt died. “The artist’s personality must be left in his dressing-room,” Bernhardt advises; the “soul must be denuded of its own sensations and clothed with the base or noble qualities” of the character to be played.²⁶⁰ In this very striking description, Bernhardt pushes sartorial code-switching to the next level and gives explicit instructions for using it to costume a personality. Metaphorical disguise has its counterpart, and indeed its ritual enactment, in the physical costuming by which a true actor may assimilate their role: “...I would become identified with my character; I would dress with care; I would dismiss Sarah Bernhardt to a corner; and leave her to be a spectator of my new ‘me.’”²⁶¹ Bernhardt’s embodied identity shifting point to a multimodal view of the self and its ability to perform the emotional and physical experience of becoming someone else at will. And this is facilitated in large part by “dress[ing] with care” which can mean, for Bernhardt, quite literally putting an entire self on and off like a costume. In Fig. 14, we see Bernhardt’s most famous roles embroidered onto her dress to emphasize her metamorphic abilities. Here Bernhardt is portrayed as such a consummate actress that she

²⁵⁹ Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity*, 35.

²⁶⁰ Sarah Bernhardt et al., *The Art of the Theatre by Sarah Bernhardt*, 77.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

is able, as in her own description of her technique, to put her roles on and off as easily as her dress. The distinction between the actress's exterior and interior selves is thus blurred as both are condensed, for observers, into one surface-level projection.

Bernhardt's aptitude for manipulating visual readings of her body through physical and metaphorical costuming is contextualized by the cultural ideal against which she was constantly compared. A photograph of Bernhardt's friend and fellow actress Sophie Croizette (Fig. 15) illustrates the *zaftig* physique preferred for European women at this time. Croizette's pleasing plumpness is a reference point for perceptions of Bernhardt's thinness as unhealthy or extreme; contemporaries joked that she was "a needle torn apart by four pins" who had no need of an umbrella "because she can walk between the raindrops." "When she takes a bath," one joke went, "the water goes down"; another held that when she arrived at the theater one day, "[a]n empty carriage pulled up at the stage door and Sarah Bernhardt got out."²⁶² Self-consciousness about her slender waist may have contributed to Bernhardt's development of what composer and friend Reynaldo Hahn called her signature "Sarah Bernhardt-esque cut" (Fig. 16). This was a style of gown "made famous by Sarah, which...contributed to her fame by establishing her as a type...a bodice draped to her figure and a skirt that clings more tightly round the legs than round the hips, giving the appearance of encircling her in a spiral."²⁶³ Bernhardt's innovative style of dressing not only enhanced the natural grace of her long lines—it also concealed and drew attention away from her supposedly too-narrow waist

²⁶² Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France*, 188.

²⁶³ Reynaldo Hahn and Ethel Thompson, *Sarah Bernhardt, Impressions* (E. Mathews & Marrot, 1932), 27.

and hips by creating a swirling bunch of fabric in that area. Throughout her life many people insisted that she would never be truly beautiful because of her supposedly problematic slenderness. At one point Bernhardt cites her godfather asking, “Why persist...in going on the stage? You are thin and small...your face is pretty enough when near, but ugly in the distance.”²⁶⁴ Other members of the family agreed with him. In *Ma double vie* Bernhardt frames this episode to communicate that her natural physique did not lend itself immediately to success in her chosen profession, and that like all good actors it was only her skill of self-transformation that eventually made her slenderness a secret weapon. This is an open admission of Bernhardt’s knack for utilizing sartorial code-switching to create opportunities for herself despite possessing, in contemporary theater, a disadvantageous body type.

Against perceptions of her body as pathologically thin or unfeminine, Bernhardt deployed her versatile, androgynous physique in breeches roles. Significantly, she had one of her first major successes in 1869 playing the pageboy Zanetto in François Coppée’s *Le Passant*. Friend and erstwhile in-law Louis Verneuil describes how her turn as a romantic, lovesick young man was so successful that Zanetto’s iconic “silhouette became celebrated,” Bernhardt having designed her own pageboy costume based on the recent exhibit of a popular statue called “The Florentine Singer.” Suddenly Bernhardt’s boyishly slim figure was an asset that made her more believable in drag. Verneuil recalled not only how the men’s doublet she wore “suited her perfectly,” but also that it marked a turning point in Bernhardt’s career:

²⁶⁴ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 89.

...she gave the first proof of the astonishing taste with which she always knew how to 'dress" a period character...not only with scrupulous accuracy, but with such an intuitive feeling for what would strike the eye and the memory of the spectator that none of the characters which she created could be imagined ever afterward as having any other appearance than that which she had given them.²⁶⁵

In addition to early career *travesti* roles like Zanetto and the Duc de Richelieu, Bernhardt would go on to play characters not usually portrayed in conventional breeches roles for women. In 1896 she played Lorenzo de Medici in *Lorenzaccio*; tackled the monumental part of Hamlet in 1899; and in 1900 portrayed Napoleon's son in *L'Aiglon*. These roles pushed against social boundaries in multiple ways. Not only did they momentarily collapse spectators' ability to process gender norms by bestowing the trappings of masculinity on that "most feminine of French actresses,"²⁶⁶ but their substantial nature contravened the traditionally titillating purpose of breeches roles—to show off a woman's lower body in tight clothing.²⁶⁷ Instead, Bernhardt explained, she was attracted to the complexity of roles traditionally reserved for men: "In no female character am I able to discover such a variety of emotions, such a compelling power. Many are the male parts that I should have liked to play...At the theatre the parts designed for men are

²⁶⁵ Louis Verneuil et al., *The Fabulous Life of Sarah Bernhardt* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1942), 68.

²⁶⁶ Heather Mcpherson, "Sarah Bernhardt: Portrait of the Actress as Spectacle," 419.

²⁶⁷ Pamela Cobrin, "She's Old Enough to Be a Beautiful Young Boy: Sarah Bernhardt, Breeches Roles and the Poetics of Aging," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 50.

always the finest.”²⁶⁸ Crossing sartorial gender boundaries invigorated her. Playing *L’Aiglon* in her fifties, Bernhardt was asked how she could rehearse until three or four in the morning at her age. “Bah!” replied Bernhardt. “Don’t be surprised. Now that I’ve cut my hair short, I feel like I have the strength of a man.”²⁶⁹ This enthusiasm carried over to her onstage performances. One reporter comments that Bernhardt’s skill at theatrical cross-dressing is so great that, as he watches *L’Aiglon*, “the ‘real’ men beside her have the air of being disguised.”²⁷⁰ Pamela Cobrin has also demonstrated that Bernhardt’s middle-aged breeches performances were not simply cross-gendered but “cross-aged.” Cobrin notes that transforming herself onstage into the 21-year-old Napoleon II or the young Prince Hamlet “effectively constructed Sarah Bernhardt’s offstage female senior body as [one] whose vitality countered assumptions of its limitations...Bernhardt’s aging body...performed physical feats – running, jumping, fencing...assumed only available to a young body.”²⁷¹

For Bernhardt, however, the culturally opposite notions surrounding youth, old age, masculinity, and femininity were just more opportunities to demonstrate her uncanny ability to dissolve all preconceptions. As we have seen, over the course of her career Bernhardt developed the trick of simultaneously performing (both on- and offstage) multiple identity aspects that wider culture viewed as mutually exclusive. This

²⁶⁸ Sarah Bernhardt et al., *The Art of the Theatre by Sarah Bernhardt*, 141, 143.

²⁶⁹ Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 177.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁷¹ Pamela Cobrin, "She's Old Enough to Be a Beautiful Young Boy: Sarah Bernhardt, Breeches Roles and the Poetics of Aging," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 52.

phenomenon resurfaces in almost every situation where Bernhardt's contemporaries expect a choice between two options presented as dichotomous, and with each demand to choose one *or* the other, Bernhardt consistently chooses one *and* the other—to be thin *and* an actress; to be an unwed mother *and* a prominent social figure; and not least of all, to claim her Jewishness *and* Catholicism simultaneously. Bernhardt's intriguing mix of characteristics caught the public's attention and held it for decades. Already by the early 1880s Bernhardt images were so widely circulated that, on one of her passports from this period, the section where facial features should be described is simply marked with two dismissive squiggles (Fig. 17). Everyone knew what Sarah Bernhardt looked like.

Conclusion: Bridging the Gap

Bernhardt tells her readers in *Ma double vie* that she realizes, in retrospect, just how much her youthful self was “a being quite apart from all others” because of “my somewhat fantastic tastes, my paleness and thinness, my peculiar way of dressing, my scorn of fashion, my general freedom in all respects.” But she takes care to note that this unconventionality was not necessarily intentional; in her youth she “did not recognise the fact.”²⁷² In keeping with Sharon Marcus' notion of a “state of social exception” for celebrities that allows them to “[suspend] adherence to a social norm while still asserting membership in society,”²⁷³ Bernhardt's seemingly nonchalant description of her unique physical appearance and taste in dress here signals her status as a trendsetter, not a follower. I contend that in her autobiography this individuality ultimately corresponds to

²⁷² Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 288.

²⁷³ Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity*, 25-26.

the differentiation side of the tension between “social obedience” and “individual differentiation” that Georg Simmel identifies as the two primary components of fashion.²⁷⁴ Bernhardt’s Catholic piety, which as we have seen provides a counterweight to her more unconventional traits, functions in *Ma double vie* as the “social obedience” half of that equation. Her autobiography, in other words, parallels the sociological conventions of fashion and is itself fashionable, adhering as it does to popular genre precedents. Bernhardt’s ability to self-reflectively stage a hybridized double image in both theater and autobiographical narrative is also part of what John Berger, in his work on the gaze, identifies as a larger societal trend:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself...From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.²⁷⁵

This gendered tailoring of oneself to fit audience expectations is a form of code-switching, and it aligns perfectly with Bernhardt’s earlier description of women as natural performers whom society requires to constantly play the cultural role of womanhood (which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, George Sand also understood). It is clear, then, how and why Bernhardt would have engaged in metaphorical and physical sartorial code-switching to present herself in a positive light. As we have seen, Bernhardt

²⁷⁴ Daniel L. Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 297.

²⁷⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (British Broadcasting; Penguin Books, 1972), 46.

was dealing not only with gendered oppression as a courtesan and unmarried mother, but also with virulently negative stereotypes of her ethnic Jewishness.

If, as previously discussed, these pressures meant that Bernhardt's memoirs sometimes omitted or dressed up the truth a little, that did not bother her more appreciative readers. Henry Lyonnet, reviewing *Ma double vie* shortly after its release for the newspaper *Comoedia*, instantly puts it in the same category as Rousseau's *Confessions* for this very reason. Technically speaking, a memoir should "nous renseigner utilement...nous rendre compte d'une époque...tout dire," [*give us useful information...make us understand a given time period...tell us everything*]. But Lyonnet freely admits that where "convenances sociales et privées" [*considerations of society and privacy*] are involved, they sometimes do not. The most notable example is "les *Confessions* de Jean-Jacques, qui passent pour un modèle de franchise" [*the Confessions of Jean Jacques (Rousseau), which pass themselves off as a model of honesty*] but which are, as Lyonnet himself says he has recently discovered, almost completely untruthful for at least the first twenty pages. If a reader were really "assoiffé de vérité" [*thirsty for truth*], more inconsistencies could doubtless be found. But Lyonnet indicates that he has chosen not to investigate the illustrious Rousseau's truth claims further, and he accords the same honor to Bernhardt by choosing to view her book as the creative masterpiece of a great artist. "Ce livre est autre chose encore qu'un livre de souvenirs. Il est *surtout* une leçon d'énergie..." [*This book is something completely different from a simple collection of memories. It is above all a lesson in energy...*] Lyonnet is able to philosophically resolve the tension between a book whose title purports to tell everything—but often does precisely the opposite—by aligning Bernhardt with Rousseau in the time-honored French

tradition of taking autobiographical artistic license. He informs his readers that, “[c]es réserves faites, j’ouvre [*Ma double vie*] avec le respect qui lui est dû.” [*having expressed these reservations, I open [Ma double vie] with the respect it deserves.*]²⁷⁶

Lyonnet’s review indicates how convincingly Bernhardt was able to combine truth and artistic illusion even for those who knew or suspected her methods. This ability to fuse categories to create a new, hybridized reality brings us back to Bernhardt’s use of the Madonna throughout *Ma double vie*. I argue that hybridity is the key factor making her choice of the Virgin as a mediating figure so clever on multiple levels. After all, as Adrienne Boyarin has shown in her study of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe, the Madonna was “the foundational female model of Christianity (and also a Jewess), provid[ing] a deep sense of...authority for women...[and providing] living Jewesses with a similar kind of authority.”²⁷⁷ Bernhardt is thus referencing a powerfully multiple figure of both Christian and Jewish womanhood when she frames herself as a “little Madonna.” In this sense the Virgin Mary’s appearance throughout *Ma double vie* can be read as a subversive bridge between Judaism and Catholicism that allows Bernhardt to negotiate both categories simultaneously. The cultural specificity of Bernhardt’s unusual hybrid position—and its potential for subversion—is encapsulated in her response to one reporter who asked if she was Christian: “No, I’m a Roman Catholic, and a member of the great Jewish race. I’m waiting until Christians become better.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Henry Lyonnet, “Mémoires de Comédiens,” *Comoedia*, No. 34, (Nov. 3, 1907): 2.

²⁷⁷ Adrienne Williams Boyarin, “Inscribed Bodies: The Virgin Mary, Jewish Women, and Medieval Feminine Legal Authority,” *Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Law and Sovereignty in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (2011): 258.

²⁷⁸ Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Madame Sarah* (Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 13.

Shirley Neuman writes that "[t]he question for the reader of the rare autobiography which represents the body becomes...one of the extent to which that representation reiterates and reinforces the social codes constructing bodies or the extent to which it reconfigures them."²⁷⁹ I argue that when it comes to bodily representation, Bernhardt is primarily doing the latter. By applying certain predetermined sets of social codes to her body in new contexts and combinations—by engaging, in other words, in sartorial code-switching—Bernhardt often reconfigures them. Sometimes, as in *Ma double vie*, this involves challenging readers' expectations for overt scandal and instead enacting a quieter form of subversion by presenting herself as a paradox: a rule-bending but morally unassailable social hybrid. Two publicity posters by her close friend Alphonse Mucha show Bernhardt in this mode. In Fig. 18 advertising *La Dame aux camélias*, he portrays Bernhardt as Marguerite Gautier, the title character of Dumas' play about a dying courtesan with a heart of gold. Significantly, the large white camellias offered by a disembodied hand in the foreground are balanced against a purple background filled with stars, which on closer examination turn out to be tiny Stars of David. The sweeping white robe worn by Marguerite/Bernhardt combines with these white flowers to communicate a symbolic virtue that works against bourgeois perceptions of prostitution; the Stars of David in the background add another layer of subversion to Marguerite's presentation as a "chaste courtesan,"²⁸⁰ particularly in light of contemporary views about Jewish courtesans like Bernhardt's mother Youle. In this image we see

²⁷⁹ Shirley Norman, "Autobiography, Bodies, Manhood," *Prose Studies* 14, no. 2 (1991): 139.

²⁸⁰ Heather Mcpherson, "Sarah Bernhardt: Portrait of the Actress as Spectacle," 412.

Mucha narrativizing Marguerite/Bernhardt in much the same way that Bernhardt does for herself in *Ma double vie*. Female sexuality, Bernhardt's personal reputation, and the culturally fraught *belle juive* are simultaneously redeemed in one elegant image.

In Fig. 19 Mucha's usage of Jewish iconography goes a step further. His illustration of Bernhardt's turn as Photine in Edmond de Rostand's 1897 play *La Samaritaine* once again features Stars of David, this time scattered through Bernhardt's hair—which, as if to defy her mother's hairdresser, has reclaimed its untamed wildness and now flows around her body in two large tendril-like, almost sentient waves. Mucha has also drawn a stylized halo around Bernhardt/Photine's head that marks her as mystical or holy. In the center we find Hebraic lettering spelling out “JEHOVA” against a mosaic background, and along the halo's edge Bernhardt's name is written in a hybridized Hebrew-Latin script. Rostand created Photine as a mediating figure between Christianity and Judaism that echoes the Virgin Mary's historical function in Europe; Photine is a girl from Samaria living in biblical times who becomes a follower of Jesus and subsequently converts her entire tribe.²⁸¹ Playwright Victorien Sardou, who had also written roles for Bernhardt, was especially impressed by her interpretation of Photine. “Full of the divine fire, she evangelizes the crowd wherever she goes,” he rhapsodized.²⁸² Bernhardt herself recalls receiving a letter from a disaffected Catholic priest who found his doubts miraculously cured after watching her play this role.²⁸³ But if, as Bernhardt

²⁸¹ Jack Rennert, Alain Weill, and Alphonse Mucha, *Alphonse Mucha: The Complete Posters and Panels* (Hjert & Hjert Book. Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1984), 188.

²⁸² Jules Huret, George A. Raper, Edmond Rostand, et al., *Sarah Bernhardt*, 153.

²⁸³ Sarah Bernhardt et al., *The Art of the Theatre by Sarah Bernhardt*, 187.

relates, the opening night of *La Samaritaine* was “a day of unforgettable emotion” on which “Christian love filled the theatre with a joy of infinite purity,” this was not necessarily because the actress herself was fully dedicated to the Jewish-to-Christian conversion narrative she represented on stage (and would later echo in *Ma double vie*). It was primarily a “memorable” day because, in Bernhardt’s words, “it plunged me for a moment into memories of my early [childhood], when, mystical and ignorant, I raved about the little Jesus; it demonstrated to me more than ever the powerful influence of literary works performed in our temple: the Theatre.”²⁸⁴ Writing these words twenty-six years after the fact, Bernhardt here appears to reverse the story from *Ma double vie* in which she begs the Madonna’s pardon for choosing an inferior acting career over her true vocation as a nun. This older Bernhardt now frames her youthful devotion to Catholicism as the ravings of a “mystical and ignorant” child. What she deems truly powerful is theatrical narrative, underscored by Bernhardt’s description of the theatre as a temple. If *Ma double vie* rhetorically privileged Catholicism over acting, here that hierarchy is suddenly and revealingly reversed; Bernhardt’s religion is the theater, and her only devotion is to the “powerful influence” of mythmaking. Audiences loved Photine’s story. But while *La Samaritaine* admittedly catered to French Catholic appetites for Jewish conversion narratives (like Bernhardt’s own), it also provided a cultural space where Bernhardt could appear in a Jewish role that commanded widespread sympathy at the height of the Dreyfus Affair.

Bernhardt’s choice of subtly or overtly hybrid stage roles thus seems, in many cases, to combine elements that were personally relevant to her and which

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 186-87.

contemporaries tended to view as incompatible. Her ability to convincingly fuse notions of chastity and sexuality or Judaism and Catholicism in one unifying character is a good example of Judith Butler's "subversion from within the terms of the law," since Bernhardt routinely performed these characters in ways that combined preexisting codes (or cultural "laws") into new formations that would on some level subvert them. This phenomenon, which I term sartorial code-switching when applied to dress and appearance, is in Butler's words a moment when "the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities."²⁸⁵ I argue that this is precisely how Bernhardt's hybrid selves function. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, with the eruption of the Dreyfus Affair and ongoing tensions between France and Germany, Bernhardt continued to claim her multiple identities in the face of rising right-wing nationalism and attendant anti-Semitism. One of her most unlikely successes throughout these years is Bernhardt's ability, despite her foreign roots and ethno-religious background, to cast herself as so patriotic and quintessentially French that she often became fully identified with France itself in the minds of the public. By doing so, Bernhardt boldly claimed the right to be both Jewish and French in a time when those notions were increasingly being presented as opposites.

Bernhardt's offstage efforts to appear patriotic date back to at least the 1870s, when according to Louis Verneil "[s]ome envious rivals inspired newspaper attacks on [Bernhardt] on the ground of her nationality." In the wake of the Franco-Prussian war,

²⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 93.

during which she had selflessly operated a military hospital out of the Odéon Theatre, Bernhardt's detractors nevertheless "represented [her] as a German Jewess." She wrote a letter to the editor of one newspaper addressing these rumors:

Certainly...I am a Jewess, but not a German...All my family come from Holland...If I have a foreign accent—which I much regret—it is cosmopolitan, but not Teutonic. I am a daughter of the great Jewish race, and my somewhat uncultivated language is the outcome of our enforced wanderings. I hope your sense of justice will lead you to rectify a mistake which may not only affect my son's future but is painful to me as a Frenchwoman.²⁸⁶

Bernhardt's response is revealing. No, she emphatically declares, she is not German. But she reverses the other half of the accusation, proudly identifying as "a daughter of the great Jewish race" and seamlessly claiming this heritage alongside that of a patriotic Frenchwoman—which for anti-Semites was a *de facto* impossibility. Bernhardt performs a similar move in an 1876 sculptural self-portrait titled *La Fille de Roland* (Fig. 20), a bust of the actress in Gallic costume for her starring role in a play of the same name. By portraying the daughter of a legendary medieval French hero who was also Charlemagne's nephew, Bernhardt ties herself irrevocably to the founding mythologies of France—and takes the additional step of immortalizing this role with a sculpture of herself in character. All of this was a very conscious choice on Bernhardt's part. *La Fille de Roland* was not very well written, Bernhardt admitted, but its main advantage to her

²⁸⁶ Jules Huret, George A. Raper, Edmond Rostand, et al., *Sarah Bernhardt*, 37-38.

was that it had a “great patriotic” feel.²⁸⁷ Bernhardt pulled off a similarly patriotic *coup* when, after returning to her disgruntled Parisian public at the end of a two-year tour in 1881, she surprised audiences by replacing the original actress who had been scheduled to declaim the Marseillaise at a July 14th celebration. Appearing suddenly and throwing off her cloak to reveal a “long white gown; a sash in the three national colors, with loose ends; and...a black moiré cap, with wide wings like those of the Alsatian peasant women,”²⁸⁸ Bernhardt’s performance made the most dramatic impression she could have hoped for: “...all the women wept and many men also wiped their eyes, while the entire audience was positively overcome.” Bernhardt chanted the Marseillaise with increasingly dramatic fervor until, “at the last words [of the song]...Sarah raised as high as possible the flag which she held in her right hand. It unfolded widely behind her and...[she] stood motionless, all in white, in front of the three French colors.” The effect of this *tableau* was overwhelming. “The enthusiasm was beyond description...really a kind of delirium...[i]n a quarter of an hour Sarah Bernhardt had turned Paris around and had regained all her old popularity.”²⁸⁹ In addition to rumors of her unacceptable foreignness, Bernhardt had been accused of abandoning France to chase money and popularity in other countries. But her iconic costume and ability to pose in it at just the right moment made audiences swoon with a patriotic zeal that would forever after be associated in their minds with Sarah Bernhardt.

²⁸⁷ Kenneth E. Silver, “Celebrity, Patriotism, and Sarah Bernhardt,” in *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Berghahn, 2013), 147.

²⁸⁸ Louis Verneuil et al., *The Fabulous Life of Sarah Bernhardt*, 147.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 148-49.

Bernhardt created similar associations between herself and the nation by playing characters like Napoleon's son in *L'Aiglon*. But perhaps the most striking example of her ability to present herself as more French than anyone else is Bernhardt's turn as Joan of Arc. As we have seen, Victoria Tietze Larson draws a clear connection between Bernhardt's "insistence on her early religious mysticism" in *Ma double vie* and its resulting "stereotypical Jeanne d'Arc-like image...of fragile, innocent vulnerability."²⁹⁰ Saint Joan of Arc was perhaps the only female figure who could compare with the Madonna in contemporary French society. In some ways Joan was even more powerfully unifying because she appealed not only to traditional Catholics, but also to secular proponents of the Third Republic. This made Joan of Arc a conundrum of her own, a "patriotic saint" who rose "above politics" to unify various factions of France—and Bernhardt portrayed her twice, once in 1890 when her career was in greater need of Joan's vicarious virtue, and again in 1909 when the Maid achieved sainthood.²⁹¹ Anatole France reacted to Bernhardt's Joan in much the same way as others had to her Photine. "She bears upon her face that afterglow of stained glass which the visitations of the saints had left," he writes rapturously.²⁹² But as Venita Datta has remarked, Bernhardt's successful performance as Joan (Fig. 21) is in fact quite subversive:

The fact that Bernhardt, a Jew and a New Woman, was playing the virginal Joan was not without its ironies. Famous for her transvestite

²⁹⁰ Victoria Tietze Larson, preface to *My Double Life*, ix.

²⁹¹ Venita Datta, *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 144.

²⁹² Kenneth E. Silver, "Celebrity, Patriotism, and Sarah Bernhardt," 149.

roles, Bernhardt, the cross-dresser, was herself playing a cross-dresser and, moreover, an androgyne. In the context of the fin-de-siecle crisis of masculinity, this gender blurring by the historical figure and the actress who portrayed her is significant.²⁹³

And yet despite its apparent contradictions, Datta notes, Bernhardt's stunningly successful 1909 portrayal of Joan was able to unify "all [spectators except] the most recalcitrant among the extreme right."²⁹⁴ Bernhardt had again switched cultural codes quite spectacularly—acting in a cross-aged role as the teenage Joan despite being in her sixties; performing gendered cross-dressing in the role of a historical cross-dresser who had nevertheless just been canonized; portraying a mystical virgin in defiance of her known courtesan past; and perhaps most incredibly, producing herself as a symbolic fusion of national and religious belonging by incarnating one of France's most enduring Catholic icons as a Jewish actress. The mystery behind Joan of Arc's ability to absorb all these social contradictions is quite clear to Bernhardt. It is nothing less than the power of personal mythology:

...legend remains victorious in spite of history. And this is perhaps an advantage for the mind of the people. Jesus, Joan of Arc, Shakespeare, the Virgin Mary, Mahomet, and Napoleon I have all entered into legend. It is impossible now for our brain to picture Jesus and the Virgin Mary accomplishing humiliating human functions...We cast aside all the failings of humanity in order to leave them, clothed in the ideal, seated

²⁹³ Venita Datta *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity*, 144.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

on a throne of love. We do not like Joan of Arc to be the rustic, bold peasant girl...sitting astride her big Percheron horse like a man...We do not care for such useless truths. In the legend she is a fragile woman guided by a divine soul...It is thus that we wish it to be, and so the legend remains triumphant.²⁹⁵

Bernhardt's analysis of the mechanisms by which biographical narrative can reframe history is telling when we consider her own usage of such strategies, both in *Ma double vie* and elsewhere. Bernhardt knew how to remain "victorious in spite of history" and its sometimes "useless truths." I argue that it is precisely because of her multimodal ability to narrativize herself as a seemingly impossible, hybridized figure—as an outsider who defiantly belongs—that Sarah Bernhardt joins her own list of triumphant legends.

²⁹⁵ Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, 86-87.

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Appendix

Fig. 1—Sarah Bernhardt sleeping in her coffin. Photographer L. Poirel, circa 1873, Ville de Paris / BMD / Roger-Viollet.



Fig. 2—Photograph of Bernhardt wearing her taxidermied bat hat, circa 1899.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arts du spectacle.



Fig. 3—Bernhardt in her custom-made Worth sculptor's outfit, late 19th century (exact date unknown). Hulton Archives.



Fig. 4—Sarah Bernhardt, *Encrier fantastique* (1880), self-portrait as a woman-devil hybrid. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 5—"Too Thin, or Skeleton Sarah." In *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*.
Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1887, 47.

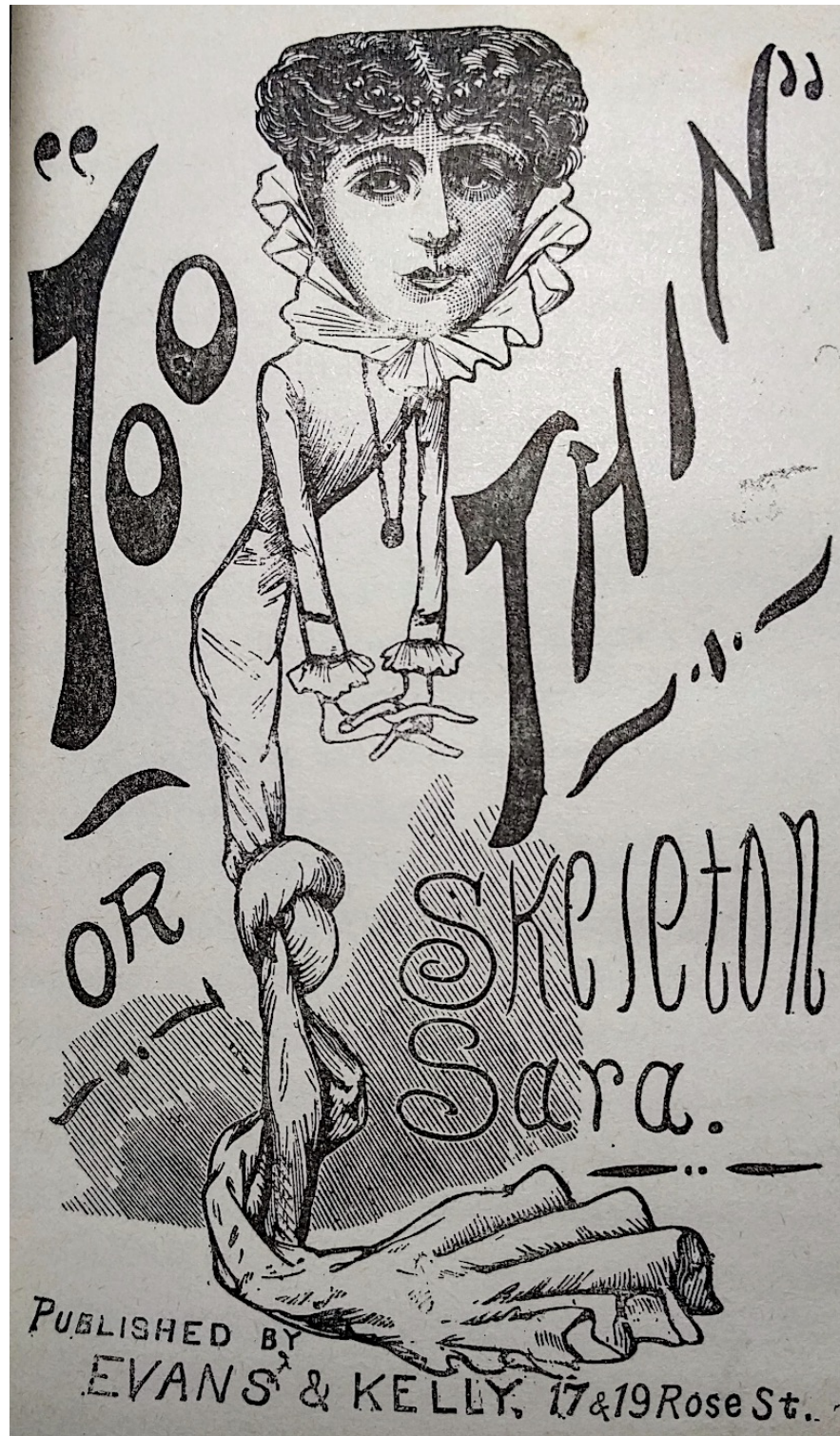
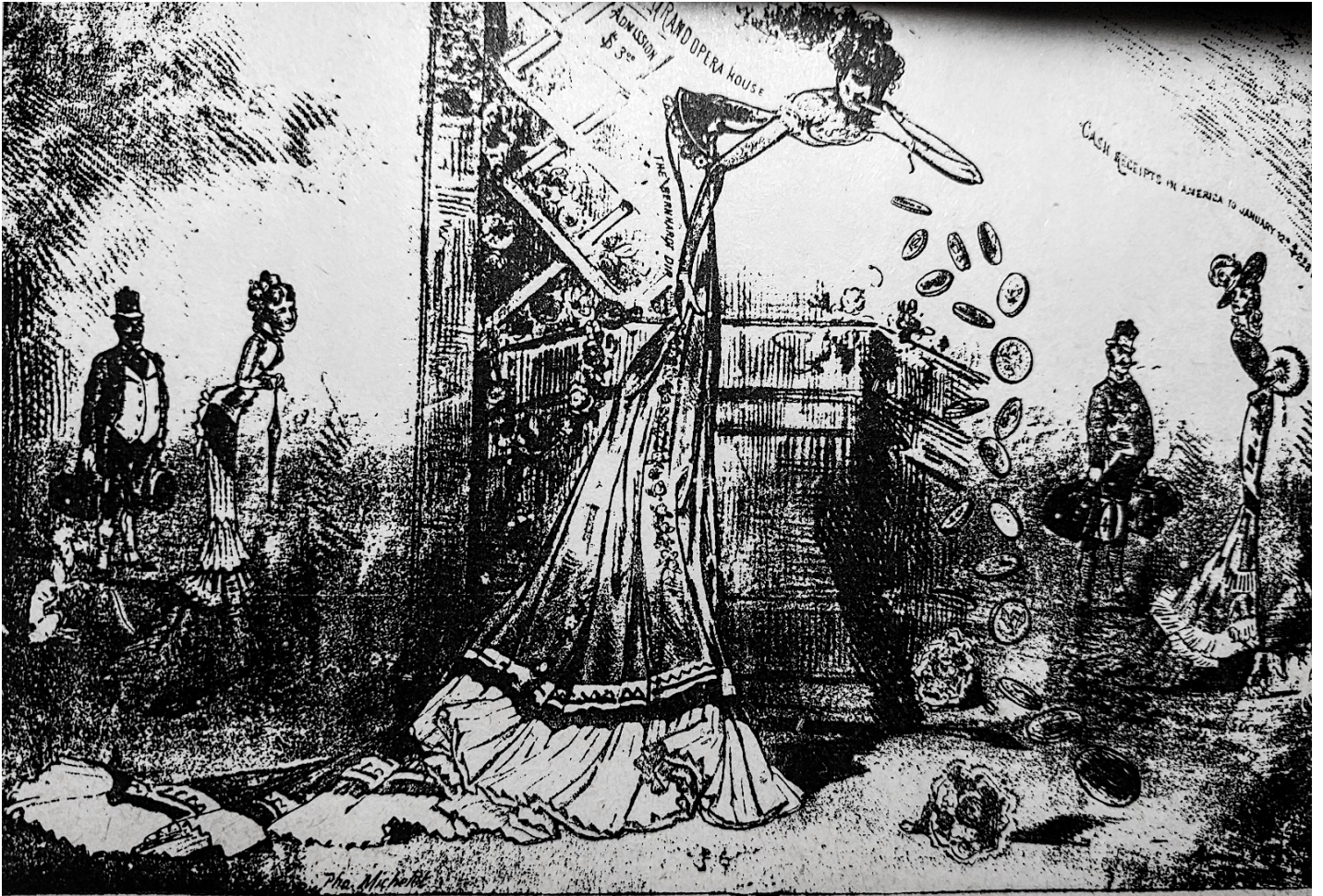


Fig. 6—Manuel Luque, caricature of Sarah Bernhardt, *Supplement du Monde Parisien*, circa 1882. In *The Drama of Celebrity*. Princeton, NJ; Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2019, 34.



Fig. 7—"Modeste à l'arrivée...arrogante au retour." In *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*. Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1887, 187.



Modeste à l'arrivée.

La voix d'or, machine à dollars.

Arrogante au retour

Fig. 8—"Mademoiselle, à votre service!" In *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*.
Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1887, 255.



— Mademoiselle, à votre service! Usez-en! Goûtez de ce champagne! Buvez de mon wiskey!
Fumez-moi ce cigare! Essayez de mon cirage! Voyez cette brosse à dents! (Tiré du *Puck*.)

Fig. 9—Bernhardt photographed by Félix Nadar, circa 1864.



Fig. 10—Advertisement suggesting that even Bernhardt can gain weight. In *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*. Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1887, 279.



Bitter pour le foie. Buvez-en, il vous donnera de l'appétit.
(Couverture d'un prospectus).

Fig. 11—"La verité sur Sarah." In *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*. Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1887, 126.



Fig. 12—W.K. Haselden, "The Divine Sarah," 1906. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

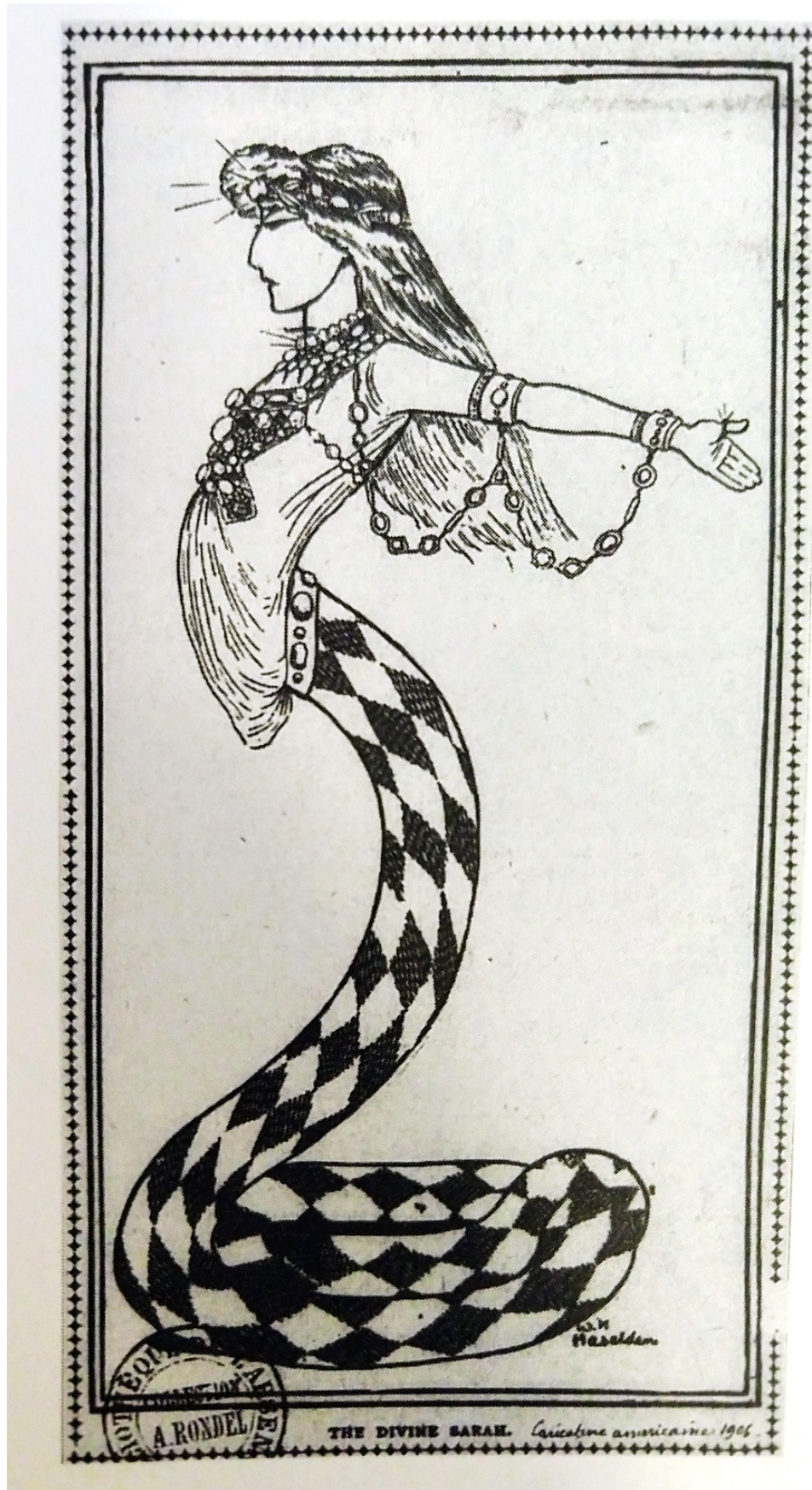


Fig. 13—"Tout fait réclame! Mais celle-ci est la bonne." In *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*. Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1887, 137.



Tout fait réclame! mais celle-.i est la bonne. (Tiré du *Puck*.)

Fig. 14—George Luks, “The Great Bernhardt in Her Robe and Roles,” *New York World*, May 24, 1896.



Fig. 15—Photograph of Bernhardt's friend and rival actress Sophie Croizette by Félix Nadar, 1900. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie.



Fig. 16—Melandri photograph of Bernhardt that showcases her signature dress style and spiral pose, circa 1878. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arts du spectacle.




Fig. 17— Sarah Bernhardt's 1881 passport for a trip to Odessa. Archives de la préfecture de police de Paris.

PASSE-PORT A L'ÉTRANGER.

Département de _____

Registre *10*



SIGNALEMENT

M^{me} Sarah Bernhardt
artiste dramatique
 native de *Paris (Seine)*
 demeurant à *11, avenue Villiers*
 allant à *Odessa (Russie)*
 âgée de *30* ans, taille d'un mètre
11 centimètres,

cheveux	front
sourcils	yeux
nez	bouche
barbe	menton
visage	teint

SIGNES PARTICULIERS :

PIÈCES DÉPOSÉES:
Certificat

Fait à *Paris*, le *13* *juin* 1881.

Signature des Témoins : _____

Signature du Porteur :
Pour Sarah Bernhardt
E. Guerau

Fig. 18—Alphonse Mucha's poster for *La Dame aux camélias* (1896). Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Fig. 19—Alphonse Mucha's poster for *La Samaritaine* (1897). Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Fig. 20—Sarah Bernhardt, *La Fille de Roland*, self-portrait in costume (1876).
Permission of the Jewish Museum, New York, NY.



Fig. 21—Bernhardt as Joan of Arc, photographed by Félix Nadar, 1890. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie.



CHAPTER 3

**“You’re So Human!”:
Embodiment, Animality, and Gender in Colette**

In 1907 Colette Willy and her lover Missy, the Marquise de Belbeuf, performed a pantomime sketch titled *Rêve d'Égypte*. It would later be called “The Scandal of the Moulin Rouge.” Missy, a high-status aristocrat known to wear men’s clothes in public, appeared onstage in a man’s suit from her personal collection that blurred the boundaries between safely-bounded performance and real life social transgression. Missy played a male archeologist discovering a mummy’s tomb, out of which Colette rose and performed an erotic striptease dance, finally slipping off her veils to give Missy a passionate kiss. The sight of two women kissing in public caused an instant shockwave of anger. Missy’s husband and his paid claque fueled these flames until a full audience riot broke out. “Pendant le quart d’heure que durera cette pantomime,” Jean Jaurès reported afterward, “le tumulte n'arrêtera pas une minute.”²⁹⁶ [*For the fifteen minutes the pantomime lasted, the chaos did not stop for one minute.*] As soon as the curtain fell, enraged audience members closed in on Colette’s estranged husband Willy while chanting “[c]uckold, cuckold”; he and his girlfriend were forced to fight their way through a violent mob and take refuge in the theater manager’s office.²⁹⁷ Angry audiences blamed not just Colette and Missy but also the husband who had publicly forfeited sexual control of his wife to another woman.

²⁹⁶ Jean Jaurès, “Un Incident au Moulin Rouge,” *L’Humanité: Journal Socialiste Quotidien*, 5 Jan. 1907, 2. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

²⁹⁷ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: a Life of Colette* (Knopf, 1999), 172.

In the face of audience and police threats it was decided that Colette would appear without Missy in future performances²⁹⁸ and eventually the police commissioner shut down the entire show.²⁹⁹ But it had already contravened multiple norms. Juliana Starr notes that *Rêve d'Égypte* violated “taboos surrounding the exposure of the female body and the display of lesbian sensuality.”³⁰⁰ In addition to Missy’s blurring of performance and real life and the couple’s public kiss, unwrapping a mummy—whether at an Exposition Universelle or onstage—was associated in the nineteenth century with male scientists’ and explorers’ desires to “penetrate” the Orient. Missy’s drag performance of the typical man-discovers-Orient narrative is thus mockingly subversive. Colette’s role also contradicted conventional eroticism. Performers like Ida Rubenstein, who also played Salomé, catered to heteronormative desire by allowing other actors to remove their veils.³⁰¹ Colette’s mummy costume (Fig. 1) referenced Salomé,³⁰² but she removed her own shroud-like veils.³⁰³ I argue that these factors make *Rêve d'Égypte* a prime example of sartorial code-switching, with Colette and Missy transposing stereotypical costumes and behaviors into new performative contexts that question and even reverse their intended messages.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹⁹ Lottman, Herbert R Lottman, *Colette: a Life* (Little, Brown, 1991), 77.

³⁰⁰ Juliana Starr, “The Mummy’s Dance: Staged Transpositions of Gautier’s Egyptian Tales,” *Translation and the Arts in Modern France*, Indiana University Press, 2017: 173.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 182.

³⁰² Ibid., 176.

³⁰³ Madeleine Dobie, *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism*. (Stanford University Press, 2001), 180.

Another example of sartorial code-switching can be seen in a *Rêve d'Égypte* publicity photo (Fig. 2) that shows Colette's mummy character posing as a sphinx. Missy hangs back uncertainly from the alluring creature stretched on the floor in front of her, suggesting cultural associations of danger. I argue that Colette's deployment of sphinx imagery, with its iconic fusion of woman and feline, provides a springboard for investigating her views about gender and animality. A selected survey of Colette's hybridized human-animal references, including the sphinx, shows her engaging in a kind of cross-species code-switching between cultural notions of humanity and animality. Both visually and in her writing Colette repeatedly portrays Woman as a sensual, voluptuously embodied being that belongs more to the organic world than to male-coded urban civilization. By doing so she plays up to certain essentialist beliefs about animal-identified femininity (which I will discuss in more detail shortly), but I argue that Colette's technique in this endeavor can be viewed as a sort of strategic essentialism (in Gayatri Spivak's formulation³⁰⁴) that involves marginalized Others "both acceding to [social] roles and exceeding them..."³⁰⁵ Colette does this by claiming and redeeming femininity's stereotyped associations with animality. In publicity photographs, literary works, and fashion commentary, Colette's appearance and her opinions on fashion trends highlight her reclamation of feminine corporeality and animality itself as potent, often positive forces. These views prove remarkably consistent in the face of many cultural shifts throughout Colette's lifetime.

³⁰⁴Elizabeth Grosz, "Criticism, feminism and the institution. An interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Thesis Eleven* 10/11 (1984): 175-189.

³⁰⁵Uma Narayan, *Dislocating cultures: identities, traditions, and third-world feminism* (Routledge 1997), 155.

The sphinx is a good place to start our analysis of Colette's subversive repurposing of negative animal-female associations. Largely because of the perceived link between dangerous femininity and "evil" cats (on which more later), French sphinx imagery in the mid- and late-nineteenth century was closely identified with the *femme fatale*. An early example is Gustave Moreau's 1864 Salon entry *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (Fig. 3). The painter described his seductive yet murderous sphinx as "intoxicating and brutal," an "earthly Chimera, vile and attractive," with a "charming woman's head [and] wings that promise the ideal" but also the horrifying "body of the monster, of the carnivore that tears and annihilates."³⁰⁶ Oscar Wilde's 1894 poem *The Sphinx* adds to these tropes a fear of contamination: "Hideous animal, get hence!/You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be."³⁰⁷ Two fin-de-siècle paintings by Franz von Stuck illustrate a similar disgust for the animalized feminine represented by sphinxes. *The Kiss of the Sphinx* (Fig. 4) showcases deep anxieties about predatory female sexuality, and in *The Sphinx* (1895) (Fig. 5), we see only a nude woman reclining in sphinx position, with no evidence of claws, wings, or tail. But these trappings of overt animality are not needed, because the visual message is clear: every woman, simply by virtue of having a body, is a dangerous animal.

Woman as Animal

By the time of Colette's 1907 performance in *Rêve d'Égypte*, then, the sphinx was already firmly ensconced in European imagery as a symbol of threatening feminine sexual power.

³⁰⁶ Peter Cooke, "Gustave Moreau's 'Oedipus and the Sphinx': Archaism, Temptation and the Nude at the Salon of 1864," *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 146, no. 1218 (2004): 612.

³⁰⁷ Oscar Alastair Wilde, *The Sphinx* (J. Lane Co., 1920), 4, 38.

This is the redemptive use Colette makes of its associations. In *La Vagabonde*, her loosely autobiographical novel about vaudeville performance, we see Colette again evoking the sphinx pose as part of her narrator/alternate self's Orientalist dance repertoire:

[All the women] have changed their hair styles...one sees nothing but little muzzles...to which this year's fashion undeniably gives a markedly bestial appearance.

I dance and dance. A beautiful serpent coils itself along the Persian carpet...a feline beast springs...then recoils, a sphinx, the color of pale sand, reclines at full length, propped on its elbows with hollowed back and straining breasts...Do these people really exist, I ask myself? No...The only real things are dancing, light, freedom and music...Is not the mere swaying of my back, free from any constraint, an insult to those bodies cramped by their long corsets, and enfeebled by a fashion which insists that they should be thin? ³⁰⁸

Colette here explicitly links conventional wealthy bourgeois womanhood with a certain undesirable animality, whereas her own representations of a “feline beast” and “a sphinx, the color of pale sand” are filled with powerful embodiment. But she assigns an inferior animality to the bourgeois women watching her, with their “little muzzles” and their “cramped” corseted waists. and “enfeebled” by fashion’s demand for thinness rather than strength. They are thus reduced to emptied-out bodies, dominated pets reminiscent of dogs. Colette’s thinly disguised alter ego Renée, on the other hand, is fully and autonomously embodied. She transposes her intellectual activity directly into “beautiful gestures,” indicating an active acceptance of her corporeality. Her metamorphosis into a

³⁰⁸ Colette, *The Vagabond* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 47-48.

wild “feline beast” channels the imagery associated with that dangerous mythological creature, the legendary sphinx. She may be predatory, but she is powerful. Renée/Colette’s rejection of corsetry, idealized physical weakness, and gendered social convention are all wrapped together in animal metaphors that immediately communicate either an empowerment of the whole feminized self (represented by the sphinx pose) or, in the case of Renée’s audience, a type of domesticated animality that is the complete absence of such empowerment.

I argue that this is another strong example of the sartorial code-switching Colette uses to subvert and redeploy larger cultural undercurrents identifying women, along with animals, primarily as bodies. Feminists have long wrestled with the mind vs. body dualism passed down through Western philosophical thought, in which femininity is relegated to a disparaged material realm encompassing animals and all of nature. This presumptive dichotomy is, for Nancy Hartsock, “characteristic of the dominant, white, male Eurocentric ruling class” and centers “an omnipotent subject” (like the archeologist caricatured by Missy) while “construct[ing] marginal Others as sets of negative qualities.”³⁰⁹ Ecofeminist Val Plumwood offers a range of responses to dualism that include merging its two halves, reversing its hierarchy to privilege feminized nature over masculinized reason, renouncing association with social identities like womanhood, and finally, reclaiming femininity—or what Plumwood terms a “critical affirmation” of “woman’s identity...as a source of strength as well as a problem, and a ground of both

³⁰⁹ Nancy C.M. Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: a Theory for Women,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1990), 161.

continuity and difference with traditional ideals...a critical reconstruction.”³¹⁰ I argue that this last approach most closely resembles Colette’s.

A brief overview of European animal-feminine associations helps us appreciate the full weight of convention against which Colette rebelled by claiming them as positive. Negative zoomorphism portraying women as animals has a long, problematic history in Western thought reaching back to antiquity, as Jeanne Roberts notes:

From Aristotle on, philosophers have seen women as formless matter upon which men must imprint their shape... Women were seen as closer than men to animals in the Great Chain of Being, barely rational and...dominated by passion and appetite...Like Nature, the female was fixed and given, if chaotic and shapeless, whereas the male, like Culture, belonged to the intellectual world of becoming.³¹¹

These binary associations continue for centuries, establishing a “male ideology of transcendent dualism”³¹² that allowed men to assume intellectual superiority over a feminized material world. Plato’s *Timaeus* puts “women and other animals” into the same category.³¹³ In the medieval period Jean de Meun describes Woman as “[u]n

³¹⁰ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993), 59-64.

³¹¹ Jeanne Addison Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 25-26.

³¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Seabury Press, 1975), 195.

³¹³ Dominic Montserrat, *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (Routledge, 1998), 143.

...animal...pas bien apprivoisé,”³¹⁴ [*an animal that is not well-tamed*], to which Christine de Pisan responds angrily in the *querelle des femmes*, “by God! These are your mothers, your sisters, your daughters, your wives.”³¹⁵ Hegel and Rousseau deploy the reason vs. nature duality to argue that women belong to the private sphere and men to the public;³¹⁶ Descartes famously cements it as a split between mind and body; Marx reemphasizes a dichotomy between culture and nature that is also one between civilized and primitive, mental and manual labor, and production and reproduction.³¹⁷ And Freud, writing as late as 1929 in *Civilization and its Discontents*, announces that women are not good at performing the “instinctual sublimation” necessary to control the animalistic urges of the human subconscious; therefore they are naturally in “opposition” to civilization itself.³¹⁸

Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman terms the categorization of women, children, and animals as part of a despised natural world as “somatophobia,” or an attitude of general hatred for embodiment.³¹⁹ Josephine Donovan and Carol Adams explain that somatophobia “refers to the hostility to the body that is a characteristic of

³¹⁴ Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Lorris, et al., *Le Roman De La Rose* (Librairie Générale Française, 1992), 586-587: vv. 9917.

³¹⁵ Joseph L. Baird and John Robert Kane, *La Querelle de la Rose: Letters and Documents* (University of North Carolina Press 1978), 136.

³¹⁶ Lloyd, Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58-63, 80-85.

³¹⁷ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 45.

³¹⁸ Sigmund Freud et al., *Complete Psychological Works: Standard Edition* (Hogarth Press, 1978), 21:103.

³¹⁹ Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,” in *Feminist Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1982): 120, 127.

Western philosophy and its emphasis on reason...[it is] a legacy of the soul/body distinction, [and] is often enacted in unequal relationships,” such as “men to women, masters to slaves, fathers to children, humans to animals.”³²⁰ This is an effective description of philosophical dualism’s impact on Western culture. By the nineteenth century dualist strains of thought had coalesced to form what Charles Bernheimer terms an “imagination of disgust” built on a simultaneous desire for and fear of women’s sexuality.³²¹ As industrialization and attendant urban prostitution intensified in Europe, female bodies and their supposed relationship to a problematically sensual animality like that of the sphinx—partly fueled by venereal disease epidemics—became more anxiety-provoking than ever.³²² Nineteenth-century French culture offers many examples. Take, for instance, Baudelaire’s casual misogyny in his *Journaux intimes*: “...la femme est naturelle, c’est-à-dire abominable” he writes³²³ [*Woman is natural, which is to say, abominable*]. Flaubert goes a step further to specify that “La femme est un animal vulgaire dont l’homme s’est fait un trop bel idéal.”³²⁴ [*Woman is a vulgar animal from whom man has created a too-beautiful ideal*].

³²⁰ Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, (Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

³²¹ Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century France*, (Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

³²² Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, (University of California Press, 1994) 50.

³²³ Charles Baudelaire and Claude Pichois, *Oeuvres complètes de Baudelaire* (Gallimard, 1975), 677.

³²⁴ Gustave Flaubert and Caroline Hamard Commonville, *Pensées de Gustave Flaubert*, (L. Conrad, 1915), 2.

Wildly Domestic

It was into this cultural milieu, then, that Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette was born in 1873 to Adèle Eugénie Sidonie Landoy. Colette repeatedly wrote to and about Sido in ways that identify them so closely that at times Colette appears to be almost an extension of her mother. This narrative closeness also serves to frame Colette in specific ways for her readers. Thanks to this tendency, Sido's beliefs about animality, femininity, and the contravention of societal norms are of particular interest; Colette seems to intentionally portray them as the source from which she derived her own views on these topics. In the opening pages of *My Mother's House*, Colette ascribes a certain animality to Sido's behavior (and suggests that she and her siblings have inherited it). As she stands in the doorway at twilight calling "Where are the children?" Sido takes on the aura of an "oversolicitous mother-[dog]...head lifted and scenting the breeze."³²⁵ Despite having played outside all day her quasi-feral children do not respond; they hide in trees and piles of hay, one in particular lying "stretched like a tom-cat along a big branch..."³²⁶ The family boundary between human and animal is porous, Sido having been raised alongside a large pet monkey named Jean and often referring to her children, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, as "*sauvages*" [wild] because they vastly prefer a solitary outdoor existence to socializing with human beings.³²⁷ Colette recounts how her mother would also call home "her carnivorous family of vagabond cats," by waving a bloodstained

³²⁵ Colette et al., *My Mother's House; and Sido* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 8.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁷ Yvonne Mitchell, *Colette: a Taste for Life* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 11-13.

sheet of butcher's paper.³²⁸ We are never informed whether the feral cats or feral children responded first. Colette remembers the freedom of her early childhood, "roving the hedgerows and waterlogged meadows like an independent dog..."³²⁹ She only became a writer, Colette insists, by accident. Otherwise she would have happily continued this animal existence. "[B]orn into a family without money, I had learned no calling. I knew how to climb, whistle, run, but no one came to propose a career as a squirrel, a bird or a hind."³³⁰ This vocation for the natural world carried over to Colette's famous writing style, identified by Cixous as one of only three French specimens of true *écriture féminine*, or writing that can fully "inscribe femininity."³³¹ Colette herself described her artistic process as "...letting [my] pen...nibble at a half-formed word...adorning it with antennae and paws until it loses all resemblance to a legible word and turns into a fantastic insect or a fluttering creature half butterfly, half fairy."³³²

Colette's childhood home and garden constituted a veritable Eden to which she would perennially return in her writing. On only her second trip to Paris at age sixteen, her primary impression was its stark difference from the environment of lush nature and animal life in which she had been raised. Colette recalls her "surprise" and "melancholy aversion" at the sight of

³²⁸ Colette, et al., *My Mother's House; and Sido*, 9.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³³⁰ Colette, *Looking Backwards* (Indiana University Press, 1975), 17.

³³¹ Hélène Cixous et al., "The Laugh of the Medusa (1975)," in *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Florida State University Press, 1986): 311.

³³² Colette, *The Vagabond*, 14.

...houses without animals. Mere cubes without gardens, flowerless abodes where no cat mews behind the dining-room door, where one never treads near the fireside on some part of a dog...rooms devoid of familiar spirits...I left all these with famished senses, with the vehement need to touch once again fleeces and leaves, warm feathers and the exciting dewiness of flowers.³³³

Colette thus situates Paris as the antithesis of her idyllic countryside. These are the early suggestions of a negative attitude toward urban life that would periodically resurface (as we will see later). Colette's description of Parisian apartment houses suggests that for young Colette, an extended stay in the big city had resulted in sensory deprivation. In this passage she frames herself for her reader as someone who deeply, physically craves contact with the organic world. Her last husband Maurice Goudekot reports that this connection was indeed very physical:

Her way of making contact with things was through all her senses...she had to sniff and taste them. When she went into a garden...I would say to her: 'I suppose you are going to eat it, as usual.'...she separated the sepals of flowers, examined them, smelled them for a long time, crumpled the leaves, chewed them...pondering intensely over everything she had smelt and tasted...She attracted bees and wasps, letting them alight on her hands and scratching their backs...When at last she left the garden, she would pick up her scarf, hat, slippers, stockings, dog and husband, which she had shed one after the other. With her nose and her forehead covered with yellow pollen, her hair in

³³³ Colette et al., *My Mother's House; and Sido*, 48.

disorder and full of twigs...she was just like a bacchante after libations.³³⁴

Goudek et here casts Colette as a nature-worshipping pagan (specifically a wild feminine bacchante) who progressively strips herself of civilization's trappings—clothes, husband, tame dog, and conventional middle-class gendered behavior—in order to fully abandon her senses to the natural world.

Colette portrays her visceral need for regular contact with nature as a direct inheritance from Sido. Upon returning home from her first extended voyage to Paris, Colette extends a “composite greeting” to “my mother, the garden and the circle of animals” as if they are one inseparable entity.³³⁵ In Colette's narrative Sido merged her life completely with those of animals, often preferring female ones as pets; “[d]es mères, des enfants; des lices, leurs chiots, les chattes, les chatons...Peu de mâles...Des mères, des rejetons, féconds à leur tour: voilà qui ne m'a jamais manqué, pendant les vingt premières années de ma vie.”³³⁶ [*mothers, children, mother dogs, their puppies, mother cats, their kittens...Few males...But mothers, offspring, fertile in their turn: I never lacked for these during the first twenty years of my life.*] Sido's own maternal qualities fuse with all of these mother animals so completely that, in looking back, Colette wonders, “Pensais-je moins à ma propre mère qu'à toutes ces mères qui m'entouraient? C'est possible. On ne

³³⁴ Maurice Goudek et, *Close to Colette; an Intimate Portrait of a Woman of Genius* (Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957): 18-19.

³³⁵ Colette et al., *My Mother's House; and Sido*, 49.

³³⁶ Colette, *Oeuvres Complètes de Colette* (Le Fleuron, 1949), 14:341.

songe pas à la présence de l'air."³³⁷ [*Did I think less often about my own mother than about all these other mothers that surrounded me? It is possible. One doesn't notice the presence of the air.*] Colette's childhood home is thus cast as a profoundly feminine and animal-oriented space, a sort of metaphorical interspecies harem (the harem being one of Colette's favorite motifs). "Points de garçons adolescents en vue, point d'homme. Des mères, des enfants encore ignorants de leur sexe, une paix profonde de gynécée... [*No adolescent males anywhere, not a single man. Mothers, children still ignorant of their sex, a profoundly peaceful gynaeceum...*] Sido's domestic realm is not designed for males or humans; it is a zoocentric and gynocentric site of peace, growth, and deep connection to nature. As part of this connection Sido even befriends insects, echoing the older Colette's penchant for bees and wasps. Colette relates that Sido carefully nursed a wounded moth caterpillar back to health despite its hungry ravages in her garden; "...what can I do about it?" Sido asks, when a young Colette points out that the growing insect may devour their flowering honeysuckle; "I can hardly kill the creature."³³⁸ And in one of the more striking portraits of her mother, Colette describes Sido's relationship with a large, fat garden spider who lived permanently on her bedroom ceiling and drank out of her hot chocolate bowl every night.³³⁹

Colette presents Sido's care for nurturing and preserving life as a unified trait that indiscriminately spans humans and animals. Scenes from Colette's memoirs show her mother disregarding or contravening deep-seated social convention in the service of that

³³⁷ Ibid., 14 :341.

³³⁸ Colette, *My Mother's House, and The Vagabond* (Doubleday, 1955), 43.

³³⁹ Ibid., 42.

ideal. Sido refuses to dismiss a pregnant unmarried maid; she would rather cause a scandal in the village than abandon a mother and her unborn child.³⁴⁰ Similarly, Sido tells young Colette that she is not obligated to marry if she becomes pregnant out of wedlock (as decorum dictates) but should come straight home to her parents—and if she must continue her affair to satisfy sexual needs, Sido will understand as long as she is properly discreet.³⁴¹ Colette was not to try hiding an illegitimate pregnancy, either. “Those love-children always suffer because their mothers have crushed them under their stays trying to hide them,” Sido declares in Colette’s memoirs. “Yet after all, a lovely unrepentant creature, big with child, is not such an outrageous sight.”³⁴² Although at one point Sido describes lustful sexuality as “evil desire”,³⁴³ on the whole we see in these anecdotes a concern for prioritizing bodily freedom over social standing that is remarkably different from the bourgeois morality of Sido’s peers.

This is perhaps most apparent in a scene that occurs when Colette’s father dies. After accompanying Captain Colette’s coffin to the grave in her widow’s black and veil, Sido returns to the house complaining that she wants to change out of her black dress. The resistance she meets with confuses her. “Why not? Because of my mourning? But I simply loathe black!...What connection is there between this cashmere and crape [*sic*] and my feelings?” she declares.³⁴⁴ A few minutes later she breaks with mourning

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 51.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 96.

³⁴² Ibid., 102.

³⁴³ Ibid., 96.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 98.

traditions again by laughing at a playful kitten on the floor.³⁴⁵ A more amusing breach of decorum is her behavior at the village church. Sido often attended services with a pocket volume of *Corneille* hidden inside her bible and loudly coughed to end the priest's sermon if it lasted beyond ten minutes, laughing like a "reprobrate" at his flustered reaction. She also took her dog to church with her. When the priest suggested that mass was not for dogs, Colette says that Sido "bristled like a belligerent hen," asking indignantly, "What are you afraid he may learn there?", and insisting that her dog was trained to stand and kneel during mass just like the human parishioners. And in an obvious swipe at religious hypocrisy, Sido pointed out that while the priest was so concerned about dogs at church she was thinking about how best to help the poor children of their village who would go "without swaddling clothes or nappies unless I take a hand."³⁴⁶ An adult Colette wrote that her own aversion to religion stemmed from growing up in Sido's world, "peopled with my gods, my talking animals, my nymphs and my satyrs...I listened to [the priest] talking about...hell, and thought what arrogance man has."³⁴⁷

Sido clearly placed more value on life and the natural world than on social convention. It is easy to see, then, why Colette describes her as a quasi-Gaia figure "rich in children, flowers and animals like a fruitful domain."³⁴⁸ Indeed, there are many

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

³⁴⁷ Yvonne Mitchell, *Colette: a Taste for Life*, 19.

³⁴⁸ Colette, *My Mother's House, and The Vagabond*, 99.

indications that Sido viewed herself and Colette as somehow Other or supra-human. I argue that this is due to Sido and Colette's understanding of a connection between their mutual affection for nature and their mutual femininity. "[Y]ou're a girl, a female creature of my own species, my rival," an aging Sido informs Colette.³⁴⁹ Indeed, although they are sometimes assigned the temporary characteristics of animals in Colette's memoirs, by and large the men of the family stand at a far greater distance from the natural world than Sido and her daughter. "I never saw my father touch a horse," Colette tells us. "No curiosity ever impelled him to look at a cat or give his attention to a dog." And in marked contrast to Sido, who is clearly the alpha presence of the house, "no dog ever obeyed him." Captain Colette can identify plants in books, but not in his own garden, an interesting reversal of the nature versus intellect duality that in Colette's narrative becomes deep pity for her father's inferior relationship to nature. As he stands in the garden at twilight one evening, Colette sees not just an amputee or former soldier but "a man, banished from the elements that had once sustained him."³⁵⁰ Her father cares only for inorganic things, "learned societies...politics...platforms...a vision of masculine joys." And Sido, in a revealing passage that shows her stark understanding of human-animal duality's gendered implications, periodically exclaims to her husband, "You're so human!" with, Colette notes, an "indefinable suspicion in her voice."³⁵¹

Sido thus stands out in Colette's formative early years as a strong influence who, beneath her abundant and nurturing domesticity, articulates a clear vision of herself as a

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 102.

³⁵⁰ Colette et al., *My Mother's House; and Sido*, 186.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 188.

wild, supra-human member of the natural world. I propose that Sido's understanding of this unique and culturally animalistic status is intimately connected on some level with historically gendered binaries in Western culture. It is true that Sido's interpretation of essentialist dichotomies also reinscribes them. But far from accepting their intended debasement, I argue that Sido embraces her theoretical feminine connection to nature and animals as a profound form of empowerment to which she and her daughter enjoy privileged access. Her ability to see womanhood as a healthy, fully embodied fusion of the human and animal realms prefigures Colette's own usage of hybrid animality to interrogate and redeem these types of binary associations, as we have seen in her usage of sphinx imagery. I contend that by doing so, both she and Sido actively combat somatophobia with an understanding of all material life as valuably connected.

Goudekot confirms this perception. "It is not enough to say that she loved animals," he writes of Colette. "Before every manifestation of life...she felt a respect which resembled religious fervor. At the same time she was always aware of the unity of creation in the infinite diversity of its forms...[human], animal, or vegetable, the most urgent thing for her was to help [it]." One evening, while at the cinema watching a nature film, Goudekot relates that Colette suddenly grabbed his arm and emphatically announced, "There is only one creature! D'you hear, Maurice, there is only *one* creature."³⁵² This is a significant parallel statement to the phrases Colette recalls as most characteristic of her mother's personality, words which, when spoken by Sido, "always had the same meaning"—a deep concern for the material world that viewed all forms of life as cosmically linked in an echo of the Neoplatonic universal soul. "The child must

³⁵² Maurice Goudekot, *Close to Colette; an Intimate Portrait of a Woman of Genius*, 31.

have proper care. Can't we save that woman? Have those people got enough to eat? I can hardly kill the creature."³⁵³ I argue that the effect of Sido's worldview on Colette's development—as both a person and a writer—cannot be overstated. “Dans le coeur, dans les lettres de ma mère, étaient...l'amour, le respect des créatures vivantes,” Colette would later explain. “Je sais donc où situer la source de ma vocation...d'avoir voulu...briller...aux yeux de mes frères et complices [les animaux]. C'est une ambition qui ne me quitte pas.”³⁵⁴ [*In my mother's heart and letters there was...love, respect for living creatures. So I know where the source of my vocation is...I have wanted to...shine...in the eyes of my (animal) friends and accomplices. It is an ambition I still have.*]

Like Cats and Dogs

If her attachment to the animal world led friends to describe Colette affectionately as “tour à tour, chatte, panthère, furet, biche”,³⁵⁵ [*by turns a cat, panther, ferret, doe*] we may also note that others often saw these attributes as threatening or demeaning. In such critiques we find evidence of the traditional view that feminine-coded materiality and emotionality are somehow deviant compared to the masculine-coded “norm” of rationality and detachment from nature. Willy's friend Sylvain Bonmariage betrays a certain uneasiness when he writes that Colette “emitted an indefinable and troubling odor of sensuality.” This was related to her animal nature; “[t]here was something in her of a panther stretching,” he writes. “She gave the impression of a wild creature...She exhaled

³⁵³ Colette, *My Mother's House, and The Vagabond*, 43.

³⁵⁴ Colette, *Oeuvres Complètes de Colette*, 3:304.

³⁵⁵ Colette and Claude Pichois, *Lettres au petit corsaire* (Flammarion, 1963), 132.

that feeling of unashamedness [*sic*] that I have known in no-one else...It was at the same time imprudence...and an overwhelming aspiration towards the freedom of nature.”³⁵⁶

Commentators on her life and work, especially men, repeatedly focused on Colette’s animalistic qualities as either fascinating, threatening, or proof of her total corruption. One critic opined that Colette lived in her “atmosphere of immorality...like a worm in the mud.”³⁵⁷ André Gide admitted that “[i]n spite of her superiority, it does not seem to me that Colette was not somewhat contaminated.”³⁵⁸ Colette responded to accusations about her “simplicité monstrueuse” [*monstrous simplicity*] or “douceur pleine de ténèbres” [*sweetness full of dark shadows*] with a metaphorical shrug: “Autant de mots justes. Au point de vue humain, c’est à la connivence avec la bête que commence la monstruosité.”³⁵⁹ [*How right they were. From the human point of view, monstrosity begins at connivance with animals.*] And again: “L’homme qui reste du côté de l’homme a de quoi reculer, devant la créature qui opte pour la bête et qui sourit, forte d’une affreuse innocence.”³⁶⁰ [*Any man who remains on the side of men has reason to shrink back from the creature who opts for beasts and who smiles, strong with a dreadful innocence.*] I argue that in such instances we see Colette in strategic essentialist mode, actively accepting her social status as an animal-identified “creature” or “monstrosity.” I

³⁵⁶ Yvonne Mitchell, *Colette: a Taste for Life*, 86.

³⁵⁷ Robert Phelps, *Belles Saisons: a Colette Scrapbook* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 219.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁵⁹ Colette, *Break of Day* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 45.

³⁶⁰ Colette, *Oeuvres Complètes de Colette*, 12:106.

propose that they also show Colette positively reclaiming her status as a culturally-hybridized being like the dangerously sensual sphinx.

Contemporary critics believed in a tight link between animal affinities and sexual scandal. Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century proper bourgeois behavior was, as memoirist Odile Marcel reflects in analyzing her own bourgeois childhood, entirely devoted to “act[ing] like a human being” and “curb[ing] one’s animal desires by limiting the signs of their gratification.” Whether dealing with appetites for food or sex, an “avid body” was considered “abominable.”³⁶¹ But while Colette also came from a thoroughly bourgeois family, she considered physical appetites to be completely natural. Colette’s determination to embrace and explore these appetites was often misunderstood. In addition to her nude stage performances, Colette’s novels covered topics ranging from eroticism, adultery, love triangles, and adolescent sexuality to “abortion, sadism, uncontrolled and indiscriminate sexual activity, and sexual revulsion.”³⁶² But she conducted these literary investigations with artistic style, as well as a careful attention to character development and psychology. Most of all, despite critics’ protestations to the contrary, Colette never resorted to vulgarity. Notwithstanding her devotion to all things physical she considered such “genitally graphic writing”³⁶³ a lazy

³⁶¹ Odile Marcel, *Une Éducation Française / Odile Marcel* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 13, 14.

³⁶² Sharon Spencer, “The Lady of the Beasts: Eros and Transformation in Colette,” in *Women’s Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1981): 300.

³⁶³ Claude Dauphiné, “Rachilde et Colette: de l’animal aux Belles Lettres,” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1989): 301.

way to approach eroticism, exclaiming “What a narrow domain obscenity is!”³⁶⁴ It was perhaps this intriguing blend of daring and restraint that led one theater critic to note “something chaste in her face” during a nude vaudeville scene; “...there is also something which is obviously sensuous...we do not know if we are disturbed or if we simply wonder at her.” He concluded that Colette was oddly “touching and at the same time perverse...in all this there is something...very pure.”³⁶⁵

We thus have evaluations of Colette’s character that, in attempting to grapple with her relationship to bodily functions and notions of sensuality, cover a wide range of seemingly disparate attributes: touching and perverse, pure and contaminated. Nathalie Barney described these tensions by portraying Colette’s personality as a mixture of her two favorite animals, the cat and the dog. The reason Colette typically owned one of each was “à cause de leur singulière ressemblance avec leur maîtresse. Sa nature n’était-elle pas un composé de ces deux natures animales? Obéissante et dévouée à un maître, mais usant secrètement de l’instinct du fauve qui échappe à toute domination.”³⁶⁶ [*because of their singular resemblance to their mistress. Was not her nature a composite of these two animal natures? Obedient and devoted to a master, but secretly harboring the instinct of a wild animal who escapes from all domination*] In what follows, I argue that understanding the cultural beliefs behind Nathalie Barney’s view of Colette’s personality as half-cat, half-dog provides a lens through which to read themes of submission,

³⁶⁴ Robert Phelps, *Belles Saisons: a Colette Scrapbook*, 186.

³⁶⁵ Yvonne Mitchell, *Colette: a Taste for Life*, 86.

³⁶⁶ Natalie Clifford Barney, *Souvenirs indiscrets* (Flammarion, 1960), 189.

domination, and eventual independence in images from Colette's life where she is portrayed with (or as) one of these two animals.

Barney's zoological depiction of Colette's two primary inclinations—obedient submissiveness and wild independence—aligns with late-nineteenth-century understandings of dogs' and cats' essential natures, as well as their symbolic and social functions in everyday bourgeois life. For French society in this time period, Kathleen Kete explains, “animals embodied values” in a very real way.³⁶⁷ As evidenced by Barney's description above, dogs were “the premier domestic animal” strongly associated with “fidelity and malleability”, while cats represented “marginality...sexuality and independence.”³⁶⁸ Cats actually did not become proper family pets in France until almost the end of the 1800s. In preceding centuries they were considered suspicious animals, burned throughout the medieval and early modern periods as witches' familiars or even as witches themselves.³⁶⁹ They were also ceremonially murdered in rites of fertility, purification and protection, clearly marking their status as cultural bearers of sin and evil within religious belief systems. A ritual that involved burning thirteen cats in a cage was routinely performed in front of cathedrals from the Middle Ages until at least the 18th century. One reported cat bonfire took place as late as 1905 in Lorraine.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 134.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 132, 116-117.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

Thus, in the period leading up to their uneasily finalized domestication at the turn of the twentieth century, cats were still very much seen as wild animals. This status lingered in negative cultural representations. In the mid- and late- nineteenth century cats were believed to be standoffish, “self-indulgent,” “voluptuous,” vainly obsessed with their appearance,³⁷¹ and of course, as evidenced by their connection to witches, consistently and directly linked to traits of female deviance: “rapacious feminine sexuality...mystery...darkness, evil, and danger.”³⁷² We can see, then, why Bonmariage chose a large cat to evoke Colette’s “troubling” sensuality. Crucially for our discussion of Colette’s sphinx imagery, cats were also associated with the Orient and specifically with Egyptian pagan beliefs. Their exoticism made them popular among rebellious intellectuals and artistic bohemians precisely because they were “the anti-pet of nineteenth-century bourgeois life.”³⁷³ A certain imperialist urge to possess the exotic meant that counter-culture Europeans could choose from a dazzling array of Orientalized cat breeds which, judging from the following list, were sometimes thinly-veiled stand-ins for colonial populations: “chats de Perse, de Birmanie, de Siam...chats nègres de Gambie, chats cypriotes, chats du Canada...”³⁷⁴ [*cats of Persia, of Burma, of Siam...negro cats of Gambia, cats of Cyprus, cats of Canada...*]

³⁷¹ Ibid., 118.

³⁷² Ibid., 119.

³⁷³ Ibid., 115.

³⁷⁴ Robert LeStrange, *Les Animaux dans la littérature et dans l'histoire* (Ophrys, 1937), 60.

The dog, on the other hand, was no longer a true animal; it was proof of Western civilization's ability to shape malleable nature. Celebratory accounts of dogs' contributions to human progress abounded in the nineteenth century. According to these narratives dogs had assisted prehistoric humans in hunting, then in shepherding and farming; one 1889 account rhapsodizes that "[w]ithout the dog" there would be "no herds; without herds, no sustenance, no clothing, no time to waste, consequently, no astronomical observations, no science, no industry. It is the dog who has given leisure to man."³⁷⁵ Dogs thus enjoyed a special relationship with patriarchal Western society that cast them as either ruggedly masculine animals who had performed an essential role in early man's virile fight to "[gain] mastery over the world,"³⁷⁶ or, in a similar move allying them with masculinity, as human males' "first conquest."³⁷⁷ This latter portrayal dovetails with an evolutionary perspective in which dogs were progressively feminized by civilization's domination and selectively controlled breeding, so that by the nineteenth century Parisian dogs in particular were viewed as animal counterparts to women and children.

In nineteenth-century Parisian society all three groups—dogs, women, and children—were thus expected to be the submissive, willingly shaped subordinates of their male owners. Fin-de-siècle bourgeois culture personified dogs more than any other animal. In keeping with their role as "signatures for human nature," Parisians dressed

³⁷⁵ Marius Portanier, *Le Chien à travers les âges; extrait du rapport adressé à La Société Protectrice des Animaux* (Nice 1889), 5.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

³⁷⁷ Oscar Honoré, *Le Coeur des bêtes, par Oscar Honoré (De Bourzeis)* (Paris 1863), 9.

their dogs like their wives to create “a double, a doppelganger, a personalized expression of control...Canine clothing was clearly as restricting of movement, as denaturing, as that of contemporary women’s fashions.” High society pet clothing was commonly monogrammed with an owner’s initials to further emphasize this possessive doubling.³⁷⁸ Elegant dog outfits should match those worn by the woman of the house “in color always,” one contemporary insisted, and “in design, as closely as possible”;³⁷⁹ like their mistresses, fashionable fin-de-siècle dogs wore swimsuits, underwear, a whole wardrobe of “shirts, handkerchiefs, dressing gowns, traveling cloaks, tea gowns...rubber boots...collars [that] might be made of gold or silver“ as well as different sets of outfits for winter and summer.³⁸⁰ Dogs dressed like people (Fig. 6) were thus materially imbued with civilization’s markers, but this was also true in reverse. The transposition of women’s clothing’s visual codes onto dogs served to underscore similarities between tamed, feminized Parisian canines and their tamed, feminized mistresses.

I argue that certain images of Colette during her marriage to Willy are a striking example of this. Even a brief analysis of them demonstrates that Willy is using the contemporary fashion for sartorial code-switching between women and dogs to send messages of domination and ownership. Take, for example, one of a series of postcards Willy designed for the *Claudine* publicity campaign circa 1902-1903 (Fig. 7). It is a year after the second *Claudine* novel’s release, and much to Sido’s chagrin, Willy has just

³⁷⁸ Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 85.

³⁷⁹ Paul Mégnin, *Nos Chiens: Races, dressage, élevage, hygiène, maladies, 2e édition* (J.-B. Baillière et Fils, 1909), 325.

³⁸⁰ Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 84.

persuaded Colette to chop her ankle-length hair into a short bob that matches the title character's new hairdo.³⁸¹ He is still taking credit for the novels his wife has written, but (in keeping with his claim that Colette's school journals inspired him) openly exploits her as a Claudine stand-in for marketing purposes. The postcard features a nearly thirty-year-old Colette sitting hunched on a desk in her character's schoolgirl uniform, including the famous Claudine collar that would spark a decades-long trend.³⁸² Her bulldog Toby-Chien (who also appears in the *Claudine* books) sits beside her on the desk and, in addition to the color similarity between his dark fur and Colette/Claudine's dress, wears the same trademark white collar. Dog and innocent "girl" thus broadcast, through their body language and clothing, a certain availability and subservience that hint at their parallel status as pets. This is reinforced in a second postcard from the series (Fig. 8) that shows a satisfied Willy sitting on the same desk, holding Toby-Chien and Colette/Claudine close to him. This time the message sent by their identical collars is reinforced by Willy's body language; his encircling arms draw obedient dog and obedient, adoring wife inward at mirror angles, visually identifying them with each other. In a third image (Fig. 9), Willy is not physically present, but his top hat lies under Toby-Chien's paw as Colette/Claudine looks up coyly from a large book she is reading while sitting half-reclined on the floor. Her posture echoes the dog's, and their relative position

³⁸¹ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* (Berghahn Books, 2009), 78.

³⁸² "...nous sommes en 1935, et je viens de recevoir une lettre d'un chemisier pour hommes et dames, qui me propose trois modèles nouveaux (*sic*) de cols, récemment baptisés: *Claudine à l'école*, pour le matin, *Claudine à Paris*...et...*Claudine s'en va*." Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, (J. Ferenczi et Fils, 1936), 56. [...it is now 1935, and I just received a letter from a men's and women's shirtmaker, who is proposing three new models for collars, recently baptized *Claudine at School*, for the morning, *Claudine in Paris*...and...*Claudine Goes*.]

to the objects in front of them once again combines with similar outfits to send a clear visual message: dogs like Toby-Chien have about as much use for top hats as sweet young things like Claudine have for big, boring books.

If these photographs subtly pair Colette and her dog to indulge Willy's pedophilic taste for youthful, submissive girls, others in the series are much more direct about that intention. In another of the Gerschel postcards (Fig. 10), Colette/Claudine bends over an easel where she has been adoringly sketching Willy's portrait while Toby-Chien sits in the background. Colette/Claudine's coy over-the-shoulder pose establishes a hierarchy of height: Willy's hat reaches slightly above her head as she, in turn, stands taller than the dog behind her, suggesting a visual chain of pet ownership. The same hierarchy is much more pronounced in Fig. 11, where Colette has now fallen to her knees to sketch Willy's portrait. She and Toby-Chien sit together in the foreground of the photo, wearing their matching white collars, while Willy stands above them in profile. The triad recurs in another version (Fig. 12) where once again Willy stands above a seated Colette, who is higher than the dog. But if this reiteration of the hierarchical pose has something of a traditional family portrait look to it, with Toby-Chien as the couple's metaphorical child, there is also the curious detail of Colette's cross-dressing: she wears a man's three-piece suit and holds a cigarette loosely in her right hand. Lest viewers think such attire is a signal of her emancipation, Willy's pose suggests otherwise. He looms over the seated Colette with his cane pointed toward her. This, plus Colette's vaguely feminine shoes and the fact that her collar still matches the dog's more than either matches Willy, creates an impression that would not be out of character for the mischievous but menacing personality of Colette's first husband. Little matter if she has traded schoolgirl costumes

for the sartorial prerogatives of masculinity, Willy seems to be saying—he can still dominate her easily.

Colette's memoirs confirm this. Speaking of the various publicity portraits Willy commissioned during their marriage, she points out that "sur mes traits on lit, comme sur la plupart de mes photographies de la même époque, une expression tout ensemble soumise, fermée, mi-gentille, mi-condamnée, dont j'ai plutôt honte..."³⁸³ [*on my face one could read, as with most photographs of me from this period, an expression simultaneously submissive, closed-off, half-gentle, half-condemned, of which I am rather ashamed...*] Colette's words support a reading of her status, at this time, as the subordinated pet of a man whose entire goal was self-aggrandizement. In another passage from her memoirs she remembers Willy feverishly producing the aforementioned series of postcards that he used "à profusion et qu'il faisait tirer par commandes de plusieurs milliers" [*profusively and that he ordered in print runs of several thousand*]; some even self-indulgently portrayed him as Saint Willy in a halo of light.³⁸⁴ But in his haste to generate profitable publicity, Willy did not stop at postcards or exploiting the fashion for coordinating dog-and-mistress outfits. He went a step further, hiring the actress Polaire to play Claudine onstage and transforming her into a second version of Colette/Claudine in everyday life. Willy dressed both women in coordinating girlish outfits (Fig. 13) and paraded them ostentatiously around Paris "like one would walk a couple of greyhounds," in Polaire's words.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ Ibid., 75.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 76.

³⁸⁵ Polaire. *Polaire, par elle-même* (E. Figuière, 1933), 119.

“M. Willy était en train d’inventer une paire de *twins*,” [Mr. Willy was in the process of inventing a pair of twins], Colette recalls. “De par sa décision nous eûmes, Polaire et moi, trois ‘tenues’ identiques, et c’était bien assez, et c’était bien trop.” [By his decision we had, Polaire and I, three identical ‘outfits,’ which was enough, and at the same time really too much.] Willy’s almost total control of the two women chafed on Polaire. “Les jours où notre manager nous menait vêtues de pareil, au restaurant, [Polaire] pouvait difficilement cacher une gêne, une tristesse de bête affublée, qui n’attirait que mieux l’attention gouailleuse.”³⁸⁶ [The days when our manager brought us dressed identically to a restaurant, [Polaire] had difficulty hiding her embarrassment, the sadness of an animal in a costume, which only attracted even more leering attention.] If obscenity was a “narrow domain” for Colette, for Willy it was an expansive and lucrative field of opportunity. He wanted to create the impression that he and his youthfully-dressed “twins” were a sexual threesome. “Mettez vos robes blanches,” he ordered Colette and Polaire one night, before taking them to a music-hall show, “J’aurai l’air de balader mes deux gosses.” [Put on your white dresses...I will look like I’m taking my two kids out for a walk.] Just as Willy intended, when the three of them entered the hall, “l’attention du public se fixa sur nous d’une manière si pesante, si muette et si unanime que les sensibles antennes de Polaire frémissaient, et elle recula d’un pas, comme devant la trappe...”³⁸⁷ [the attention of the audience fell on us in such a heavy, silent and

³⁸⁶ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 116.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

unanimous manner that Polaire's sensitive antennae trembled, and she fell back a step, as if from a trap...]

Colette remembers feeling more distress at Polaire's unhappiness than her own.³⁸⁸ To describe the actress's misery, and as if to underscore the unnaturalness of their predicament, Colette continually deploys animal metaphors: "A Polaire, comme à toutes les bêtes tendres, la tendresse inflige les apparences de la maladie." [*With Polaire, as with all tender-hearted animals, deep feelings inflicted on her an appearance of illness*]. This took the form of a physical reaction. "Polaire triste serre les épaules, joint ses doigts et serre sa joue sur son épaule, comme font ces singes ravissants, que les trafiquants d'animaux sauvages amènent sous notre climat pour qu'ils meurent."³⁸⁹ [*Sad Polaire pulls her shoulders up, clasps her fingers and squeezes her cheek against her shoulder, as do those beautiful monkeys that animal traffickers bring to our climate to die.*] But Willy cared little for the happiness of his "gosses" [*little girls*], so long as they contributed to his fame. Willy's appearances in public with the "twins," theatrical adaptations of the *Claudine* novels, saleable commodities like the Claudine collar, and images like the Gerschel postcard series formed part of a massively successful marketing campaign that hinged, Colette explained, on the titillation of a sexualized teenager hovering between childhood and womanhood. Claudine was "le 'fruit vert', personnage acide qui, vêtu en enfant, a licence de se comporter en femme."³⁹⁰ [*"green fruit," an acidic personality who, dressed like a child, has permission to act like a woman*]

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 116-117.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 118.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 118.

Suddenly there were dozens of actresses portraying her onstage; “[on vit] des Claudines de toutes couleurs, des rousses, des blondes et des châtaines. Des longues, des trapues, des costaudes et des consomptives. On en vit même une barbue...”³⁹¹ [*one saw Claudines of all colors, redheads, blonds and brunettes. Tall ones, stocky ones, strong ones and sickly ones. There was even a bearded lady...*] Fan mail from teenage girls—and often the girls themselves, dressed in Claudine outfits and eager to please Monsieur Willy—flooded into Colette’s house.³⁹² This sexual response to Claudine’s precocious seductiveness was not confined to Willy. The infamously fast-moving Parisian sex industry quickly capitalized on it too; “every nightclub, pickup joint, and even the most miserable dives had their 'Claudine,' in her black smock, large white collar, red necktie, and, of course, the short hair,” Polaire later recalled.³⁹³ Willy’s name was on the books that had started it all.

But even in the early days of the *Claudine* novels some guessed that it was Colette who had written them, despite Willy taking credit for the next several years.³⁹⁴ Her wifely acceptance of this arrangement, which involved Willy locking her in a room for hours at a time to write on his behalf³⁹⁵ is perhaps one of the submissive, dog-like behaviors that led Nathalie Barney to depict Colette as too often “obedient and devoted to a master.” Colette would later say of her life with Willy that it was a “captivité

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁹³ Polaire, *Polaire, par elle-même*, 129.

³⁹⁴ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 55.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

quotidienne...pas à mon honneur, je conviens, et je n'aime pas à faire figure de brebis."³⁹⁶ [*daily captivity...not honorable for me, I admit, and I don't like to seem a sheep.*] But this domestic-animal tendency would eventually be balanced out by the “instinct of a wild animal who escapes from all domination” that Barney (and wider French culture, as we have seen) labeled feline—even if Colette periodically chose throughout her life what her contemporaries viewed as a canine form of submission. In “The Colette I have Known,” Barney once again noted that “[t]orn between the desires of her two contrary natures, to have a master and not to have one, she always opted for the first solution.”³⁹⁷ Although this is most obvious in her submissive relationship with Willy, certain echoes of it would linger in other, perhaps healthier romances. Contemporary observers claim that during her relationship with the Marquise de Belbeuf Colette wore a collar-like bracelet on her arm engraved with “I belong to Missy,” and she would refer to her wealthy second husband as “Sidi” (Arabic for “my master”) in reference to her Orientalist fantasy of belonging to a harem.³⁹⁸

But if such behavior may have been viewed as doglike, it was the independent, culturally feline-coded half of Colette’s personality that ultimately assisted her in breaking free from Willy. Although Colette exhibited both socially constructed sets of “cat” and “dog” characteristics, Goudekot relates that she was more attached to feline identity markers; “she set the cat above the dog” just as she “set poetry above prose.”³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 86.

³⁹⁷ Colette et al., *My Mother's House; and Sido*, xiii.

³⁹⁸ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: a Life of Colette*, xv.

³⁹⁹ Maurice Goudekot, *Close to Colette; an Intimate Portrait of a Woman of Genius*, 138.

As Colette pauses in one of her memoirs to rhapsodize, “...I’ve not yet finished with singing the cat, the heart of the cat.”⁴⁰⁰ The cultural consequence of this preference for felines is very clear to her; “...I accept that I am, in the feline heart, the privileged one led by a straight and burning corridor right to the heart of the cat,” she explains. “When I return [to the human world], I am received here as a somewhat suspect explorer...It must be high time for the strictly human race to be disturbed about it...In fact, it is disturbed. On my table is a magazine article gravely entitled: ‘Has Madame Colette a soul?’”⁴⁰¹ Colette’s usage of the term “strictly human race” indicates that she, like Sido, did not put herself into this category. And it would be these animal qualities, particularly those viewed as feline in French culture, that ultimately helped her achieve autonomy. “Colette claimed that a wild animal—and the cat is a wild animal—prudently avoids showing how far it can leap,” Goudekot explains. “If one day it finds it necessary to make a prodigious bound, would one deny that it had always had the power to do so?”⁴⁰² In her relationship with Willy Colette may have kept her independent side mostly hidden, but when it eventually resurfaced, her “prodigious bound” of escape (as we will see in more detail) was facilitated in large part by a devotion to physical culture in which animal associations were continuously present.

As previously discussed, Willy’s publicity photos widely circulated a perception of Colette/Claudine as his submissive little pet dog. Images like Fig. 14 seem to be a

⁴⁰⁰ Colette, *Looking Backwards*, 45.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁰² Maurice Goudekot, *Close to Colette; an Intimate Portrait of a Woman of Genius*, 174.

direct response to this; used for a 1910 postcard, it was produced the same year Colette and Willy's divorce became official after almost four years of separation. Colette was now fully engaged in her difficult but independent vaudeville career, and *La Vagabonde* was being published serially in *La Vie Parisienne*.⁴⁰³ Most importantly, Colette had taken active control of her own publicity, building on her previous fame with the *Claudine* novels (despite losing the legal rights to them⁴⁰⁴), but also performing visual code switches to communicate strength, independence, and confident sexuality as a counterbalance to Claudine's vulnerable adolescence. Fig. 14 is a prime example of this. A relaxed, grown-up Colette lounges on a lion pelt with her feet in the air behind her, nearly nude and covered loosely with a cheetah skin. It is certainly an Orientalist image, using nudity and exotic dead animals to create what may be superficially read as a conquest of feminized nature. But Colette's personal background and relationship to cultural canine-feline traits also point to a reading of this as an anti-Willy postcard. The snarling lion head on which her arms rest seems to send multiple messages that reverse those found in Willy's images of Colette; her casual pose indicates that she has subdued the masculinized king of beasts, and that she herself—body aligned with the lion's and chin regally lifted—is also deeply connected to feline (and thus feminine) power. I propose that through this lens the cheetah fur draping Colette's lower body is just as much hers as the nude skin she exposes alongside it, signaling her status as a predatory big cat who has once again, like all of Sido's children, gone feral. Colette's visual shift

⁴⁰³ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 124.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

from domestic animal to wild animal is thus made clear in this image, which is the polar opposite of artificial schoolgirl outfits and sweet, submissive young wives posing next to small, dressed-up dogs. It is a repurposing of animal imagery as an instrument of autonomy. It is also, like her sphinx pose, a redeployment of Orientalist tropes in the service of feminine independence.

If, as we have seen, cats in this time period were associated with danger, evil, wildness, and rebellious femininity, then this postcard shows Colette playing up the full range of those associations. Accepting a “bad” stereotype of womanhood may at first seem as constraining as performing its “good,” domestic side. But for Luce Irigaray, “assum[ing] [a] feminine role deliberately...means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.”⁴⁰⁵ Colette’s deliberate choice of feminine-feline stereotypes, as opposed to the canine ones Willy had forced on her, is thus doubly important here. Letters to her theater associate and pantomime trainer Georges Wague show Colette negotiating contracts, budgets, and publicity, proactively commissioning portraits of herself which she would then send out to print media editors with “precise instructions for captions and placement.”⁴⁰⁶ This included several images that would join the postcard series *Beautés Parisiennes*—including the aforementioned photograph with lion head and cheetah skin. Colette had learned how to play Willy’s game of public self-promotion and was now actively using it to counter the reputation he had built for her with new public images of her own, such as Fig. 14 where her dress (or

⁴⁰⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’est pas un* (Éditions De Minuit, 1977), 76.

⁴⁰⁶ Tilburg, Patricia A. *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 115.

lack thereof), body language, and proximity to animals taps into and repurposes a system of cultural notions connected to visual signs, a semiological system à la Barthes and Saussure. In such images I argue that we see Colette engaged, in other words, in sartorial code-switching.

Independence and certain types of animality were multiply linked for Colette. She describes the first stage of her rupture with Willy as “l’heure de renâcler—bon mot qui rend bien le sursaut animal, le refus total et buté” [*a time of angry snorting—a good term that captures its animal jolt, the total and stubborn refusal*]; she had a moment of realization that their marriage was really over as she sat in “la petite retraite où j’avais emporté la chatte, le bouledogue et des livres naufragés.”⁴⁰⁷ [*the small apartment where I had brought the cat, the bulldog and some castaway books.*] Surrounded by pets and literature, Colette no longer had such need of Willy. The first thing she wrote for herself, of her own volition and under her own name, was *Dialogues des bêtes*; its subject was partially chosen because Colette knew Willy would not want to put his illustrious name on something as triflingly feminine as talking animal stories.⁴⁰⁸ But animals, their stories, and femininity itself in all its polymorphous manifestations—whether animal or human—had never been trifling for Colette. “L’ouïe mentale, que je tends vers la Bête, fonctionne encore,” she sighs in relief some time after leaving Willy [*The mental hearing that I project towards beasts still functions*]. When it comes to human men, she has had enough for a while; “Je n’ai plus envie de me marier avec personne...” [*I no longer want to marry anyone...*] But this reluctance does not apply evenly across species, and certainly

⁴⁰⁷ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 95.

⁴⁰⁸ Yvonne Mitchell, *Colette: a Taste for Life*, 70.

not to the animal emblem of Colette's newfound independence: "...je rêve encore que j'épouse un très grand chat."⁴⁰⁹ [*I still dream that I am marrying a very big cat.*]

Physical Culture

An incident that occurred just before her separation from Willy stands out in Colette's memoirs. It is a moment where Colette starkly measures the consequences of her husband's fetish for pedophilia and "twinning": "[I]a fille de M. Willy a acheté le même chapeau que vous', me dit un jour ma modiste."⁴¹⁰ [*Mr. Willy's daughter bought the same hat as you', my hatmaker said to me one day.*] Willy's new girlfriend had apparently started ordering copies of Colette's clothing from her personal vendors. This was another of her "sosies d'occasion,"⁴¹¹ [*occasional body doubles*] countless young or youthful-looking mistresses whom Willy continued to bring into their life—often directly into their house—and who imitated not only Claudine's but also Colette's general appearance.

Colette was now thoroughly miserable. But she didn't feel able to leave just yet:

Il faut comprendre...qu'un captif, animal ou homme, ne pense pas tout le temps à s'évader, en dépit des apparences, en dépit du va-et-vient derrière les barreaux...Ouvrez à l'écureuil, au fauve, à l'oiseau lui-même, la porte...presque toujours, au lieu du bond, de l'essor que vous attendez, la bête déconcerté s'immobilise, recule vers le fond de la cage...Fuir?...comment fait-on pour fuir? Nous autres filles de province,

⁴⁰⁹ Colette, *Oeuvres Complètes de Colette*, 3:304.

⁴¹⁰ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 142-143.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

nous avons de la désertion conjugale, vers 1900, une idée énorme et peu maniable...⁴¹²

[You must understand...that a captive, whether animal or human, doesn't think all the time of escape, despite appearances, despite the back-and-forth behind bars...Open the door to the squirrel, the wild animal, the bird itself...almost always, instead of the leap or the flight that you expect, the disconcerted animal freezes, retreats to the back of the cage...Flee?...how would I flee? We provincial girls, around the year 1900, we had an intimidating and inflexible idea of conjugal desertion...]

Despite these protestations, however, Colette relates that the idea of escape was growing somewhere in her subconscious. In her memoirs she remembers choosing to pass the time by strengthening the one thing she could count on: her body. In an attic above the apartment she shared with Willy, Colette set up a room full of “anneaux, barre, trapèze, corde à noeuds” [*rings, a barre, a trapeze, a knotted rope*]. With this exercise equipment, she recalls, “[j]e me suspendais, je tournais autour de la barre, j’étirais mes muscles, presque clandestinement...” [*I hung, flipped around the barre, stretched my muscles, almost secretly...*] A contemporary photo (Fig. 15) shows Colette leaning against her exercise equipment looking blankly despondent, as she did in many images taken around this time, and perhaps subtly referencing her captive animal status by imitating an equally depressed Toby-Chien’s resigned sideways glance. Is she intentionally broadcasting quiet desperation? “En y songeant après, il m’a bien semblé que j’exerçais mon corps à la manière des prisonniers qui ne méditent pas nettement l’évasion, mais découpent et

⁴¹² Ibid., 140.

tressent un drap.”⁴¹³ [*Thinking about it afterwards, it seemed to me that I was exercising my body like those prisoners who do not consciously dream of escape, but cut and braid a rope out of sheets.*]

In this difficult period we see the deep-rooted connection to physicality and embodiment that centered Colette throughout her life. In fact, as Patricia Tilburg notes, critics and scholars have often dismissed Colette’s focus on the physical body as frivolously (or, as we have seen, disturbingly) “idiosyncratic,” when it is in fact a key element of a larger “rich and meaning-laden cultural context.”⁴¹⁴ That context hinges in large part on Colette’s education in the first wave of public girls’ schools in France. Studies of Colette “have not remarked enough that she was, alone amongst the great writers, formed exclusively by the school of the Third Republic,” as Michèle Hecquet writes; she “belongs to the generation of the *‘école laïque* that emerges between 1890 and 1914.”⁴¹⁵ Colette was in fact an early student of the new secular school system, attending her village *école laïque* in the 1880s when it was still groundbreaking to educate girls outside of convents. Importantly for our discussion of Colette’s embodiment, French secular education in this period placed a great emphasis on physical movement—moral and physical realms were considered inseparable in the new pedagogical philosophy. This was an anti-somatophobic response to traditional dualism, including the Church’s, since

⁴¹³ Ibid., 139.

⁴¹⁴ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 15.

⁴¹⁵ Michèle Hecquet, “Colette: Femmes au Travail,” *Cahiers Colette*, vol. 15 (1993): 40-41.

Catholic education continued to exhort children to transcend their sinful corporeality by focusing on the immaterial soul.⁴¹⁶

Colette thus experienced firsthand, in her formative childhood years, an early version of the larger shift in attitude toward the material body that would increasingly pit religion against secularism (and positive physicality against somatophobic dualism) in French culture. Although secular educational athletics for boys was designed to produce future citizens and soldiers, girls were not fully excluded. After the terrible Franco-Prussian War in 1870 the new *laique* school system promised a quasi-Spartan regime that would reinvigorate the nation through the bodies of its youth, shaping “a new generation of soldiers and soldiers’ mothers.”⁴¹⁷ This would be achieved through physical exercise; “schoolboys were drilled in *bataillons scolaires*, schoolgirls were taught to be fruitful and multiply, and both were trained to knit body and soul together as integral halves of a whole being.”⁴¹⁸ As Gilbert Andrieu notes, the fin-de-siècle exercise craze marked a significant moment in French history—particularly on this cultural and institutional scale—in which a large portion of the aspirational middle class consciously decided to stop “aping the aristocracy” in its rejection of physical labor. Now “mindful of the strength of the People or workers,” and hoping that it would protect the nation from future defeats, bourgeois families like Colette’s suddenly “felt the need to associate

⁴¹⁶ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 48.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

reason and muscles, and to develop them jointly to generate a new kind of power.”⁴¹⁹ In such descriptions we see a direct rejection of philosophical dualism’s traditional dichotomies. The author of an 1882 public school hygiene manual makes this quite explicit, connecting the new embrace of corporeality to Third Republic politics: “the *culture physique* of children has always been very closely linked with...philosophical or religious ideas...It was neglected or artificial whenever an ethos of authority and asceticism prevailed; it has reemerged each time that liberty has gained the upper hand.”⁴²⁰ From an administrative perspective, healthy bodies made good republican citizens.

Colette’s well-equipped attic gymnasium, then, did not arise in a vacuum. Neither did her supposedly “idiosyncratic” devotion to physicality or exercise. I argue that the animal and corporeal attachments she absorbed from Sido were reinforced by newly-developed physical education classes at school; 1880s government programs for girls’ schools included “parallel bars, weights, swimming, balance beams, and numerous stretches and jumps focused on various body parts” that totaled several hours of exercise each week.⁴²¹ Most importantly for our discussion of Colette’s animality, public educational philosophy now considered the human body to be essentially an animal one. Following Darwin, the increasingly-accepted scientific view of humankind’s

⁴¹⁹ Gilbert Andrieu, “La gymnastique de plancher: Une pratique pour une bourgeoisie se préparant à prendre pouvoir?,” *Stadion*, vol. 11 (1985), 56.

⁴²⁰ Elie Pécaut, “Hygiène scolaire,” in *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d’instruction primaire*, edited by Ferdinand Buisson, vol. 1 (Hachette, 1882), 1302.

⁴²¹ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 49-50.

evolutionary trajectory popularized Herbert Spencer's maxim among French *laique* pedagogues: "One must before all things be a good animal." Pedagogy writer Georges Dumesnil, citing Herbert in 1882, emphasized that this was because "a good animal effortlessly carries within it the understudy of a good man and a free thinker."⁴²² Educational liberalism thus reclaimed the body as materially animal *and* humanly rational in one simultaneous move.

But this was not a complete revolution in gendered perceptions of corporeality. French society's "extreme gender conservatism" did not disappear with the advent of scientifically-minded public education; it continued to uneasily coexist and conflict with a simultaneous urge toward a modern version of womanhood that utilized republican principles of equality and economic advancement to achieve social liberation.⁴²³ This was the turn-of-the-century New Woman figure. What Robert Gildea terms the *laique* system's "hypocrisy"⁴²⁴ lay precisely in its theoretical pretensions to a gender-neutral objectivity that claimed girls' bodies were "not constituted any differently than boys" for purposes of physical education,⁴²⁵ while at the same time exhibiting a paranoid concern

⁴²² Georges Dumesnil, "Cours d'instruction morale et civique, (suite)," *Revue Pédagogique* 2 (Feb. 1882), 146-147.

⁴²³ Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, *A "Belle Epoque"?: Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* (Berghahn Books, 2007), 3.

⁴²⁴ Robert Gildea, *Education in Provincial France, 1800-1914: a Study of Three Departments* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 264.

⁴²⁵ Paul Rousselot, "La Pédagogie dans les écoles de filles, à propos du concours d'admission aux fonctions de directrice d'école normale," *Revue Pédagogique* (July-December 1879), 562.

about “the nation’s falling birthrates and the specter of New Womanhood.”⁴²⁶ The resulting tension meant that publicly educated French girls like Colette received conflicting social messages urging them to be both “domestic angels” and “*femmes nouvelles*.” But it was widely accepted in this time period that one could not be both. Thus, even as it attempted to “enfor[ce] social discipline” and “reaffir[m] republican values,” the Third Republic also accidentally “helped organize and make palatable the social and sexual rebellion of bourgeois women” by giving them access to conceptual frameworks and social behaviors which had previously been reserved only for boys’ educations, and which possessed the power to facilitate their transformation into New Women.⁴²⁷ Among these was the notion that the body, like the mind and in conjunction with it, could be refined—that the whole self, in other words, could and should be strengthened to produce a sort of virile rationality. This was a new concept for girls who would have originally been trained by dualist culture’s values, as we have seen, to view themselves as too-natural and too-embodied for rationality, and too feminine for athletic virility. They would not normally have considered their bodies or minds to be either completely positive or perfectable. Now science and republican pedagogy urged them to build up and enjoy their muscles to achieve greater mental and bodily presence.

The new educational system was thus filled with regular contradictions, feeding girls modern concepts alongside old ones. Patricia Tilburg notes that, in Colette’s public school,

⁴²⁶ Tilburg, Patricia A. *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 9.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

[she] was exhorted to work hard and save money, while at the same time to distance herself from the realm of commercial work as a *femme au foyer*...told to eschew immobility and to fortify her body through constant physical activity, even as popular culture and science pathologized the female body...encouraged to use honed skills of exterior observation to cultivate her imagination and enrich her intellect, even though, as a woman, her most valuable creation was expected to be healthy offspring and a blissful and efficient household...the boundaries of respectable femininity had...been redrawn and broadened.⁴²⁸

Despite their somewhat haphazard application, these types of “intellectual inconsistencies” in the new secular schools gave girls the option, as Tilburg emphasizes, of accessing realms previously reserved for masculinity. It was perhaps this blending of cultural dichotomies that enabled Colette to create a literary “interpenetration of language and the word, style and flesh,” in Kristeva’s description of her writing.⁴²⁹ What is clear is that thinking from the perspective of both social genders (as she would have learned to do in the new *laïque* school system) produced a double consciousness in Colette that would sometimes lead her to reflect, as she wrote in *Le pur et l’impur*, on the “genuine mental hermaphroditism [of] certain highly complex beings.”⁴³⁰ *Le pur et l’impur* showcases the fact that Colette’s conception of gender and sexuality grew more expansive, at some point, than contemporary society’s binaries.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁴²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Notre Colette* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), 10.

⁴³⁰ Colette, *The Pure and the Impure* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 60.

This ability to see beyond certain cultural horizons would serve her well. As we saw earlier with her autobiographical character Renée's renunciation of bourgeois femininity in favor of a more liberated, animalistic womanhood, Colette's experience of her own physicality was crucial in developing her independent sense of self. Attic acrobatics eventually grew into a full-blown vaudeville career. Although vaudeville was in many ways a hard life, it nevertheless gave Colette what Willy could not: "...dancing, light, freedom and music."⁴³¹ Using exercise to shape her body as a performative tool was therefore a key aspect of Colette's newfound autonomy, and I argue that animal imagery from her early vaudeville career seems intentionally designed to reinforce this very physical claim to independence. Take, for example, a photo of Colette from a sketch called "La chatte amoureuse" (Fig. 15) that Sido responded to by exclaiming, "...ce n'était pas bien facile de métamorphoser une si belle chatte en femme...Il y a des fables de La Fontaine où une chatte est ainsi transformée, mais pas mieux réussie."⁴³² [*...it must not have been easy to metamorphose such a beautiful cat into a woman...There are fables by La Fontaine where a cat is transformed that way, but yours is better.*] Cats' cultural connotations of freedom, independence, and female sexual liberty (reinforced by the play's title and theme), operate in this image to boost Colette's associations with those attributes—and they do so, we may note, through the medium of her stage costume's sartorial code switch between woman and cat, which in Sido's reading blurs the conceptual boundaries of each.

⁴³¹ Colette, *The Vagabond*, 47.

⁴³² Colette, *Lettres à sa fille* (Des Femmes, 1984), 497.

I argue that many of Colette's other early vaudeville performances also demonstrate an extreme urge to distinguish herself as physically and morally unrestrained. This was true even before leaving Willy, during her transitional phase out of the marriage. "When [Colette] began her lessons with the celebrated mime Georges Wague in 1905," Tilburg notes,

...she was the author of numerous racy works of fiction, her marriage was collapsing, and she was unabashedly pursuing new extramarital and bisexual pleasures. Her first public shows called for her to don revealing and provocative costumes as, in turn, a bare-legged faun, a lothario (in drag), a lusty gypsy, and the mistress of a pagan god (clothed in nothing but a panther skin). In addition, Colette broke new ground, theatrically speaking, by foregoing the flesh-colored leotard normally worn by performers under such costumes.⁴³³

I propose that Colette rejected leotards because she wanted to fully experience a growing sense of independence through unrestrained corporeal movement. This view of her affective relationship to her body is supported by the choice of roles enumerated above: the faun (a traditionally masculinized human-animal hybrid representing sexual appetite), the lothario in drag (once again claiming masculinity's vestimentary privileges, but this time in earnest), the gypsy (a cultural symbol of rebellious nomadic freedom), and the pagan god's mistress (referencing a pre-Christian morality system and evoking pre-societal wildness by wearing only an animal skin). These performances, together with the female cat in heat that Colette played in "La chatte amoureuse," send a clear message of unconventional, untamed, fully sensual femininity. Colette is effectively reclaiming

⁴³³ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 106.

negative associations from duality's binaries as positive, then blending them with similar New Woman concepts (sexual liberation, economic independence) to create a composite vision of feminine animality that builds on her inheritance from Sido and her *laique* education.

The importance of the body to this project cannot be understated. Colette's decision to forego restrictive modesty cover-ups onstage is one indicator of her understanding of body and soul as connected; another is her perspective on body size. In the unhappy period preceding her divorce, Colette recalls, "...je maigrissais. La perte de poids sans diète, la volatilisation mystérieuse de notre substance, je ne lui donnais pas encore l'importance qu'elle mérite." [*I was getting thinner. To the loss of weight without dieting, the mysterious disappearance of our substance, I did not yet give the importance it deserves.*] As this weight loss continued, Colette relates, "Je serrais d'un cran la ceinture de cuir, tirais jusqu'au bout le lacet du petit corset de rubans. Je m'étonnais de maigrir..."⁴³⁴ [*I tightened my leather belt another notch, pulled the laces on my little ribboned corset as far as they would go. I was astonished to be getting thinner...*] I contend that in this passage Colette associates her involuntary corporeal diminishment with strong negative affective experiences (in this case a broken heart). If the Third Republic's educational motto was "*Mens sana in corpore sano*,"⁴³⁵ [*A healthy mind in a healthy body*] then it follows that Colette would have considered the reverse to be equally true; in her reflection on weight loss she appears to draw a direct link between an

⁴³⁴ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 149.

⁴³⁵ Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, 49.

unhealthy, diminished body and an unhealthy, diminished soul. By inference, both should ideally be robust.

A 1906 photo of Colette costumed as a faun for her official vaudeville premiere (“Le Désir, la chimère et l’amour”) does indeed show her looking thinner than usual, which only serves to heighten the sad, wounded-animal look of her comparatively larger eyes (Fig. 17). As her marital situation grew more desperate, Colette’s memoirs hint at a corresponding physical abandon bordering on wildness. Willy came home during Colette’s visit with a friend one day to find “sur le tapis une sorte de boule, poings, pieds mêlés, deux corps jaloux de se nuire, combattant à la manière femelle, à coups rapides, maladroits, griffus...Nous nous étions disputées, ‘pour rien, pour le plaisir’...[elle] avait mal parlé de ma chatte.”⁴³⁶ [*a sort of ball on the carpet, fists, feet mixed together, two bodies eager to harm themselves, fighting in the female manner, with rapid hits, clumsy, clawed...We had started fighting, ‘for nothing, for the pleasure of it’...she had spoken ill of my cat.*] In these excerpts we see a restless Colette wasting away and blowing off steam in a random brawl, while continuing to exercise her body with gymnastics and pantomime. She was very physically chafing inside the prison of a deteriorating marriage that could no longer be called respectable.

But respectability was perhaps overrated, particularly if it involved playing the part of a nice little bourgeois wife. “D’you remember...what marriage was for me?” Renée asks indignantly in *La Vagabonde*. “[C]onjugal domesticity...turns so many wives into a sort of nurse for a grown-up...trembling lest Monsieur’s cutlet should be overdone, his Vittel water not cold enough, his shirt badly starched, his stiff collar soft...It means

⁴³⁶ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 146-147.

playing the exhausting part of an intermediary...[a] mediator, I tell you, between Monsieur and the rest of humanity.”⁴³⁷ She would rather live what her scandalized friend terms a life of “libertinism.” “Let me stay alone in my closed bedroom,” Renée begs, “bedecked and idle, waiting for the man who has chosen me to be his harem...I want to know nothing of him but his tenderness and his ardour, I want nothing from love, in short, but love.”⁴³⁸ In this description we again see a clear choice between domesticity and freedom that echoes the nexus of polarized ideas surrounding canine and feline cultural traits. Instead of denying herself to attend to the physical needs of a husband and become, like personified Parisian dogs, a “mediator” between her legal owner and “the rest of humanity,” Colette paints a picture of her ideal romance that involves mutual independence, exotically sensual Orientalism, and a complete focus on sexuality—particularly her own female satisfaction—as the sum total of the relationship. I argue that Colette is advocating here, in other words, for an arrangement that contravenes contemporary bourgeois domesticity (often represented, as we have seen, by pet dogs) in favor of one that corresponds more closely to feline cultural traits.

The zoomorphic dynamics of this gap between domesticity and *déclassement* help us better understand, then, why Renée’s exotic dance scene relies on an epithet like “little muzzles” to insult the bourgeois wives in her audience—particularly when we consider that she (like Colette) used to be one herself. Her “swaying” back, now “free from any constraint,” can only be “an insult to those bodies cramped by their long corsets” if one considers corsetry to be a material synecdoche for the artificial constrictions marriage

⁴³⁷ Colette, *The Vagabond*, 146-147.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

imposes on women's bodies and souls alike. This interpretation dovetails with what we have seen of Colette's affective relationship to clothing and body movement, especially since by the time of her vaudeville career she had largely abandoned the beribboned corset of her married days. By the time of *La Vagabonde's* publication in 1910 Renée/Colette was not alone in this disdain for long corsets; cutting-edge fashion was already beginning to embrace the loose, straight-lined minimalism of designers like Paul Poiret and newcomer Coco Chanel. Poiret in particular "claimed to have abolished the old, tight-laced corset by 1908,"⁴³⁹ which may have been true for his elite, fashion-forward clientele. But the staid bourgeois women in Renée's audience are still, with their pinched waists, "enfeebled by a fashion which insists that they should be thin" in the middle.⁴⁴⁰ I contend that this scene underscores Colette's view of artificially induced slenderness as an unhealthy diminishment of the self in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Colette's attitude toward corporeality, then, is that it should be encouraged rather than transcended, and that the best or truest form of femininity is deeply connected to the body as a free, athletic, and fully accepted animal.

Flappers and Fashion

Renée's rejection of corsets does not necessarily mean Colette approved of the fashions that followed them. Her published journalism on the fashion industry, including a series of articles written for *Vogue* in the 1920s, makes this abundantly clear. With the flapper look in full swing, Colette writes that women are now

⁴³⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 40.

⁴⁴⁰ Colette, *The Vagabond*, 47-48.

flat-bottomed, with no more hip than a bottle of Rhine wine, while the gentlemen are narrow-waisted, laced like Cossacks, and fine-chested...I concede that bathing, breasts, scare you. You are afraid, sheltering them under Claudine's smock, of giving yourself that little [ridiculous] look that attends every dumpy woman dressed *en gamine*, and you are right. Well then, why not use...the body-stocking of pure rubber which holds you tighter than a lover...What matter if it reduces the shape of the female body to the mere contour of a cylinder! Sausage you must be, sausage you shall be. And while a slow strangulation accelerates your heartbeat...you can savour the subtle pleasures of an odoriferous perspiration...I need say no more. Adopt this elastic hair-shirt, Madame. You will find that it serves both vanity and virtue.⁴⁴¹

In this scathing critique of 1920s body types we may note several significant points. First, women and men's physiques seem to have switched places; the former have no curves while it is now the latter who are lacing their waists to show off comparatively broader chests. Colette appears to disapprove of this exchange, demonstrating that she has a stable notion of what each gender's ideal body type should be. She also indicates that the current women's fashions are somatophobic. In Colette's portrayal modern rubber body shapers mortify the flesh to transcend it; flapper fashion may be disguised as modern and forward thinking, but turns out to be another version of the medieval Catholic hair shirt. Colette proposes that these women punish their bodies because they are afraid of them; "bathing, breasts, scare you," she chides her (presumably trendy) reader. Breasts, those ultimate symbols of traditional female physicality, have been banished beneath girlish clothing articles like Claudine's smock. Colette objects to this artificially childlike look,

⁴⁴¹ Colette, *Journey for Myself: Selfish Memories* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), 77-78.

in spite of—or is it precisely because of?—her role in creating and incarnating the teenage character who popularized the *gamine* (“little girl”) style that would so strongly influence flapper fashions. Having once posed as Claudine *en gamine*, Colette now rails against the consequences of the trend for undeveloped, youthful bodies to which she contributed.

The reason lies, as we have seen, in her approach to bodily autonomy. In Colette’s withering estimation that rubber body shapers “reduc[e]... the female body to the mere contour of a cylinder” and turn a once-living entity into a consumable “sausage,” we find many aspects of her corporeal philosophy; namely that the female body should be healthy, whole, fit and muscular. In the face of corseted inactivity, Colette had argued for the body’s freedom of movement and claim to strength. Now that flappers have taken the New Woman look to the other extreme, Colette satirically lampoons the obvious disconnect between its aesthetic aspirations and the actual bodies of its wearers. “Short, flat, geometric, rectangular, the female garment is based on patterns that derive from parallelograms, and 1925 is not going to witness the return of the fashion for flowing curves, jutting breasts and lascivious hips,” she writes disapprovingly. As if to insist on the bodily reality these women are so desperate to deny, Colette compares them to animals. One American designer will soon be bringing “half a dozen American mannequins who are surely not going to settle matters for you, you sturdy French ponies, strapping Latins inured to fatigue, resistant to disease.” These luxurious Americans are a “squad of archangels...unimpeded by the flesh,” who will only serve to “reorientate fashion towards an increasingly slender line...”⁴⁴² In Colette’s paradigm the “natural”

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

French/Latin body is a practical animal that has faithfully kept its populations alive for centuries. It is now being invaded by a modern Anglo-Saxon “squad of archangels” who are “unimpeded by the flesh,” and who therefore, in Colette’s construction, are not equipped to survive the real world’s fatigue and disease. By extrapolation they themselves are not physically real. The “slender line” of “increasingly simplified” 1920s clothes is thus nothing but a lure, an illusion of immateriality that cannot support the healthy, serviceable embodiment we have seen to be Colette’s ideal.

Fashion’s attempt in this time period to flatten out and eliminate the fleshy reality of the healthy female body is related, as Anne Freadman and Anne Hollander have shown, to the “exclusively scopic regime” of cinema and contemporary art; women’s bodies were aspirationally transformed to match the flat, simple shapes on movie screens and in abstract paintings.⁴⁴³ While this is a significant factor and one to which I will return, I argue that for Colette the disaster of flapper fashion lies not only in its reduction of the female body; it is also a question of corporeal assimilation to what she views as a masculine urban environment. Colette was not alone in this. Many residents of post-Haussmann Paris viewed their city as “...an increasingly cruel and bourgeois world, male, alienating, and relentlessly unsentimental.”⁴⁴⁴ Colette later connected her first experiences of Parisian life with the unhappiness of the marriage that had brought her there: “...j’ai eu beaucoup de peine à accepter qu’il existât autant de différence entre l’état de fille et l’état de femme, entre la vie de la campagne et la vie à Paris, entre la

⁴⁴³ Anne Freadman, “Breasts Are Back! Colette’s Critique Of Flapper Fashion,” *French Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2006): 343.

⁴⁴⁴ Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 7.

présence...du bonheur et son absence...”⁴⁴⁵ [*...I had a lot of difficulty accepting that there should be so much difference between girlhood and womanhood, between life in the countryside and life in Paris, between the presence...of happiness and its absence...*] she writes, setting up a sharp divide between country life and city living. Her transfer from one to the other reads as a paradise lost. Soon after arriving in Belle Époque Paris, she already wanted to flee the sinister apartment to which Willy had brought her, with its “plafond bas” and “suceries en place de viande, une lampe à pétrole au lieu du soleil...” This toxic combination resulted in a “vivace et stupide espoir qui me soutenait: ce grand mal, la vie citadine, ne pouvait durer, il serait guéri miraculeusement par ma mort et ma résurrection, par un choc qui me rendrait à la maison natale, au jardin, et abolirait tout ce que le mariage m’avait appris...”⁴⁴⁶ [*low ceiling...candy in place of meat, a gas lamp in place of the sun...a lively and stupid hope sustained me: this great evil, life in the city, could not last, it would be miraculously solved by my death and resurrection, by a shock that would bring me back to my childhood home, to the garden, and abolish everything that marriage had taught me...*]

Although she would later be renowned as a long-term resident of the city whose “cubes without gardens” she had once decried, Colette’s description of initial transplant shock is undeniable. Writing these memoirs years afterward, she still identifies Paris with the twin aspects of her husband’s domination and civilization’s unhealthy artificiality. In Willy’s claustrophobic bachelor pad, sugar has replaced meat and the light of gas lamps has replaced the sun; nature’s healthiness has been left behind in favor of an urban

⁴⁴⁵ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 41.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

lifestyle akin to sickness, and Colette does eventually become seriously ill.⁴⁴⁷ When a young, miserable Colette dreams of being magically transported back to Sido's house, it is specifically the garden that she longs for—and if necessary she would die to enter this paradise rather than stay in Paris.

These sentiments toward urban life re-echo in Colette's fashion journalism decades later. "[H]ow much longer can [we] save Paris from the mournful cubism, the rectangular shadow of apartment blocks?" she asks sadly. Even the few vestiges of nature Paris used to have are being routinely eliminated; "[e]very month in the 16th *arrondissement* sees the felling of an avenue of limes, a thicket of spindle-trees, an old-fashioned arbour rounded to the measure of the crinoline."⁴⁴⁸ Here Colette appears to directly associate new body types and their fashions with modernist changes to Parisian environments.⁴⁴⁹ Bodies are fitted to the city and vice versa; as the bell-shaped crinoline of larger skirts disappears, so too do the old-fashioned gardens designed for those who wore them. Now there are only hard lines and hard materials, with women shaped to match this inorganic modern zeitgeist. "Yes, spring pronounces that the fashion will be flat and short," Colette writes in the mid-1920s. This will be "[a] spring for women to stand poised like a slim lamp-post at the angle of a building, to start up from a lawn like a fountain, to lean against a balustrade like a pillar less bulging than the others."⁴⁵⁰ The

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 43-45.

⁴⁴⁸ Colette, *Journey for Myself: Selfish Memories*, 47.

⁴⁴⁹ For more on the way Paris' urban design and fashion shaped each other, see Heidi Brevik-Zender's *Fashioning Spaces: Mode and Modernity in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (University of Toronto Press, 2015).

⁴⁵⁰ Colette, *Journey for Myself: Selfish Memories*, 34.

new ideal woman is even more slender and less curvaceous than the updated urban spaces she is designed to imitate. This is a sartorial code switch Colette cannot approve of. Masculine modernity's visual cues have been transposed onto female bodies so that they now communicate its values at the expense of their own corporeality.

This brings us back to the question of women growing thinner. In society's efforts to diminish female bodies to serve fashion's ends, Colette sees a conspiracy against feminine autonomy that is epitomized by the plight of Parisian fashion models. Watching a fashion show, she is struck by "this year's way of carrying one's stomach which, though flat, retains a shieldlike arrogance and sways forward and back...Where is the...hip-rolling of the models of 1914? All very well to talk of hips, we don't bulge at the sides any more!"⁴⁵¹ Interestingly, Colette initially portrays the archetypal *mannequin* as a spider. The confident, well-dressed model of in-house *couture* fashion shows "glides from one group to the next, a long gleaming shuttle⁴⁵² weaving her web..."⁴⁵³ But unlike spiders found in nature, this one does not own the beautiful web/garment she also does not weave, and she has become the hunted rather than the hunter. "Among all the modernized aspects of the most luxurious of industries, the model, a vestige of voluptuous barbarianism, is like some plunder-laden prey," Colette asserts. "She is the object of unbridled regard, a living bait, the passive realization of an ideal." Significantly, Colette

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵² Colette's wording here indicates a possible reference to another hybrid human-animal narrative: the Greek myth of Arachne, the talented mortal who challenged Athena to a weaving contest and was then transformed into a spider for her pride.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 40.

views this victimization as an erasure of organic signifiers like (in her paradigm) sexual physiology. The model's "ambiguous profession makes her ambiguous. Even her sex is verbally uncertain. People say: 'This model is charming'; [*ce mannequin*] and her job is to excite covetousness, a demoralizing mission..." Colette describes the objectified, denatured model/victim in terms of horseflesh: "Gentlemen designers...you pay up to forty thousand francs a year for the quivering shoulder, the noble neck, the regal carriage of those who, more than any other female creatures, exalt the product of your genius."⁴⁵⁴ Colette portrays *mannequins* as the idealized apex of fashionable femininity, but also as a warning tale for those women who can afford to imitate them. For her, fashionable femininity is unnatural and "true" or "natural" femininity is an organic, living quality fundamentally opposed to the artificial, masculinized, urban domain the fashion industry represents. Captive models are designed to lure other women into this trap. Take their "living bait," Colette suggests, and you too will be exploited, rendered unnatural, and manipulated for commercial purposes.

Colette relates that her friend Valentine has fallen victim to this system. No longer able to assess nature on its own merits, fashionable Valentine has everything backwards; she "characterizes the season by the material, sport by the equipment, female beauty by jewellery. She interprets the language of symbols like a romantic sweetheart, in fact..."⁴⁵⁵ Reading and re-deploying a vestimentary "language of symbols" for empowerment as we have seen Colette do is one thing, but Valentine simply reads and absorbs the fashion industry's visually-coded commands without question and at her own physical expense,

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 39-40

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 53.

like a slavish lover. Valentine's victimization is represented by fashionable frailty. When Colette tries to intervene, her friend merely "shrugs her thin, even somewhat scrawny, shoulders." Like Claudine before her, Valentine's "whole body is possessed by a sour youthfulness, as if devastated by unending adolescence. Seen from behind in the street she seems, like so many women nowadays, to be ten or twelve years old. Face to face she seems weary of having acted the little girl so long."⁴⁵⁶ Having witnessed the physical wreckage of this faux youth firsthand, Colette now worries that her daughter will follow the modern trend for a thin, boyish physique; if she does, the sensual delights Colette prioritizes in her own life will be absent from her daughter's. "Est-ce que ma fille te ressemblera?" she wonders. "Est-ce qu'il lui faudra, dans six ou sept ans, se conformer au code de beauté qui te tient sous ses durs statuts? Repoussera-t-elle la poularde aux marrons et l'entremets sucré en pensant à ses seins..."⁴⁵⁷ [*Will my daughter resemble you? Will she, in six or seven years, have to conform to the code of beauty that pins you down with its firm laws? Will she push away the fattening chicken with chestnuts and the sugary dessert while thinking of her breasts...*] The 1920s desire to eliminate visible breasts thus stands out repeatedly in Colette's critique of modern fashion and its war on the feminine body.

"You are like the greyhound, Lola," Colette says to this new generation, "who couldn't run with the little bulldogs because in three bounds she had reached the horizon and was searching everywhere for the winded bulldogs she had passed without seeing." In this paradigm flappers are slender, stylish greyhounds, an extreme version of the New

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁵⁷ Anne Freadman, "Breasts Are Back! Colette's Critique Of Flapper Fashion," 339.

Woman that has become thinned-out and overly eager to race into the modernized future—a horizon they have perhaps reached too quickly for their own good. Colette suggests that she is more akin to the squat, prosaic bulldogs left behind who cannot compete in an urbanized, fashion-obsessed world, but have gotten the better bargain as they remain culturally “behind” to enjoy nature’s pleasures. When it comes to the vast sprawl of Paris, Colette tells Lola, “space is yours; leave me what is more beautiful: the woods of scattered pines, the stream turning and twisting in the trough of its valley, the pink foxgloves...”⁴⁵⁸ City and countryside are again polarized along the axis of gender. Lola’s flapper femininity is allied with masculine progress and its fashionable modifications of the body to suit urban environments, as opposed to Colette’s slower but more physically robust and nature-oriented vision of what healthy femininity should be.

These beliefs, however, do not mean that all types of body modification are unwelcome to Colette. Her last husband Maurice Goudekot describes how Colette maintained her signature short wavy hair and bangs in the face of changing hairstyle fads over the years because, as she declared, “The feminine face needs leafage.”⁴⁵⁹ Whereas traditional constructions of femininity held long hair to be more natural and some elements of conservative French culture even decried flapper bobs as “indecent and unchristian,”⁴⁶⁰ Colette’s attitude toward hair length is one indicator of her remarkably stable and self-contained views about feminine style. In her description of short hair as

⁴⁵⁸ Colette, *Journey for Myself: Selfish Memories*, 45.

⁴⁵⁹ Maurice Goudekot, *Close to Colette; an Intimate Portrait of a Woman of Genius*, 50.

⁴⁶⁰ Mary Roberts, “Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 98, no. 3 (1993): 657.

“leafage” we see a unique blend of cultural concepts; short hair may be a sign of modern liberation for flappers, but for Colette it is also closer to nature, mimicking foliage that encircles the face. Although it was in “obéissant aux suggestions de M. Willy” [*in obedience to Mr. Willy’s suggestions*] that Colette first cut her hair many years before it became a widespread style, she explains in her memoirs that she also welcomed the change. “Pour ne pas mentir, je ne demandais qu’à voir tomber ma grande corde incommode de cheveux, qui se nourrissait de moi.”⁴⁶¹ [*To tell the truth, I couldn’t wait to chop that big inconvenient rope of hair, which was feeding off me.*] In another passage she compares her ankle-length tresses to snakes.⁴⁶² The new haircut horrified Sido, who claimed that Colette’s hair was in fact her personal masterpiece and possession, but Colette saw things differently: “...je secouais un front délivré du joug et des épingles, et je me répétais avec allégresse: ‘Je sens le vent passer sur la peau de ma tête!’”⁴⁶³ [*I shook my forehead, which had been liberated from heaviness and hair pins, and repeated to myself happily: “I can feel the wind on my scalp!”*] As with her negative opinion of most aspects of flapper style, Colette’s surprisingly positive experience of short hair is connected to her underlying belief that female bodies should be free, autonomous, and able to experience natural sensations—in this case the wind blowing across their skin.

Hair cutting is thus one form of altering the body that Colette paradoxically views as bringing it closer to nature. Another is makeup. Kathy Peiss explains that in nineteenth-century Western culture “[t]he dominant discourse on cosmetics...placed paint

⁴⁶¹ Colette, *Mes Apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*, 115.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

outside the truthful representation of personal and social identity, identifying cosmetics with disrepute and deceit, a debased female and non-European ‘other’...[there was a] longstanding association of visible cosmetics with illicit sexuality and commerce.”⁴⁶⁴ Here we may note that many of these are also culturally feline-coded traits, and that overt cosmetic use connects the non-European, exotic, and debased Other to Orientalism in this time period—an association which, as we will see later, Colette also references. Peiss links the slow emergence of more positive attitudes toward makeup to theatrical performance, celebrity culture, and the advent of photography and film creating situations where faces needed additional enhancement for practical purposes.⁴⁶⁵ This is, I suggest, one of the key reasons for Colette’s attachment to cosmetics; as a vaudeville performer in the first years of the twentieth century she would have been an early adopter of visible makeup, accustomed to using it for enhancing her facial expressions onstage. By the 1920s, however, entire makeup “looks” were being marketed for various flapper-girl “types,” which “blurred the distinction between the made-up face as *revealing* a woman’s inner self and the made-up face *constituting* that self.”⁴⁶⁶

I argue that Colette viewed her own use of cosmetics as revelatory rather than constitutive. Despite her upbringing in the makeup-averse nineteenth century and her dislike of flappers who were associated with early-twentieth century notions of modern face painting, Colette ascribes to none of these viewpoints. Instead, she sees makeup as a

⁴⁶⁴ Kathy Peiss, “Making Up, Making Over: Cosmetics, Consumer Culture, and Women's Identity,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (University of California Press, 1996), 316.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 320-324.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

way of bringing out natural feminine qualities, physically engaging the five senses, and remaining connected to nature. Goudekot relates that when Colette briefly produced her own line of beauty products in the 1930s, it was because “[s]he wanted to do a real job, a human job, which would let her come and go, travel, handle objects and knead substances.” Again we see a concern for physical activity and sensory input. It was also a question of using natural materials instead of artificial ones: “For my friends and myself,” Colette tells Goudekot, “I used to boil the flesh of quinces and the mucilaginous envelope of their seeds. I beat the cold cream and pressed out the juice of cucumbers...”⁴⁶⁷ When her husband tried to urge caution by pointing out that she would be required to do makeup demonstrations on clients, this turned out to be

...the finishing touch to her temptation. She always adored busying herself with the human face, she used to change the hair style of her friends...Already she saw herself modifying women’s faces, restoring their true characters to them, manipulating colors, plunging her hands deep into pastes and unguent!⁴⁶⁸

These anecdotes, in combination with my previous analysis of her views on corporeality, allow me to propose that Colette had a coherent approach to body modifications that I will term “enhancing the animal.” If some alterations—like the Belle Époque corset or the interwar rubber shaper—denied women their full bodily autonomy and were therefore negative in Colette’s value system, others like makeup could be used for positive purposes. In Goudekot’s descriptions we see Colette using cosmetics to “restor[e]” women’s “true characters” and enjoying the voluptuous sensory experience of working

⁴⁶⁷ Maurice Goudekot, *Close to Colette; an Intimate Portrait of a Woman of Genius*, 69.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

with natural substances, similarly to her views on short hair. Despite a general dislike of flapper fashion's artificiality, then, Colette's approach to certain modern dress and grooming practices which others may at various times have deemed artificial or unnatural (whether in a positive or negative sense) are not always, in the strictest definition of those terms, artificial or unnatural for her. Instead, selected modifications serve to enhance those features of femininity that Colette so consistently adheres to: healthy embodiment, multisensory physical enjoyment, independence and a connection to nature. If, as I have argued, Colette's ideal woman is culturally animalized through these associations, then I propose that in her approach to hair and makeup Colette is not erasing but simply enhancing her version of the female animal.

These factors play into a connection, in Colette's thought (as in wider culture), between makeup and an exoticized Orient. We have seen Colette utilizing Orientalist stereotypes like Salomé, mummies, and sphinxes to project feminine independence, and in her view of cosmetics similar associations resurface. One striking example is Colette's reminiscence of a visit she paid to Sarah Bernhardt shortly before her passing, in which she compares Bernhardt's personal style to that of her famous Italian rival Eleonora Duse:

When I chanced to be a passing guest at her table, four or five months before her death, Sarah's youth and octogenarian coquetry almost left me speechless...What desire to please, what near-posthumous effort still to shine! What determination to forget, to make others forget, the present physical decay and to reconstruct for us, by a single movement...the Sarah of former days, the eternal Sarah!..La Duse respected the wrinkles on her face...Sarah attained old age without

feeling it, but she touched up her features with colour and make-up
with an Oriental and intelligent taste for adornment.⁴⁶⁹

Colette here presents an aging Bernhardt's use of behaviors and cosmetics to appear young as a fascinating (rather than unnerving) quasi-supernatural skill. She also associates it with a positively-Orientalized "taste for adornment" in general. If the more natural-looking Duse "respected" her marks of aging, in Colette's construction that is because she also passively accepted old age; her exterior state matched her interior. Bernhardt, by contrast, becomes old "without feeling it," and so, Colette suggests, it is only natural for her to heighten her features—to enhance, in other words, the sensual animal characteristics of her body until they reflect her youthful inner desires to "please" and to "shine." Bernhardt's exotic, Orientalized self-presentation (whose success hinged in large part on cultural perceptions of her Jewishness) is thus naturalized in Colette's paradigm even as she articulates its technical fabrication via makeup and mannerisms. Cultural codes of "natural" vs. "unnatural" appearance are here switched and combined to create a new perception of what it means to decorate the body, casting certain types of artificiality as unexpectedly aligned with nature's intentions.

Colette's relationship to the various fashions she lived through shows her consistently resisting one thing above all: the constant pressure on women to function as passive objects of a consumer culture that would shape, mold and constrain them without regard for their health or happiness. "Under the domination of commodity fetishism," Walter Benjamin writes of modernity, "the sex appeal of [every] woman is tinged to a

⁴⁶⁹ Colette, *Journey for Myself: Selfish Memories*, 104.

greater or lesser degree with the appeal of the commodity.”⁴⁷⁰ Luce Irigaray elaborates that a commodity’s “social element is added on to its nature, to its matter, and the social subordinates it as a lesser value, indeed as a nonvalue.” Significantly, this is accomplished through visual codes projected onto the body. “Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier...A commodity—a woman—is divided into two irreconcilable bodies: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, exchangeable body.”⁴⁷¹ I argue that in the preceding analyses of her life and work, we have seen the rationale for sartorial code switches where Colette communicates a fusion of these two female bodies—the natural, or animal, and the specular, or socially valued—to a greater degree than Western commodity culture, with its reliance on binaries, typically allows. Colette advocates for a combination of imagery and body grooming practices from “natural” and “unnatural” categories, most significantly those of animal and human, to project messages of empowered femininity. The end result is a specific vision of female corporeality which, however constructed it may ultimately be through its use of surface-level imagery, remains for Colette a signifier of deep, underlying natural qualities. As we have seen, that paradigm allows for a certain amount of “enhancing the animal” in the service of its goal, which is to protect women’s “natural” bodily autonomy, health, and freedom.

This project’s cultural balancing act requires us to pay careful attention when Colette reveals, overtly or covertly, her views on physical appearance. Her apparently

⁴⁷⁰ Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, 113.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

wholesale negative opinion of flapper fashions is in fact nuanced. If it was the Great War that sent women into the workplace for the first time *en masse* and empowered them, this was also an experience of stepping into masculinized domains against a backdrop of equally masculinized wartime violence. For Colette, post-WWI fashions are a continuation of this violence that she casts as almost forcibly inflicted on women's bodies. "The war virilized [women], clothed them with the brief tunic of Eliacin, shored their heads like the knob of a staircase, plastered down their hair like Argentine dancers..."⁴⁷² It is not the women themselves, but male civilization that is to blame for the missteps Colette perceives in interwar fashions. And yet she admits that these fashions are context-specific; if WWI over-virilized women, the pendulum can also sometimes swing too far in the other direction. Writing during WWII, Colette muses that history is repeating itself, and this time her attitude to the reappearance of certain trends has changed somewhat. At first it seems familiar: "One of the peculiarities of the present war is the exclusively, dangerously feminine role it imposes on women," Colette opines. "Is it because of the total occupation of our territory, the omnipresence of an alien and virile multitude, that women are assuming the externals of *gamines* and the manners of pupils?"⁴⁷³ But Colette's condemnation of yet another crop of Claudines, although it begins by echoing her grievances against flappers, ends differently. In the face of war's destruction Colette admits that certain fashions can be a defiant sign of hope and life, and she is, as ever, firmly on the side of life in all its manifestations. "I incriminate none of her ulterior motives," she writes of the WWII Frenchwoman. Despite "the indiscretion of

⁴⁷² Colette, *Looking Backwards*, 213.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 213.

her curls” and her “inadequately long skirt” these girls “are often beautiful and cherish their inexpensive adornments...” In the darkness of war “the spring, however ungracious, [still] brings the need to blossom...there is merit in enhancing beauty...to adorn it, in however, barbarian a setting, is to await and already to honour peace...”⁴⁷⁴

Conclusion

Colette’s strategy of reclaiming female-animal associations through sartorial code-switching may certainly be read at times as an essentialist reinscription—but I argue that it is a strategic one. Anne McClintock’s figuration of the reactionary feminist tendency to align women with nature is that although it may reverse binaries, it also passively accepts them *a priori* and ends up problematically “glamoriz[ing]...Woman as primitive.”⁴⁷⁵ Notwithstanding this very valid point, I contend that redeeming dualist binaries is still an important and ultimately empowering feature of Colette’s resistance to the cultural forces that pressured her to renounce independence, to become Willy’s quiet ghostwriter, and to view her body as a burden that should be corseted and dieted into oblivion. Colette’s usage of woman-animal motifs like the sphinx, then, allows an exploration of alternate relationships to animality and femininity alike. McClintock has shown that in Western philosophical thought (particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis), “[w]omen become the Dark Continent, the riddle of the Sphinx...Constructing women and colonized people as a riddle...allows privileged European men to answer the riddle in terms of their own

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁷⁵ Anne McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995), 194.

interests.”⁴⁷⁶ But in her self-presentations as part animal, including the sphinx pose from *Rêve d'Égypte*, Colette stubbornly refuses to exist as a solvable mystery. She becomes instead a hybridized physical site where multiple codes of appearance overlap. Whether pairing her feminine curves with masculine clothing, juxtaposing her nudity with African animal skins, or resisting certain fashions while selectively embracing others, Colette proves McClintock’s assertion that women “permanently threate[n] the male Symbolic with our painted faces and unruly hair.” This is, I argue, precisely what Colette does in using her appearance to send new messages by combining fragments of old ones. “When we speak and act as different women,” McClintock writes, “the Self/Other dichotomy begins to totter and relations with the Other become relations with others.” In her continual determination to destroy the boundary between human Self and animal Other, Colette resists the traditional female position of “victim, cipher, empty set” that claims women are eternal recipients of assigned cultural meaning and can never be active “agents and inventors of social possibility.”⁴⁷⁷ But Colette does create new social possibilities for herself, achieving greater autonomy by mixing, reordering, and transposing predetermined signifiers into various contexts—by engaging, in other words, in sartorial code-switching. This is a concrete example of the ways women and other marginalized groups can “employ the creative freedom of narrative to liberate otherness from the norms of dominant ideology.”⁴⁷⁸ Starting from a position of gendered

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁷⁸ Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, 233.

marginality in her society, Colette creates her own redemptive narratives about femininity and animality.

Frank Mort and Nicholas Greene state that “[v]isual representations [are] part of an interlocking set of histories which involve multiple relations and dependencies across a range of social fields and practices.”⁴⁷⁹ In this chapter I have traced the histories, relations and dependencies in Colette’s thought to show her motivations and methods for engaging in sartorial code-switching. Paramount to these efforts is her overarching belief in the unity of corporeality and intellectuality, which stands in stunning contrast to the views held by her contemporaries (and perhaps some of our own). “As for me, it’s my body that thinks. It’s cleverer than my brain...When my body thinks,” Colette says in one of the *Claudine* novels, “...all of my skin has a soul...”⁴⁸⁰ Colette’s work, in all its manifestations, simultaneously redeems having a body, being a woman, and animals in general, often implicitly or explicitly sending the message that an animal is not such a bad thing to be after all. You can even enhance the natural body a little in order to play up its animalistic qualities, as we will see in the next chapter on Josephine Baker. This chapter has demonstrated that when Colette refers to her young friend Baker as “the panther with the golden claws”⁴⁸¹ or again as “the most beautiful panther” and “the most charming woman” combined in one fabulous body, she is engaged in what is, for her, the

⁴⁷⁹ Cited in Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, 144.

⁴⁸⁰ Marvin Mudrick, “Colette, Claudine, and Willy,” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1963): 569.

⁴⁸¹ Alan Schroeder, *Josephine Baker* (Chelsea House, 1991), 49.

highest form of praise.⁴⁸² For her part, Baker found Colette attractive because she was “completely open, deeply attuned to animals and growing things, a potential soul mate.”⁴⁸³ Their intimate friendship would last for years.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸² Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 115.

⁴⁸³ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine* (Harper & Row, 1977), 71.

⁴⁸⁴ Ean Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story* (Sanctuary 2000), 128.

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Appendix

Fig. 1—Colette in her Salomé-inspired costume for *Rêve d'Égypte*. Photographer Jean Reutlinger, circa 1907, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie.



Fig. 2—Colette and Missy in a pose from *Rêve d'Égypte*, 1907. In *Colette: La vagabonde assise*, Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2000.



Fig. 3—Gustave Moreau, *Œdipus and the Sphinx* (1864), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 4—Franz von Stuck, *The Kiss of the Sphinx* (1895). Budapest, Szepmüvészeti Museum.

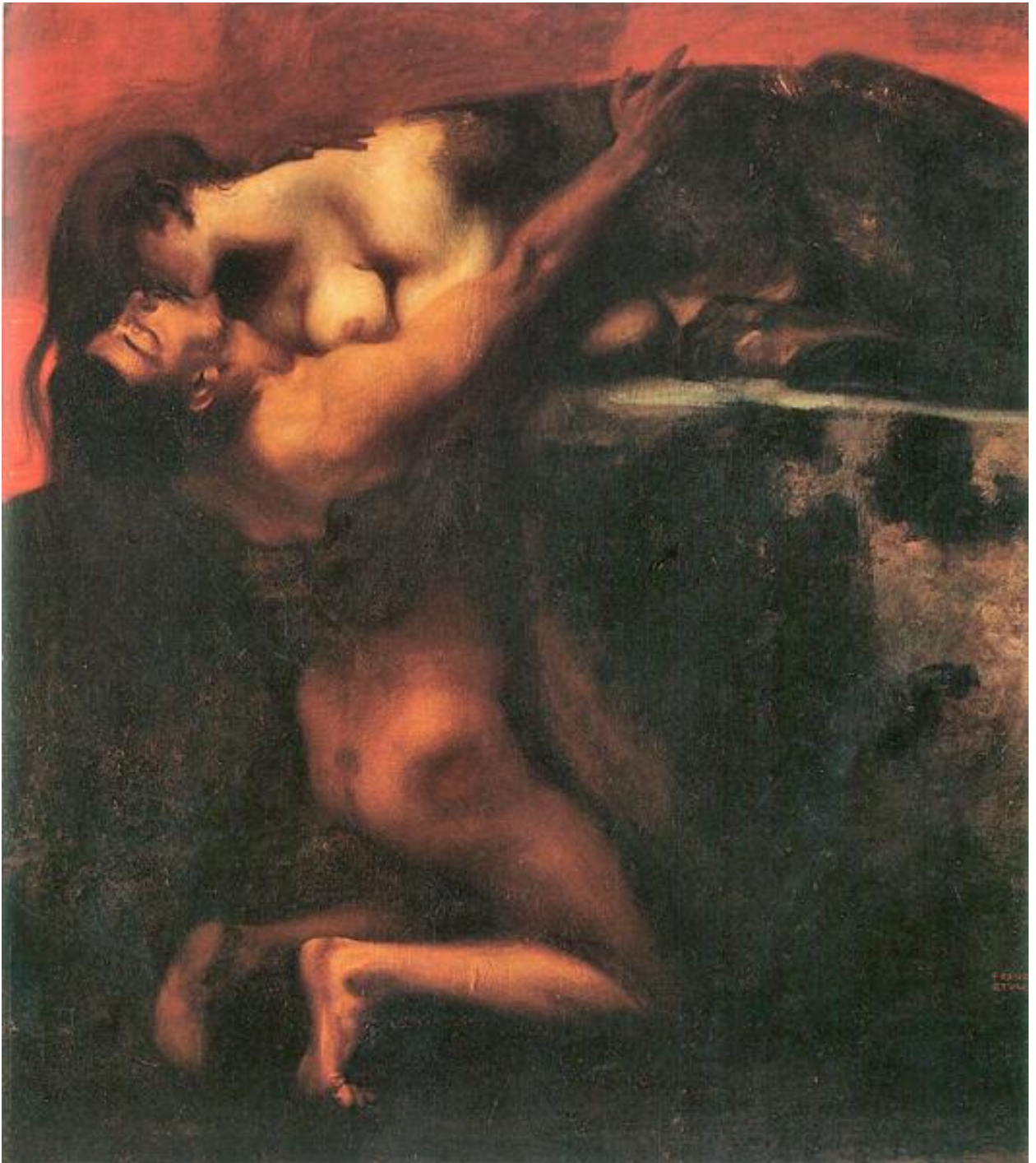


Fig. 5—Franz von Stuck, *Sphinx* (1904). Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum.

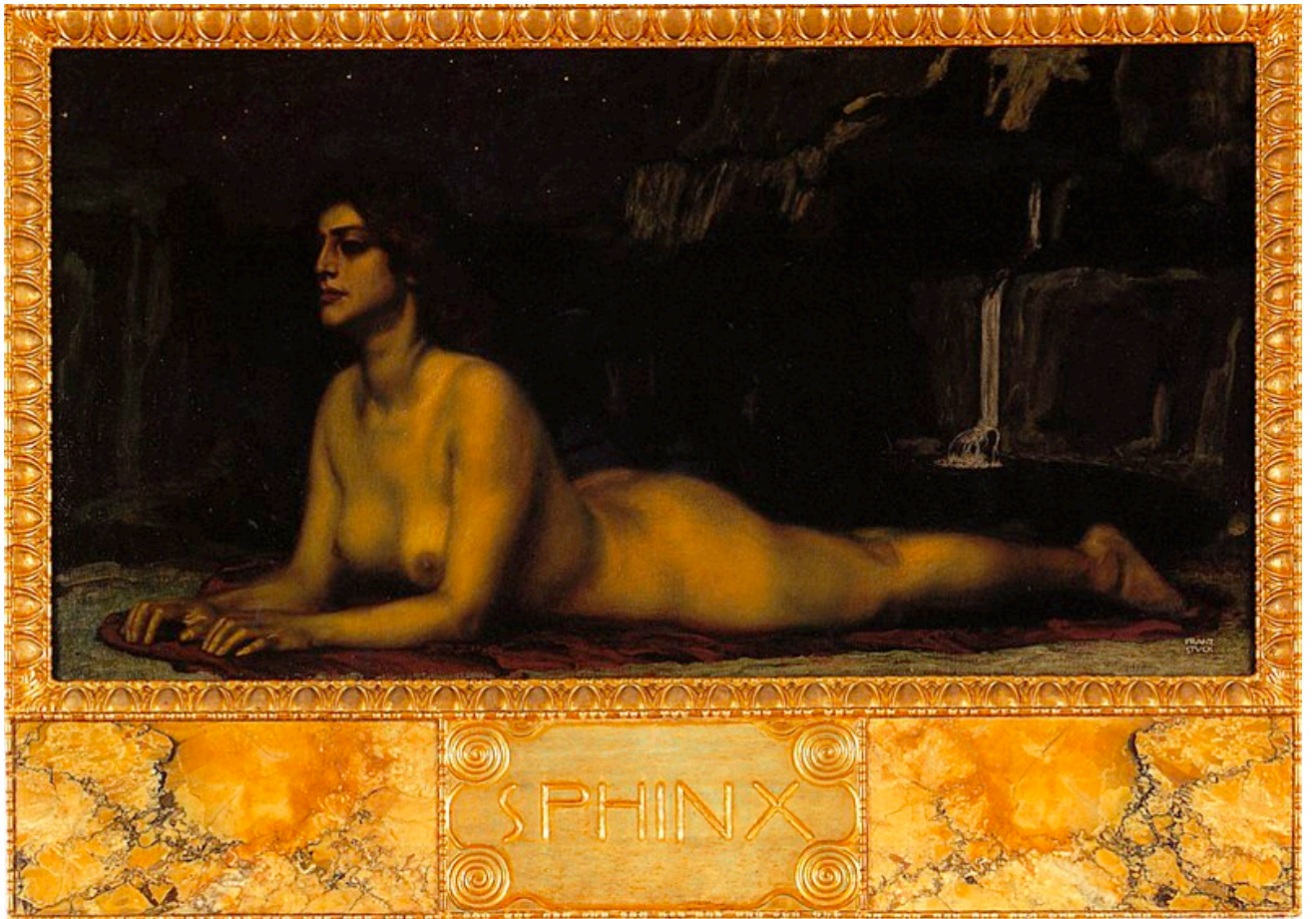


Fig. 6—A well-dressed bourgeois dog wearing feminine clothes, complete with lace, monogramming and buttoned ankle boots. In *Le Chien de luxe: Comment élever, dresser, et soigner nos chiens*. Paris: Per Lamm, Successeur, 1904, 237.



Fig. 7—Colette dressed as Claudine sitting on a school desk next to Toby-Chien, who also wears a white collar. Gerschel postcard series, circa 1902-1903.



Fig. 8—Willy sitting on Claudine's school desk, holding Colette and Toby-Chien close to him. Gerschel postcard series, circa 1902-1903.



Fig. 9—Colette posing as Claudine with Toby Chien, a book and a top hat, circa 1905. In *Colette: A Provincial in Paris*. New York : British Book Centre, Inc., 1954, 47.



Fig. 10—Colette posing as Claudine while sketching Willy's portrait with Toby-Chien in the background. Gerschel postcard series, circa 1902-1903, Fonds Centre d'études Colette.



Fig. 11—Colette as Claudine sketching Willy's portrait on her knees. Gerschel postcard series, circa 1902-1903.



Fig. 12—Colette wearing a suit with Willy standing above her. Gerschel postcard series, circa 1902-1903.



Fig. 13—Willy and his ‘twins,’ Colette (right) and Polaire, circa 1902. In *Colette*.
London: Methuen, 1983.



Fig. 14—Colette posing with a lion skin and cheetah skin for the postcard series *Beautés Parisiennes*, 1910. In *Colette*. London: Methuen, 1983.



Fig. 15—Colette in her exercise room with Toby-Chien. In *Colette: A taste for life*. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, 60.



Fig. 16—Colette in costume for the mimodrame « La chatte amoureuse,» 1912. In *Belles Saisons: A Colette Scrapbook*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978, 105.



Fig. 17—Colette dressed as a faun, 1906. In *Colette: A taste for life*. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, 92.



CHAPTER 4

**Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being Seen:
Josephine Baker and the Scopophilic Gaze**

In December 1932 the Casino de Paris opened *La Joie de Paris* starring Josephine Baker, who sang “*Si j’étais blanche!*” (“If I Were White!”) in a blonde wig and whiteface (Fig. 1). American blackness was fashionable in Europe at this time, as was the new craze for sun tanning. And yet, during her post-show interview Baker made a startling pronouncement: “To be beautiful, you must take plenty of fresh air...but not too much sunshine...I use milk as well, as a lotion, it keeps me lighter.”⁴⁸⁵ But then she laughingly asked the reporter, “...am I not already lighter than the girls in Paris when they return from Juan les Pins?”⁴⁸⁶ The theme of sun tanning recurs explicitly in “*Si j’étais blanche!*” where Baker sings a defiant lyric implying that whiteness is not truly superior: “Me, it is the flame of my heart that colors me.”⁴⁸⁷ What could have motivated these bold yet seemingly contradictory on- and offstage performances?

Unpacking Josephine’s *Joie* show requires rebuilding its historical context. In what follows, I trace Baker’s early career to argue that “*Si j’étais blanche!*” is a teasing subversion of her well known primitivist persona. Baker was a lifelong adept of sartorial code-switching, as a detailed analysis of her first major performances will show. Her *Joie* whiteface appears to capitalize on that aptitude through a parody of white music-hall

⁴⁸⁵ Benetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 64.

⁴⁸⁶ Anonymous newspaper clipping from Jan. 21, 1934, Collection Rondel, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Paris.

⁴⁸⁷ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart* (Random House, 1993), 177.

competitor Mistinguett that interrogates audiences' racial expectations. Although Baker's full political anti-racism would emerge only years later after many growing pains,⁴⁸⁸ evidence suggests that the 1932 *Joie* opening constitutes a subversive moment that works both with and against her iconic status as primitivism's colonial poster girl.⁴⁸⁹ This doubleness confirms French colonialism's assimilationist yearnings (has Baker metamorphosed into a white *Parisienne*?) while simultaneously threatening its implicit racial hierarchy—Baker grows whiter while tanned *Parisiennes* are getting darker. If identities of power can switch bodies, then that power may not be safe. This unease, however playfully experienced, nevertheless disrupts the conventional relationship between spectator and entertainer.

Baker's most career-defining performances involved heavily racialized and sexualized tropes that facilitated her primarily white bourgeois male audience's⁴⁹⁰ engagement in scopophilia, or the erotic, voyeuristic act of gazing possessively while *not*

⁴⁸⁸ Jennifer A. Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 29-33; Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker* (Cape, 1988), 252.

⁴⁸⁹ Jennifer A. Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 5-11.

⁴⁹⁰ Mary Kate Kelly, "Performing the Other: A Consideration of Two Cages," *College Literature*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1999): 123; see also Jean-François Staszak's "Danse exotique, danse érotique," *Annales de Géographie*, no. 660 (2008): 139-140, Brett Berliner's *Ambivalent Desire* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 206, Samir Dayal's "Blackness as Symptom: Josephine Baker and European Identity," in *Blackening Europe: The African-American Presence* (Routledge, 2004), 45, and Michael Borshuk's "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker," in *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist* (McFarland & Company, 2017), 128-140.

being seen in return.⁴⁹¹ As I will show, Baker's career is shaped by her ability to mediate scopophilia through codes of appearance. For the most part she actively cultivated spectators' visual consumption of her in order to gain agency,⁴⁹² but as Baker's celebrity grew she was sometimes able to subvert this dynamic by momentarily undoing the optics on which it depended, as with "*Si j'étais blanche!*" The audience's scopophilic gaze could thus be flipped back onto those who, paraphrasing Laura Mulvey, considered themselves its sole bearers.⁴⁹³ To understand the effect of such a reversal we must first examine what French audiences saw when they looked at Baker's body.

Introduction: Primitivism and the Body

"You were just what people needed after the restrictions of war. They craved something wild, natural, extravagant—you!" Baker's manager and lover Pepito exclaims in one of her memoirs. "You also represented freedom... The right to cut your hair, to walk around stark naked, to kick over the traces, including corsets!" Pepito is correct in his assertion that, when Baker arrived in Paris in 1925,

It helped that the time was ripe... People were beginning to collect *art nègre*, the public was discovering jazz. Five years earlier you'd have been booted off the stage. Five years later—*now* [1930]—you've got to

⁴⁹¹ Scopophilia or *Schaulust* was first identified by Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* before being taken up by, among others, Otto Fenichel and Lacan, who explored its relationship to the gaze and the Other in *Television* (1990).

⁴⁹² Mary Kate Kelly, "Performing the Other: A Consideration of Two Cages," 121, see also Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 103-107.

⁴⁹³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989).

come up with something new...[but] you mustn't change *too* much or you'll disappoint your audience.⁴⁹⁴

Baker cites Pepito's words as if to emphasize that her lasting fame was not simply a result of showing up in Paris at primitivism's highest vogue⁴⁹⁵—yes, that had certainly helped. But she had performed to those expectations, and it was now time to make another intentional shift. Baker viewed Pepito as “someone to help me fight my battles”⁴⁹⁶ and their collaboration would build Baker's initial success into a more enduring fame. In this moment we see Josephine and Pepito deciding together how to evolve her celebrity image beyond its initial stage and closer to the modern aspect of primitivist modernism, already present in Baker's inspirational ability to “kick over the traces.”

Doing so would be a balancing act precisely because of how Josephine's body had been constructed for audiences by primitivist tropes. Primitivism's overall tendency was to celebrate black music and art but ignore its more nuanced aspects; it readily equated all things black with Africa while simultaneously imagining the entire continent as a Garden of Eden free from Western technological sin. European modernity could play against this foil to propel itself into a rejuvenated future. Primitivism thus reactivated intermittently dormant conceptions of the “noble savage” that dated back centuries in

⁴⁹⁴ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine* (Harper & Row, 1977), 82-83.

⁴⁹⁵ WWI's carnage challenged Europe's progress narrative and strengthened avant-garde interest in primitivism; for more on the development of primitivism as a cultural phenomenon, see Petrine Archer Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), and Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*.

⁴⁹⁶ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, 68.

French culture;⁴⁹⁷ this figure “had to be created if [it] did not exist,” since it was necessary for Western progress narratives “that a rational but untutored morality exist in nature.”⁴⁹⁸ If it was true that the primitivist version of these views now largely valorized rather than disparaged many non-white lands and peoples, it also continued the colonizing tradition of regarding them as resources.

The supposed dichotomy between Europe and its Others was often expressed in terms of corporeality.⁴⁹⁹ Africa’s inhabitants, for instance, “seemed to embody a lush, naïve sensuality and spirituality that cold, rational Europeans had lost.”⁵⁰⁰ This sensuality was all the more attractive for being considered easily accessible; Europeans fantasized about hyper-developed black bodies and the supposed animal sexuality of people who, in

⁴⁹⁷ See, for instance, Montaigne’s view of brutal yet “natural” (and therefore morally innocent), native physicality in *Cannibals*. Although certain narratives periodically reinforced the “noble savage” trope (*Lettres d’une Péruvienne*, Rousseau, *René*, *Atala*, *Les Natchez* etc.), throughout the following centuries a racial pseudo-science would develop that positioned “savagery” as biologically and culturally inferior.

⁴⁹⁸ George R. Healy, "The French Jesuits and the Idea of the Noble Savage," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1958): 143.

⁴⁹⁹ Enlightenment *Philosophes* divided the globe into orderly zones populated by groups whose physical markers reflected internal characteristics (Linnaean taxonomy being the classic example). These categorizations cemented European beliefs that non-white populations were naturally more sensual and body-oriented, thus inferior. George Mosse describes how these classifying urges also gave rise to “a cardinal feature of modern racism”: a renewed, more obsessive fixation on visual difference. “Human nature came to be defined in aesthetic terms, with significant stress on the outward physical signs of inner rationality and harmony” (2-3). However, mutability and potential loss of supposedly inborn traits came to be deeply feared, manifest in the late nineteenth century’s obsession with degeneracy (both racial and social). Colonial authorities worried that Europeans living in tropical zones might degenerate, thereby “lowering...physical energy [and]...mental activity and moral vigor,” (Huntington, 187, 198) resulting in dangerous similarities with the racialized inhabitants of ‘hot climates.’”

⁵⁰⁰ Tyler Edward Stovall, "Bringing the Jazz Age to Paris," In *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Houghton Mifflin, 2012), 31.

their tropical climate, wore less daily clothing. Exoticism was thus quickly transmuted into eroticism—facilitated by cultural icons like Saartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus put on display throughout Europe in the early nineteenth century, whose genitalia were dissected after her untimely death and displayed in the Musée de l’Homme until 1974.⁵⁰¹ These were among the associations at play when Boris Lipnitzki photographed Baker herself at the Musée de l’Homme in the 1930s.⁵⁰²

Ultimately, then, primitivism’s celebration of stereotypes about sensual embodiment and blackness only entrenched them further. As Phyllis Rose remarks, “If one is to be treated as a thing, one would rather be treated as a rare and pretty thing than as a disgusting or dangerous one. But that is still to be treated as a thing.”⁵⁰³ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon articulates the one-sidedness of this relationship:

When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance...[they say], now and then when we are worn out by our lives in big buildings...Let us run away for a little while...In a way, you reconcile us with ourselves.⁵⁰⁴

Although disguised as homage or admiration, such wholesale exoticization results in user and used. Laura Mulvey, following Freud, notes that “mass culture...functions as a

⁵⁰¹ Parkinson, Justin. “The Significance of Sarah Baartman,” *BBC News*, BBC, Jan. 7 2016, 1.

⁵⁰² Bennetta, Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 22.

⁵⁰³ Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (Doubleday, 1989), 44.

⁵⁰⁴ Frantz Fanon and Charles Lam Markmann, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), 129-132.

massive screen on which collective fantasy, anxiety, fear, and their effects can be projected.”⁵⁰⁵ As both a driving cultural force and an aggregate result of collective desires, primitivism thus represented the projections of white European society desperate for outside renewal from racialized Others.

Additionally, Baker’s position at the intersection of race and gender should be considered. Anne McClintock has shown that Europeans historically cast black Africans as primitive via many of the same confluences used to stereotype femininity. According to Ilya Parkins, these stereotypes give the impression that “real women” are naturally aligned with plants and animals rather than male civilization-building activities; the eternal feminine thus floats, passive and unchanging, in a modern world men have singlehandedly made.⁵⁰⁶ McClintock notes that in the European imaginary blacks, like women, were generally considered “prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity.”⁵⁰⁷ If both groups were viewed as excessively corporeal, their stereotypes overlapped exponentially in the figure of the African woman, as epitomized by Baartman. Only five years before Baker’s debut, Freud added a footnote to his *Three Essays on Sexuality* that explicitly identified female genitalia as more primitive than those of the male;⁵⁰⁸ Gilman traces a similar centuries-old identification of blackness with exaggerated sexuality that led Westerners to view blacks as “surrogate

⁵⁰⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 12.

⁵⁰⁶ Ilya Parkins, “Fashion as Methodology: Rewriting the Time of Women’s Modernity,” *Time & Society* 19, no. 1 (2010): 104.

⁵⁰⁷ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995), 40.

⁵⁰⁸ Samir Dayal, “Blackness as Symptom: Josephine Baker and European Identity,” 40.

genitals.”⁵⁰⁹ Both notions rely on an equation of gender and race with a primitive physicality that places them outside of modern, or fully evolved, human embodiment. Thus, modernism’s early twentieth-century turn toward a primitivist aesthetic constitutes a transitory excursion of self-defined chronologically and socially progressive subjects (by default, mostly white men) into Europe’s collectively imagined prehistoric world of sensuality.

Given these operating beliefs, my investigation of Josephine Baker’s “sartorial body” and its code-switching displays is built on Joanne B. Eicher’s notion of “dress” as broader than—and potentially destructive of—the Western nudity/primitive vs. clothing/civilized binary. “We use the word *dress* to emphasize a wide variety of behaviors...not just...clothing and accessories but also grooming the body. Some examples include being dressed without wearing any clothing at all.”⁵¹⁰ Baker is a prime example of how even the most exhibitionist nudity can in fact be a cultivated surface constructed by dress and grooming. That Baker or those around her sometimes wished this nudity to appear natural, or that she may have purposefully aligned her visual presentation with or against primitivism at various moments, thus demonstrates her artfully nuanced sartorial code-switching capabilities in this wider sense. It also hints at the various levels of control operating behind Baker’s illusions. I argue that through a sustained investigation of how these visual mechanisms were deployed (by Baker and

⁵⁰⁹ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Cornell University Press, 1985), 120.

⁵¹⁰ Joanne Bubolz Eicher and Sandra Lee Evenson. *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society* (Fairchild Books, 2008), vii.

others) to project sometimes very different messages, a fuller picture emerges of the context for “*Si j’étais blanche!*”

Putting On An Act

Josephine was born in St. Louis, Missouri. After a difficult, poverty- and racism-stricken childhood and two teenage marriages, she moved to New York and got her first big break as a chorus girl in Sissle and Blake’s *Chocolate Dandies*. Poached from the company by an American socialite taking black performers to France, nineteen-year-old Josephine Baker arrived in Paris in 1925 as *La Revue Nègre*’s secondary star. That would soon change.

Many Parisians found the troupe’s loud Harlem fashions incredibly exotic, but for some it was not the right brand of exoticism. Poster artist Paul Colin took it upon himself to correct Baker’s look during their first posing session together. “She appeared in an unbelievable getup,” he later recalled, “red dress, green shoes...Anyone will understand the first thing I did: I undressed her.”⁵¹¹ Colin knew that Harlemites favored more flamboyant styles than Parisians did. Seen through a primitivist lens, his comments imply that Harlem fashions were the awkward civilizing attempts of a race that should ideally be unclothed; in his white paternal benevolence he “restores” Baker to her “natural” state of undress. Indeed, as Colin would later boast to Baker’s adoptive son, he considered

⁵¹¹ Marguerite Erbstein-Thomé and Paul Colin, *Paul Colin, le magicien des Années Folles* (Editions de l’Est, 1994), 57.

himself her ultimate creator, “the one who invented her,”⁵¹² as if she were a Harlem Galatea.

In this encounter Colin clearly draws on European associations between clothing (verb and noun) with civilization in action and, by the same token, nudity as both gateway to and expression of primal savagery. Colin thus shoulders a new, primitivist version of the white man’s burden: a de-civilizing mission. For her part, Baker remembered that although she initially felt shy about exposing herself, she suddenly “lost my uncertainty...Perhaps it dropped away with my slip.”⁵¹³ Importantly, Baker was reluctant to strip for French audiences until her experience with Colin. “He obviously saw me as an object, not a woman,” she explained, realizing she would “never be anything without [his] poster...I as a mere beginner had certain *duties*.” And yet, “*naked!* What would they say in St. Louis?” she wondered. Finally, she decided to become the famous nude icon that all of Paris was expecting. “That night I removed all my clothes...For the first time in my life, I felt beautiful.”⁵¹⁴

Primitivist-inflected nudity made an overnight star of Josephine Baker. The *Revue* show was designed to be distinctively African-American: plantation imagery, tap dancing, and minstrelsy. In Paris, however, French directors took control. They were shocked to find not the “coal-black exotics” they had expected, but “high-yellow” chorus girls who had passed American theaters’ infamous brown paper bag test.⁵¹⁵ Baker

⁵¹² Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 114.

⁵¹³ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 17.

⁵¹⁴ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, 50.

⁵¹⁵ Baker, Jean-Claude, and Chris Chase. *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 108, 116.

actually burst into tears when a Frenchman called her *cocotte* just after her arrival—she assumed he meant “a *pot*—black, of course, and undoubtedly ugly.”⁵¹⁶ The negative associations of black skin were very ingrained in American *Revue* members. André Daven recalled having “a lot of trouble stopping the black performers from using white-face makeup,” which was “very much the fashion in the Negro theater of New York.”⁵¹⁷ Much to their chagrin, he forced light-skinned performers like Hazel Valentine to wear dark body makeup—French audiences expected “Africans right off the boat.” Blacking up like this, in Hazel’s view, constituted “a supreme degradation.” Meanwhile Josephine, considered unappealingly dark in America, was now praised for being just the right shade of bronze.⁵¹⁸ For years afterward she struggled to accept this reality, clinging to American colorism and applying chemical relaxants that sometimes burned her hair off instead of producing her signature Eton crop.⁵¹⁹ “I *had* to succeed. I would never stop trying...All I had was myself. *I* was the instrument that I must care for,” Baker wrote of this period in her memoirs. “That’s why I spent thirty minutes every morning rubbing my body with half a lemon to lighten my skin and just as long preparing a mixture for my hair.”⁵²⁰ In 1974 she explained that although “...I was a big star in Paris, for years when people looked at me on the street, I think it is not because they admire me, but because I

⁵¹⁶ Baker, Josephine, and Bouillon, Jo. *Josephine*, 47.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵²⁰ Baker, Josephine, and Bouillon, Jo. *Josephine*, 58.

am coloured. I learned in America to think that way...Horror teaches you false things.”⁵²¹ I argue that Baker’s struggles with white identification⁵²² expose the gap between her representations of primal blackness onstage and her own desperate attempts to code switch up the racial hierarchy in real life. She understood all too well that appearances were everything.

After paradoxically enhancing their performers’ blackness to make it more “authentic,” Daven requested that producer Jacques Charles tweak the show to make it less American and “more ‘African.’”⁵²³ By this he did not mean any specific tribal or regional culture, but rather primitivism’s vague notion of what Africa represented. Charles and Daven delivered heavy doses of eroticism, exoticism, and nudity by creating the now-infamous *danse sauvage* for Baker and her co-star Joe Alex. For this number Baker and Alex wore strategically placed feathers alongside jewelry made of beads and shells, but little else (Fig. 2). Tyler Stovall notes that everything about the *danse sauvage* was calculated to “[bring] the show in line with French stereotypes of blacks” and transform Baker into “a symbol of torrid, exotic black sexuality”⁵²⁴ that would feed European audiences’ voyeurism. There is ample evidence⁵²⁵ to show that Baker was a

⁵²¹ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 91

⁵²² See, for instance, Petrine Archer Straw, *Negrophilia : Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, 94-97.

⁵²³ Henry Louis Gates and Karen C.C. Dalton, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 913.

⁵²⁴ Tyler Edward Stovall, "Bringing the Jazz Age to Paris," 53.

⁵²⁵ See, for example, Jennifer A. Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 5-11, 33-34; Mary Kate Kelly, "Performing the Other: A Consideration of Two Cages," 120-121; Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early

willing participant in this and many other transformations—and I argue that this is because she perfectly understood the importance of sartorial code-switching for her own survival as a newcomer on the French stage.

La Revue Nègre actually showcased Baker's shift between visual cultures. It opened with images of steamboats, skyscrapers and plantations—the standard American minstrel fare that was its original *raison d'être*. Josephine had plenty of experience with minstrelsy; Fig. 3 shows her playing a blackface clown named Topsy Anna in *Chocolate Dandies* before coming to France.⁵²⁶ Paul Colin's memory of the revue's initial number clearly shows Josephine Othering herself in American minstrel style. Baker came out “[d]ressed in rags” (an intermediary state between clothing and nudity common to plantation-style costumes) and gave the impression of being anything but human: “she was part boxing kangaroo, part rubber woman, part female Tarzan.”⁵²⁷ Baker's over-the-top absurdity evoked gales of audience laughter.

Then came the *danse sauvage*, and the laughter stopped. Baker took this important number into her own hands. “Driven by dark forces...I improvised,” she would later recall of her primitivist debut, and it worked splendidly. An ecstatic Daven called her “eroticism personified.”⁵²⁸ Colin's memoir switches tones here; Baker is now “naked but for green feathers about her hips, her skull lacquered black” and provokes an

Performances of Josephine Baker”; Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 47-71; and Samir Dayal, “Blackness as Symptom,” 44-45.

⁵²⁶ Henry Louis Gates and Karen C.C. Dalton, “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes,” 911.

⁵²⁷ Paul Colin, *La Croûte: Souvenirs* (La Table Ronde, 1957), 81.

⁵²⁸ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, 51.

audience reaction that is “both anger and enthusiasm...like a magical return to the mores of the first ages...I still see her, frenzied, undulating, moved by the saxophones’ wail.”⁵²⁹ The artist who had so confidently corrected Baker’s fashion *faux pas* now stands in awe at the power of her primal image—a cultural fantasy he had absorbed well beforehand, but which Josephine’s appearance now activated to its fullest. Janet Flanner was also present that night. When Baker appeared onstage, draped gracefully over Joe Alex’s shoulders, the audience froze in anticipation. “She was an unforgettable female ebony statue,” Flanner recalls, drawing on the language of a Matisse or Picasso transfixed by West African sculpture in a Parisian museum. “A scream of salutation spread throughout the theater,” Flanner related, identifying “...two specific elements” of Baker’s success: “her magnificent dark body...and the acute response of the white masculine public in the capital of hedonism of all Europe.”⁵³⁰

Flanner pinpoints a critical ingredient in the *danse sauvage*’s triumph: the expectations, and corresponding response, of Baker’s mostly white male audience.⁵³¹ Parisians were almost as crazy about American popular culture as they were about primitivist African tropes. Josephine gave them both in quick succession; first, specific clichés of black America, then vague stereotypes of an imagined Africa. Both positive and negative reactions were overwhelming in their force. French dance critic André Levinson immediately plugged Baker into his own cultural preconditioning, swooning

⁵²⁹ Paul Colin, *La Croûte: Souvenirs*, 81.

⁵³⁰ Janet Flanner, *Paris Was Yesterday, 1925-1938* (Viking Press, 1972), xx-xxi.

⁵³¹ Elizabeth Coffman, “Uncanny Performances in Colonial Narratives,” in *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist* (McFarland & Company, 2017), 174.

over her “wild splendor” and “magnificent animality”; some of her poses “had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture” and whipped the white French audience into a “frenzy of African Eros.” Josephine was transformed that night, according to Levinson, from “a grotesque dancing girl” into the legendary “black Venus that haunted Baudelaire.”⁵³² *Paris-Midi*’s correspondent was even more explicit in his recognition of activated fantasies; Baker’s dance made “everything we’ve ever read [flash] across our enchanted minds...sacred dances...plantation landscapes...the Negro soul with its animal energy, its childish joys...we had all that.”⁵³³ The overnight fame Josephine Baker’s *danse sauvage* brought her is best understood as a skillful re-gifting of their own desires to white audiences who could make or break the show and its new star.

Switching to primitivist tropes had worked: Josephine Baker was now suddenly famous. The scandal caused by her sensual nudity also served as free advertising; police issued the *Revue* an official citation, warning that “[t]he color black alone does not dress one.”⁵³⁴ In response, Parisian audience members flocked to see the show, proving that exposed black skin really was its own kind of cultural clothing. Even negative reviews, such as Robert de Flers’ angry assertion that the *danse sauvage* was “the most direct assault...perpetrated against French taste” he had ever witnessed and would make Europeans “revert to the ape in less time than it took us to descend from it”⁵³⁵ only served to underline its appeal for civilization-weary Europeans who *wanted* to de-evolve.

⁵³² Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*, 31.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³⁴ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 115.

⁵³⁵ Tyler Edward Stovall, "Bringing the Jazz Age to Paris," 70.

This became even more obvious during Baker's first show as a major French *vedette* the following year. Now signed to the Folies-Bergère for an exorbitant fee, Baker's new show *La Folie du jour* revolved largely around concepts of clothing and nudity. In the forty minutes leading up to Baker's appearance, eight actresses representing tourists danced their way through *tableaux* of the finest fashions 1926 Paris could offer. As they did so, each adorned herself with designer clothing and accessories, becoming progressively more dressed up.⁵³⁶ This introductory portion of the show (essentially one long advertisement for Parisian luxury industries) reinforced associations between Paris as capital of elegant fashion and Paris as epicenter of French colonialism. To be clothed (and clothed well) was to be civilized, and vice versa. Josephine's entrance abruptly—and intentionally—inverted that metaphorical trajectory of evolution. Wearing only a cheeky skirt of bouncing bananas and some jewelry (Fig. 4), Baker played Fatou, a native who turns out to be the fantasy of a French explorer sleeping under a jungle banana tree. Playing Fatou explicitly made Baker a male colonizer's dream girl.

Once again, it was stunningly successful. Baker's bananas swung, flopped, and bounced until "people were on the edge of their seats" with excitement, as one audience member later recalled.⁵³⁷ Another would never forget her "beautiful round arms, hips..." but the main attractions were those body parts that bounced when Baker shook her bananas. Georges Simenon, writing for *Le Merle Rose*, could not get over "that *croupe*" (rump), declaring it the sexiest rear end in the world. He wrote that Josephine's *croupe*

⁵³⁶ Henry Louis Gates and Karen C.C. Dalton, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes," 916-917.

⁵³⁷ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 135.

inspired “collective fantasies...[an] incense of desire wafting toward her in steamy waves.” In keeping with the aforementioned cultural elision of black femininity and genitalia, Baker’s *croupe* was a major focus of attention from the moment of her *danse sauvage* debut,⁵³⁸ with one audience member at that performance bursting out “Quel cul elle a!” [*What an ass she has!*]⁵³⁹ And then, of course, Baker had also agreed (reluctantly at first, because of its American associations with striptease⁵⁴⁰) to go topless in her *danse sauvage* and banana dance numbers. Baker’s trust in her French managers’ insistence about this ended up paying off. “She shakes her pretty breasts, which are not large but softly contoured, and she explodes,” Simenon rhapsodized.⁵⁴¹

As e.e. cummings later reported, Baker’s entrance as Fatou electrified her audience. She shimmied down the banana tree,

...walking backwards on hands and feet, legs and arms stiff...a creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both; a mysterious unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic.⁵⁴²

Every element of the primitivist worldview presents itself in cummings’ enraptured recollection. Indeed, Fatou’s way of entering the stage—backward, on all fours—is a useful visual expression of the de-evolutionary return primitivists believed would

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 154.

⁵³⁹ Samir Dayal, “Blackness as Symptom,” 38.

⁵⁴⁰ Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*, 6.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁴² Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 41.

regenerate Europe. The now-infamous banana dance captivated so many audiences that, even today, Josephine Baker's banana skirt is a material synecdoche instantly evoking her life and career. It is also understood as a wryly-phallic signifier that playfully undoes the very eroticism it creates,⁵⁴³ making it a paradoxical symbol of sexual empowerment. In homage to this double-edged wittiness, versions of Baker's banana skirt have been worn by stars as varied as Grace Jones, Phylicia Rashad, and Beyoncé.

Fulfilling Fantasies

Despite its subversive phallicism, ultimately Baker's banana skirt reinforced her *danse sauvage* image to such an extent that many audiences and critics considered its most superficial readings to be definitive. At first, Baker reacted with excitement to the news that she was now a primitivist icon throughout Europe. "Why not? And what does it mean?" she asked eagerly, ready to seize any opportunity before knowing fully what it was.⁵⁴⁴ If that was how people already saw her, then why not? Theatergoers held the key to increased autonomy and freedom, and Baker, forever a tough St. Louis girl at heart, would do anything necessary to achieve celebrity. "It is a duel between them and me," she said of her feelings towards the audience at every performance, "...my heart becomes as hard as my fist, it's a matter of winning."⁵⁴⁵ Baker's own words cast her performative flexibility in powerful, intentional terms.

⁵⁴³ See, for example, Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 135.

⁵⁴⁴ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 126.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

However, as Baker grew more famous, it became clear that she might never fully break away from primitivist stereotypes. At the time of the banana skirt's debut Baker had already begun consciously projecting sophisticated French glamor. "Since I personified the savage on the stage, I tried to be as civilized as possible in daily life," she later explained.⁵⁴⁶ By 1926 Josephine was regularly appearing in fashionable gowns by the likes of Paul Poiret, including a signature *robe Joséphine* that she helped design.⁵⁴⁷ Any couturier who dressed her could count on huge publicity: "Oh how she could wear clothes," remembered her friend Bricktop, "although her fame would rest...on her ability to perform without them."⁵⁴⁸ But the new imagery couldn't erase previous associations. In 1929 a frustrated Baker told journalists "...the bananas—finished. Understand? I have to be worthy of Paris. I want to become an artist."⁵⁴⁹ Socialite caricaturist George Goursat mocked these aspirations by drawing Baker in jewels and an elegant dress...with a long monkey's tail swishing out behind her.⁵⁵⁰ Although she was now working consciously to change her image,⁵⁵¹ for a time it seemed as if *La Baker* would be confined to the primitivist tropes projected on her body.

⁵⁴⁶ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, 55.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁵⁴⁸ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 43-44.

⁵⁴⁹ Ean Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story* (Sanctuary, 2000), 154.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁵¹ Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, 107.

As previously mentioned, Baker initially encouraged this projection, greeting visitors to her home wearing only her “favorite covering”—nude skin—and making public statements about her hatred of uncomfortable clothing: “I hope later we will live naked.”⁵⁵² She even described the banana skirt as too luxurious for the primal nudity look of her early career, attributing its creation to Cocteau and asserting that he had said, “On you, it will look very dressy.” This perspective suggests that even a few bananas strung around the waist could make a primitivist icon like Josephine seem overdressed. However, despite claims that Cocteau or others had pressured her into wearing bananas, Baker—as we have seen by her own admission that she was locked in a duel with the audience⁵⁵³ and that beginners had certain duties⁵⁵⁴—clearly engaged with her stereotypical image to achieve success. Her oldest son reports that her agency, although circumscribed within cultural limits and expectations, was in fact perfectly genuine: “...it was not so easy to exploit Josephine; you couldn’t make her do anything unless she was convinced the public wanted it.”⁵⁵⁵

But eventually this dynamic grew too unbalanced. Through its physical positioning and cultural associations, Baker’s banana skirt became symbolic proof of Fanon’s assertion that in Western culture, as McClintock and Gilman have also shown, “...the Negro is fixated at the genital; or at any rate he has been fixated there. Two

⁵⁵² Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 134.

⁵⁵³ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 157.

⁵⁵⁴ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, 50.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

realms: the intellectual and the sexual.”⁵⁵⁶ Efforts to prove that Baker could be more than just a hypersexualized body were met with some resistance. Only a year after its debut Baker viewed her banana skirt, in Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s words, as an outdated “relic” that she attempted to counterbalance with increasingly frequent sartorial code-switching via Hollywood glamor. Ostentatious marks of wealth and sophistication showcased Baker as more than a *danseuse sauvage*. Some audiences, however, continued to see only a “thin line between the flapper and the feline”;⁵⁵⁷ this gap between primal as temporary performance and primal as received proof of essential animality would have encroached on Baker’s subjecthood as echoed in Fanon’s experience of the racialized gaze: “I am overdetermined from without...I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes.”⁵⁵⁸ Scopophilia was beginning to chafe.

In a similar investigation of racialized subjectivity and power, Frieda Ekotto has shown how racial minorities must often “[play] a role and [embody] an image...race [becomes] a question of *performativity*...the category of black only ‘works’ when the gaze of the white is present.” Racialization in the West, then, is an interactive performance rather than a stable truth, “an invention of white people” that, in order to function, requires socially dominant spectators performing their “invisible” (white) subjectivity as gazers.⁵⁵⁹ Josephine Baker was certainly aware of scopophilia’s role in

⁵⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, and Charles Lam Markmann, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 165.

⁵⁵⁷ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 144.

⁵⁵⁸ Frantz Fanon, and Charles Lam Markmann, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.

⁵⁵⁹ Frieda Ekotto, *Race and Sex across the French Atlantic: The Color of Black in Literary, Philosophical, and Theater Discourse* (Lexington Books, 2011), xvii, xix, 6.

this dynamic. Baker's French producers functioned as cultural mediators from whom she quickly learned to navigate her new audience's expectations. Although Dalton and Gates describe the original *Revue Nègre* as a racist "vaudeville show, replete with stereotypes" that Charles converted into "a music-hall performance tailored for openly curious, somewhat voyeuristic Parisians,"⁵⁶⁰ this comparison gives a false impression of the revue's actual transformation. As we have seen, rather than fully shedding problematic tropes as it evolved, the show simply moved from one set of racial stereotypes to another. Both the show and its star switched between cultural codes.

Baker's experiences demonstrate the double bind of being a black female entertainer during the minstrel age. Paul Colin noticed Baker's determination to manipulate audience desires right away: "She was a born exhibitionist. And ambitious. Make no mistake."⁵⁶¹ French audiences were preconditioned to find Baker's nude performances authentically primal instead of understanding their constructed nature. Josephine, of course, was already used to producing stereotypes of blackness for spectators in America, where she had garnered attention by rolling her eyes, wearing blackface makeup, and grinning through rubber-kneed Charleston moves. Kevern Verney has shown that although blackface in America traditionally evokes white performers in burnt-cork makeup, black actors were also routinely "required" by their audiences to black up as a way of "heighten[ing] the racial caricatures in minstrelsy." However, blackface "dress," in Eicher's paradigm, includes not only makeup and comically

⁵⁶⁰ Henry Louis Gates and Karen C.C. Dalton, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes," 911.

⁵⁶¹ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 114.

oversized or ragged clothing, but also stereotyped behaviors. Kevin Verney emphasizes blackface's "wide, grinning mouths" and "rolling white eyeballs," which were among Baker's signature moves.⁵⁶² Importantly, the American minstrel culture in which Baker was trained had a tradition of comedic "doubleness" that allowed black artists to absurdly over-perform stereotypes of blackness, as a way of safely mocking the white audiences who believed them.⁵⁶³ This background provides further evidence that Baker was playing with the very tropes she reenacted, putting together what Henderson calls a "diasporic medley"⁵⁶⁴ transposing American minstrel techniques into a European context. In Paris, Baker rolled her eyes and pulled faces in combination with nudity, feathers (or bananas) and wild, seductive dance moves. I argue that these primitivist hallmarks were just as replicable as minstrelsy's stock repertoire and, indeed, constituted their own form of minstrelsy, poking fun at primitivism's libidinal desires.

Instead of blacking up as Topsy Anna, Baker stepped quickly and consistently into primitivist expectations about the way "primal" Africans showed their skin. Her *danse sauvage* and its later incarnations gave the appearance that Baker had stripped down to reveal her "natural" surface—bare skin oiled to a high shine and accentuated with the feathers, beads, and bananas that functioned as psychological shorthand for European fantasies about African nudity. Spectators saw these "primitive" decorations as the diametrical opposite of clothing and proof of a specific nudity that was more than

⁵⁶² Kevin Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2003), 8.

⁵⁶³ Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker," 132-133.

⁵⁶⁴ Mae G. Henderson, "Colonial, Postcolonial, and Diasporic Readings of Josephine Baker as Dancer and Performance Artist," in *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist* (McFarland & Company, 2017), 166.

lack of apparel. White and black bodies were equally unclothed when disrobed, but the presence of beads, feathers, or other stereotypical accessories on the latter signified a decorative primitivist nudity evoking original humanity stripped bare of civilization and its material marker, European-style clothing. Primitivist stereotypes about black nudity, then, fit Eicher's paradigm of dress as more than just garments.

Baker's nudity was meticulously curated to encourage scopophilia. Careful never to appear fully nude and always impeccably accessorized, Baker nevertheless gave spectators an impression of complete primal bareness that they never afterwards forgot. Nudity became her defining feature. In Prague, crazed fans swept Baker forcefully up in their arms until she felt, she said, "like a cork floating on the water"; another crowd "tore my dress apart, they wanted to see me naked."⁵⁶⁵ Baker's many audiences (both formal and informal) were greedily engaged in scopophilic desire, as clearly described by Simenon: "Everyone everywhere rushes to see her...When she is not the focus of thousands of opera glasses, she is the object of naked eyes or quivering fingers." Josephine, for him, was the woman who intentionally channeled this raw obsession, "a woman who laughs...and who possesses at the same time a most voluptuous body, no matter how it is adorned—gold lamé, bananas, or pale-pink plumes."⁵⁶⁶ Skimpy costumes could only constitute an incidental aspect of Baker's appearance; it was the skin underneath that clearly captivated people. Most fans came away believing that by seeing her body they had somehow possessed the "real" Josephine Baker.

⁵⁶⁵ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 157.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

Subverting Stereotypes

Henry Louis-Gates describes Josephine Baker in her heyday as “primitivist-modernism on two legs,” the incarnation of every Frenchman’s black fantasy.⁵⁶⁷ As the 1920s drew to a close, Pepito arranged Baker’s first major international tour, during which the couple re(de)fin ed new images alongside old ones and tested them on various audiences. At this point, according to Jules-Rosette, Baker began consciously and successfully “manipulat[ing] and modify[ing] her primal image based on her political values.”⁵⁶⁸ To this end, Baker leveraged her newfound star status to access high-end cabaret bookings and sponsorships with designer fashion houses in France. Soon enough there were European mass-market photographs of Josephine in furs and diamonds, driving exotic sports cars and living in a French mansion with her Italian lover Pepito, whom she (falsely, on both fronts) identified as a Count and as her new husband, theoretically making her the first black countess in Europe.⁵⁶⁹ This was not primitivist Josephine—this was Hollywood glamor Josephine.

Transposing the stereotype of traditionally white upper-class style onto a black stage star was entirely new at this time. Anne Anling Cheng notes that Baker’s growing body of publicity photos from this period all showcase the classic Hollywood obsession with light-reflecting surfaces like satin and diamonds—except now that dazzling gleam comes not only from Baker’s glamorous clothing, but also large expanses of nude skin

⁵⁶⁷ Henry Louis Gates and Karen C.C. Dalton, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes," 933.

⁵⁶⁸ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 167.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

that she bares in her signature primitivist style. Cheng reads this, however, as a *subversion* of primitivist nudity that asserts black skin's luxurious, high-shine value. Baker's skin becomes a precious object akin to the gold and jewels with which, like many of her Hollywood counterparts, she increasingly adorned herself during these years. Baker thus takes her place in a starlet glow typically reserved for white women. And the light in which she basks is made possible by the reflective quality of her bronzed, oiled body; this is blackness as luxury, Josephine re-fetishizing her own skin to become a brand new type of celebrity in a whitewashed industry. As Cheng points out, "This is indeed the first time that black skin is, and can be, glamorized."⁵⁷⁰

Baker's techniques of self-presentation disturb the very categories that make her primitivist image possible. If, in many of these photos, Baker deploys a metaphorical form of whiteface by adopting certain contemporary signifiers of white celebrity femininity, she does so by paradoxically highlighting her darker skin, sometimes artificially deepening its tone with makeup and lotion. Indeed, Baker's manipulation of racial signifiers has led one biographer to note that

As a result of makeup and photographic retouching, images of Baker from within any given period often appear completely different from one another as she criss-crossed racial and gender lines...one has the impression that the photographs do not even depict the same person.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁷⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 110.

⁵⁷¹ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 148.

Josephine Baker's routinely skillful deployment of visual identity markers brings us back to her *Joie de Paris* appearance in 1932, singing "*Si j'étais blanche!*" with a blonde wig and pale makeup. Baker's commitment to stereotype manipulation by this point in time supports a reading of the *Joie* performance, with its whiteface and repeated destabilization of primitivist expectations, as a clear subversion of cultural norms. Josephine is not playing *along* with race and gender, but *with* them. This had the potential to evoke a self-reflective crisis for audiences conditioned to view both as immutable. Ralina Joseph points out that if race's visual signifiers can become fluid, then "race itself cannot be a singular reality." Instead, the illusion of easy racial categorization fractures and a racial "politics of substance" becomes a fluid "politics of optics."⁵⁷² In other words, emphasizing the optical illusion of race challenges the notion that it is anything other than a visual phenomenon that can be directly manipulated—which, however briefly or partially, Baker did. If Butler's assertion that "[by] imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself"⁵⁷³ is transposed onto race, we immediately see how Baker's *Joie* appearance deconstructs racialization completely by exposing it as a superficial phenomenon.

Baker's *Joie* subversion was mediated through the parodic representation of a white rival's body. Two contemporary publicity posters (Figs. 5-6) by Zig encapsulate the most enduring stereotypes of Baker and her competitor Mistinguett. They also explain why Baker's appearance in "*Si j'étais blanche!*" would have surprised an audience

⁵⁷² Ralina L. Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* (Duke University Press, 2013), 72.

⁵⁷³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990,) 137.

primed for the *Joie* show by seeing its poster. While *La Miss* is draped in a slinky white dress with elegant accessories, Josephine is presented as a tree-climbing “savage” whose face is re-echoed in the tree’s coconuts, one of which she offers on an outstretched hand. Her flowing grass skirt gaps open to reveal long legs, strategically placed flowers giving the impression that she has spontaneously emerged from some Edenic jungle. This is a primitivist vision—an ambiguously racialized colonial woman who is close to nature and, as evidenced by the coconut heads, constitutes a natural resource herself. Mistinguett, on the other hand, is the epitome of fashionable style and civilization, as evidenced by the silhouettes of famous Parisian landmarks bordering her dress’s train. Mistinguett *is* Paris. These opposing images encapsulate the associations spectators were encouraged to have about each actress. People went to see Josephine for the titillating exoticism she would predictably provide; they went to see Mistinguett as a way of celebrating the classic European cultural traditions she had embodied for decades prior to Josephine Baker’s arrival in France. That Baker might switch visual codes with her rival was not an assumption such images encouraged—which perhaps heightened the effect when she did.

Blonde, famously long-legged and several years older than Baker, Mistinguett was none too pleased with this little girl from St. Louis. Josephine was a threat. Their feud lasted decades, with Mistinguett’s erstwhile lover Maurice Chevalier frequently taking her side. *La Miss* referred to Baker disdainfully as *La Nègresse*, who called Mistinguett *La Vieille* (“the old lady”), knowing the blonde star was sensitive about her age.⁵⁷⁴ Their competition grew intense. Josephine, however, was determined not to fold and go home; she knew that doing so would involve a return to American minstrelsy and

⁵⁷⁴ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 168.

second-rate roles, and at the prospect of doing so remarked dryly, “I cannot *feel* mammy songs.”⁵⁷⁵ She would rather stay in Paris, trying to wrestle the spotlight away from Mistinguett.

Competing with a legendary actress like *La Miss* was tough but exhilarating. Decades later Josephine was still finding inspiration in it: “When I am...on the point of dropping, ready to throw it all over...I think about Mistinguett. And I stand up straight again. I accept that one must go on, work hard...survive.”⁵⁷⁶ Knowing that Paris theatergoers were divided between their old favorite and a relative newcomer helps contextualize Josephine’s 1932 appearance in whiteface. Baker had been nominated Queen of the *Exposition Coloniale* the year before in homage to her signature exoticism, but was ultimately passed over because she was not actually a French colonial subject, despite her many portrayals as such.⁵⁷⁷ She had even spent the 1930-31 season performing a variety of non-white colonial roles onstage at the Casino de Paris,⁵⁷⁸ but to no avail. Now in that same theater’s 1932 *Joie* show, wearing an elegant white gown and coiffed with her rival’s wavy blonde hairstyle, she seems to be directly challenging her audience by rhetorically asking if they would like her better white—if they would like her, in other words, to be Mistinguett instead of Josephine Baker.

This mocking question comes through crystal clear in the lyrics of “*Si j’étais blanche*,” included below with my translation. Written by Léo Lelièvre and Henri Varna

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁵⁷⁸ Jennifer A Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 33.

in collaboration with Pepito and produced by Columbia Records in 1932, the song's storyline mirrors many aspects of Baker's own struggles with white identification:

*Je voudrais être blanche
Pour moi, quel bonheur
Si mes seins et mes hanches
Changeaient de couleur*

*I would like to be white
What happiness for me
If my breasts and my thighs
Were to change color*

*Les Parisiennes, à Juan-les-Pins
Se faisaient gloire
Au soleil d'exposer leurs reins
Pour être Noires*

*The Parisian girls, at Juan-les-Pins
Prided themselves
On laying out nude in the sun
To become black girls*

*Moi, pour être blanche
J'allais me roulant
Parmi les avalanches
En haut du Mont Blanc*

*Me, to become white
I used to go rolling
Among the snowy avalanches
At the top of Mont Blanc*

*Ce stratagème
Donna zéro
J'avais l'air, dans la crème,
D'un petit pruneau*

*This strategy
Came to nothing
In that creamy snow I looked
Like a little dark prune*

*Étant petite, avec chagrin
J'admirais dans les magasins
La teinte pâle des poupées blondes
J'aurais voulu leur ressembler
Et je disais, l'air accablée,
Me croyant seule brune au monde*

*With sadness, when I was small
I used to admire, in the stores,
The pale skin of blonde dolls
I wanted to be like them
And I said, feeling miserable,
Like I was the only brown girl alive*

*Moi, si j'étais blanche
Sachez qu' mon bonheur
Qui près de vous s'épanche
Garderait sa couleur*

*Me, if I were white
Know that my happiness
Which blossoms when I'm near you
Would keep its color*

*Au soleil, c'est par l'extérieur
Que l'on se dore
Moi, c'est la flamme de mon cœur
Qui me colore*

*In the sun, it's your exterior
That gets tanned and golden
Me, it is the flame of my heart
That colors me*

*Et si ma figure
Mon corps sont brunis
C'est parce que la nature
Me voulait ainsi*

*And if my face and
My body are brown
That's because Nature
Wanted me this way*

*Mais si je suis franche,
Dites-moi, Messieurs
Faut-il que je sois blanche
Pour vous plaire mieux ?*

*But if I may be frank,
Tell me, gentlemen,
Do I need to be white
To please you better?*

Audience members reacted with force—and a fair bit of confusion. Many “applauded wildly”⁵⁷⁹ without seeming to fully realize what they’d witnessed. Others, like Nancy Cunard, viewed Baker’s performance as a straightforward reinscription⁵⁸⁰ of white superiority’s “revolting standard,”⁵⁸¹ an assumption made by some Baker biographers as well.⁵⁸² But there were also those who, realizing that Baker and her manager-lover Pepito were actively marketing “Bakerskin” tanning products at this time, picked up on her apparent swipe at racial tropes and Mistinguett in one blow. *Le Journal* remarked that Josephine had become, in fact, “infinitely whiter than those white girls who roast themselves in the sun.”⁵⁸³ Some scholars, such as Haney⁵⁸⁴ and Jules-Rosette, consider that many in Baker’s audience would, at least on some level, have understood her whiteface—and I would add especially in the context of the song’s lyrics—as a rebellious act of “racial transcoding.”⁵⁸⁵ After all, show posters like the one by Zig had not prepared

⁵⁷⁹ Gaston de Pawlowski, “La Joie de Paris au Casino de Paris,” *Le Journal* (Paris, Dec. 13, 1932), 5.

⁵⁸⁰ Baker did risk reinscribing some of the stereotypes she enacted, as noted by scholars including Mae Henderson: “In a performance vocabulary based on repetition with a difference...the repetition runs the risk...of reinforcing dominant codes, while the difference often gets diminished or overshadowed.” (“Colonial, Postcolonial, and Diasporic Readings of Josephine Baker as Dancer and Performance Artist,” in *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist*, 166).

⁵⁸¹ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life the Icon and the Image*, 63.

⁵⁸² See, for instance, Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 91.

⁵⁸³ Gaston de Pawlowski, “La Joie de Paris au Casino de Paris,” 5-6.

⁵⁸⁴ Lynn Haney, *Naked at the Feast: The Biography of Josephine Baker* (London: Robson, 2002).

⁵⁸⁵ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life the Icon and the Image*, 65.

anybody for this apparent bait-and-switch. Theater magazine *La Rampe* reported that Josephine's other *Joie* songs were perfectly enjoyable, but "*Si j'étais blanche*," they opined, was absolutely "*malicieux*."⁵⁸⁶ Such language indicates a feeling of deep unease about the performance's intentions. Baker's multilayered subversion sent simultaneous messages of mockery and assimilation that led Arthur Johnson, for example, to protest that she could never equal Sarah Bernhardt or Mistinguett (as some had claimed), but would forever remain their darker, less sophisticated shadow:

The joy of imitation runs in the blood of the savage...mere monkey tricks...one must not mistake primitive drives with knowledge...[mentioning] Mistinguett...would be resorting to more violence than necessary. Well, that is the Casino de Paris-Josephine of 1932, who has grown more mimically aware in the upper region as well, *c'est tout*.⁵⁸⁷

Baker's visual code switch is legible to Johnson only as her perfectly natural desire to *be* a white performer. And yet such a vehement response to Baker's noticeable 1932 shift simply demonstrates how truly unsettling it was for some to see her rivaling iconic French divas. Johnson's snide implication that Baker's true talent did not lie in her "upper region" exposes his discomfort with her new, less erotically primitivist image.

Although it could be read as a "safe" challenge to racial norms that allowed for superficial interpretations such as Johnson's, the fact that *Si j'étais blanche* directly

⁵⁸⁶ André Legrand-Chabrier, "La Joie de Paris au Casino de Paris," *La Rampe* (Paris, Jan. 1, 1933), 18.

⁵⁸⁷ Ylva Habel, "To Stockholm, with Love: The Critical Reception of Josephine Baker, 1927-35," *Film History: An International Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2005): 134.

addresses sun tanning and the desire of many *Parisiennes* to become “*Noires*”—or, in a sort of reversed colonial influence, to racially transcode themselves as black—also points to Baker’s fundamental questioning of assimilation as a one-way process. Racial categorization itself is thus destabilized. Baker’s own words support this reading. At a Carnegie Hall performance in 1973, she laughingly recalled how white Frenchwomen “...did all they could to be like us [blacks]...they put oil on their whole bodies and went to the sea and baked all day...poor little things, some of them got sick, but they said, isn’t it beautiful to be kissed by the sun in that way?”⁵⁸⁸

Baker’s disruptive games with skin color in the *Joie* show reaffirm Homi Bhabha’s assertion that “[s]kin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in stereotype...[is] the most visible of fetishes.”⁵⁸⁹ This is certainly true in Baker’s case. Her friend Colette spoke for many when she praised Baker’s “clear, beautiful, even-textured brown skin, with which Paris is besotted.”⁵⁹⁰ Baker’s skin tone, despite varying somewhat in early years as she struggled with white beauty standards,⁵⁹¹ nevertheless developed a cult following—clearly exoticized as Other and yet almost attainable for white audiences with enough sun tanning. Indeed, the 1920s marked tanning’s first vogue among Europeans, and a year after arriving in Paris Baker became the spokesperson for Valaze sun tanning cream and its reputed “Bakerskin effect.” Interestingly, this

⁵⁸⁸ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O’Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 91.

⁵⁸⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 97, 101.

⁵⁹⁰ Bryan Hammond and Patrick O’Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 143.

⁵⁹¹ Jennifer A. Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 7-11.

marketing campaign completely elided skin and body so that consumers were almost promised the ability to slip inside Josephine's skin and *wear* her. A large billboard near the Opéra read in bold letters: "You can have a body like Josephine Baker if you use Valaze cream."⁵⁹² As if to reinforce this notion, a boutique nearby displayed Baker dolls in varying sizes and costumes, all exposing large sections of soft, brown fabric skin for sale.

But Baker did play with the notion of her skin as a transferable commodity. When famed architect Le Corbusier met Josephine aboard a transatlantic ocean voyage in the 1920s, they struck up a brief romantic liaison. He appeared one night at a ship's ball in blackface and a version of Josephine's feathered dance outfit, like some life-sized Baker doll. "What a pity you are an architect, Monsieur," she responded to this parodied second self, "[y]ou'd make a sensational partner."⁵⁹³ Importantly, some sources recount Josephine dressing in whiteface at the same event as a way of responding to Le Corbusier's parody.⁵⁹⁴ By the time of the *Joie* show a few years later, then, Baker was already well versed in the shifting games of racial appearance in both America and Europe. This time, instead of teasing a lover, she and Pepito appear to be using whiteface in combination with the lyrics of *Si j'étais blanche!* to interrogate audience assumptions—while continuing to market Bakerskin to that very audience.

If Baker's ambiguous skin allowed her to cross racial categories, her signature androgynous haircut and body type also facilitated gendered sartorial code-switching.

⁵⁹² Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life the Icon and the Image*, 148.

⁵⁹³ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 80-81.

⁵⁹⁴ Ean Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story*, 157.

Baker's tuxedo portrait from *Joie de Paris* (Fig. 7) underscores her commitment to complicating her (heavily feminized) primitivist image in new ways. Jules-Rosette notes that for Josephine, "empowerment entails adopting the accoutrements of 'the other'—blonde wigs, lighter skin, and masculine clothing."⁵⁹⁵ Baker thus identified and claimed multiple axes of destabilizing performativity. As Ralina Joseph points out, "Maleness works like whiteness...men are the default people."⁵⁹⁶ In the span of a single performance, then, Baker deployed whiteface and gendered cross-dressing to signify that she could reproduce audience identity markers with ease—thereby exposing her "natural" primitivist image as equally constructed. It is for this reason that Marjorie Garber refers to Baker as a "female female impersonator" whose flexible "identity as a transvestite begins with race as well as with class and gender."⁵⁹⁷

I argue that this reframing of whiteness and masculinity in Baker's repertoire interrupts the European spectator's scopophilic enjoyment. He now sees a parodied version of himself disconcertingly reflected on the body-object of his voyeuristic gaze; Baker is, in Borshuk's words, "slippery and unfixed."⁵⁹⁸ First she takes the appearance of a white woman; then suddenly reappears as a tuxedo-wearing dandy; the bourgeois white male's gaze bounces back, forcing him to see himself in the Other. He is just as easily caricatured as the identities he has come to consume. With or without his full realization

⁵⁹⁵ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life the Icon and the Image*, 67.

⁵⁹⁶ Ralina L. Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*, 121.

⁵⁹⁷ Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992), 280.

⁵⁹⁸ Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker," 129.

of what is happening, the spectator's scopophilic gaze consequently fails as he becomes, however briefly, its reflected object. Cheng describes the resulting psychological—and indeed, cultural—effect of that reversal:

...a categorical confusion—that is, [a consternation] over categories of race, gender, and the human that the legacy of imperial history ought to have secured, or at least lent the fantasy of certitude. Thus at the moment *la Baker* was invented on stage we see not the affirmation or denial of Modernist Primitivism but the failure of its terms to inscribe its own passions.⁵⁹⁹

Conclusion: Two Bakers?

Today, Josephine Baker is a global icon still associated with the banana dance; pop culture often pays less attention to the decades that followed. Josephine went on to become a secret agent for the Resistance during WWII, then engaged in early anti-segregation activism before joining the American civil rights movement. At one point, Coretta Scott King even asked Baker to take over its leadership after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.⁶⁰⁰ Along the way, Baker adopted a total of twelve children (and later a teenager who made it thirteen), dubbing them her “Rainbow Tribe.” Long before Brad and Angelina, Josephine Baker was trying to advertise world peace by raising children from different regions—Venezuela, Japan, Africa, Finland—in her southern French castle, itself a material reminder that poor black girls from St. Louis could sometimes make it big.

⁵⁹⁹ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, 5.

⁶⁰⁰ Joanne Griffith, "Culture - Josephine Baker: From Exotic Dancer to Activist," BBC News, December 31, 2014, 1.

And yet, for many, only the tip of this iceberg is ever seen. Josephine's banana skirt has created a split in her public image; on the one hand, she tends to be known globally as an exotic nude dancer, and on the other, there is her increasingly campy persona as a middle-aged Hollywood glamor icon. These representations are sometimes framed as artificially dichotomous. In Europe, particularly later in her lifetime, Josephine's glamorous side did manage to eclipse the primal dancer image. One theater critic opined in the 1940s that the famous "banana dancer...is no more...The elegant Parisienne has elegantly eliminated the Negress in herself."⁶⁰¹ In a very Darwinian tone, he admitted that Josephine's evolution had taken place, but only at the price of effectively killing her previous self—primitivism and sartorial sophistication could never coexist. This view seems to have prevailed among many observers of Baker's newly projected elegance. "She left us a *négresse*, droll and primitive, she comes back a great artist," wrote one critic after Baker's first tour, again assuming that these were mutually exclusive.⁶⁰² Janet Flanner expressed regret at Josephine's changing image: "She has, alas, almost become a little lady. Her caramel-colored body...has become thinned, trained, almost civilized...On that lovely animal visage lies now a sad look, not of captivity, but of dawning intelligence."⁶⁰³

Flanner's eulogy to Baker's former self has all the hallmarks of a disappointed primitivist devotee. In her view, Baker is a formerly wild, now-tamed animal whose sensuality could not withstand "dawning intelligence." This reinscription of the mind-

⁶⁰¹ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 270.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, 171.

body split on which primitivism so heavily relies is expressed physically for Flanner through the thinning out of Josephine's curves as she becomes "trained," a corporeal discipline that echoes Jane Burn's concept of "sartorial bodies." Burns notes that these "social bodies" are hybrids whose physical reality can never be objectively witnessed, "forged from both fabric and flesh," and theorizes that clothes' cultural meanings constitute an "active force in generating social bodies."⁶⁰⁴ Flanner and her fellow critics provide an obvious example of this through their anxieties about Josephine's new public image. For them, every article of clothing Baker donned onstage was an additional layer of civilization that would interfere with their scopophilic urges.

Mind versus body, intelligence versus emotion, African versus European, primitivism versus civilization. These dichotomies neglect Josephine's lifelong flair for modern fashion, as we see in one of her pre-France portraits (Fig. 8). Seventeen-year-old Baker oozes glamor and ambition—she obviously dreams of being a singer, as represented by the music notes on her sash, and presents herself as the fashionable celebrity she hopes to become. The fact that she would perform "savage" nude dances less than two years later does not in any way replace those yearnings. Cultural commentators like Flanner seem to think that primitivist Josephine represents an original state of purity whose education in culture has suddenly produced a "little lady" that did not exist previously, and who is effectively a corrupted version of her true self. In these either-or configurations Josephine's human complexity is denied, with critics insisting that she operate at one pole or the other of their artificial binary.

⁶⁰⁴ E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 12.

And yet, as I have shown, Josephine Baker constantly recreated herself in hybrid and sometimes-contradictory ways, often working simultaneously with and against social expectations. Perhaps this is why so much of her life reads as a constant battle. Indeed, as her son Jean-Claude would note, Baker “used her body as a weapon against the world because it was the only thing she trusted.”⁶⁰⁵ During WWII this battle moved beyond the metaphorical; Josephine’s body became a material form of resistance. As part of de Gaulle’s spy network she carried notes pinned to her underwear, because after all, she remarked, “Who would dare search Josephine Baker?”⁶⁰⁶ As ever, she also made good use of her skin, writing secret messages on the palms of her hands and down her arms.⁶⁰⁷

This militant embodiment found its uses in other struggles. As one of only two women included alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. in the “Big Ten” list of speakers at the 1963 March on Washington, a middle-aged Josephine Baker showed up in her Resistance uniform with four medals pinned to her chest. Baker’s military uniform acted a shield that rejected the scopophilic gaze completely. It may have been so threadbare that she was forced to use an old stage trick of filling the bald spots with ink,⁶⁰⁸ but it made her feel safe, and it projected unmistakable power. Wearing it subverted expectations that Baker would appear in her now-customary Hollywood gowns and jewels.

Above all, the uniform sent a clear message of black dignity to segregated America. Years later, Baker recalled her intense fear of white Americans at this time; she

⁶⁰⁵ Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart*, 217.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 365.

had been blacklisted for anti-segregation activism in the 1950s. “But now that little gnawing feeling is gone, for the first time in my life I feel free...I came back wearing my Resistance uniform for the March.”⁶⁰⁹ Baker’s uniform, like many a stage costume before it, proved that she understood what sartorial code-switching could do for personal empowerment. Josephine Baker actively negotiated with the cultural restrictions of being a black female superstar in the early twentieth century, successfully amplifying whatever agency she could seize.

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⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 378.

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Appendix

Fig. 1—Josephine Baker wearing a blonde wig & pale makeup for *La Joie de Paris*, Dec. 1932. Bryan Hammond Collection.



Fig. 2—Josephine Baker & Joe Alex in the *danse sauvage*, 1925. AKG-Images, London.



Fig. 3—Josephine as Topsy Anna in *Chocolate Dandies*, circa 1924.



Fig. 4—Josephine in her famous banana skirt for *La Folie du jour*, 1926. Studio Waléry, Paris.



Fig. 5—Publicity poster by Zig, 1932.

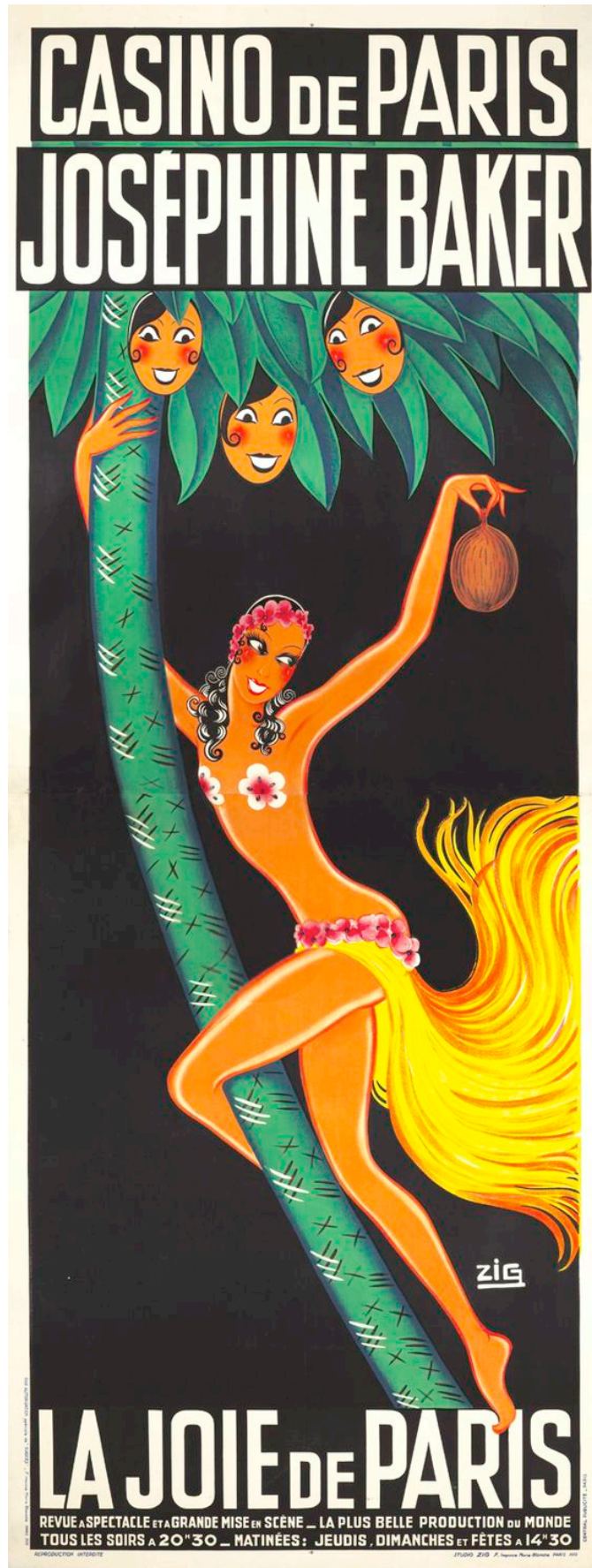


Fig. 6—Publicity poster by Zig, 1931-32.



Fig. 7—Portrait of Josephine Baker as a male bandleader in *La Joie de Paris*, 1932.
Studio Piaz.



Fig. 8—Josephine at age 17, circa 1923.



CONCLUSION

Sartorial Code-Switching and the 21st Century

In September of 2019 an openly gay African-American student named Brandon Allen was crowned “Homecoming Royalty” at White Station High School in Memphis, Tennessee. The gender-neutral title was not all that made this occasion newsworthy. For his crowning ceremony Allen wore a sparkly gold sequined dress, a delicate rhinestone tiara and a layered necklace. The 17-year-old had attempted to join the homecoming court for two years prior to his successful bid this year. “When I won,” he relates, “I felt so relieved and so happy because I had been fighting for something that I wanted for the longest amount of time.” His sartorial code switch was meant to reflect this sense of triumph and joy. “I decided to wear a dress because I strongly believe in the fact that I'm a queen,” Allen explained to reporters. In the face of “mixed reactions” that included strong opposition from socially conservative members of the community, the county school superintendent tweeted support for Allen and White Station High School principal Carrye Holland announced on Facebook that it was “Brandon's right to run for homecoming court under Title IX” and that, in any case, “[i]t's the students' choice of who they want to support as homecoming royalty.”⁶¹⁰

Some social dynamics of this groundbreaking moment, particularly its defense by school administrators on social media, would seem to make it a uniquely 21st century event. But the fact that elements of the local (and later national) community pushed back against Brandon Allen’s public representation of his school while wearing a dress is not,

⁶¹⁰ Alexa Imani Spencer, “Meet the White Station teen who wore a gold gown when he was crowned Homecoming Royalty,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 29, 2019, <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/local/2019/09/29/memphis-white-station-high-homecoming-royalty-brandon-allen/3813818002/>.

alas, surprising. Alarmed protests that things have gone too far in the quest for progress are part of a time-honored response to social identity blurring—particularly those forms of it that are instantly and visibly legible, such as cross-dressing and other aspects of sartorial code-switching. This is so predictably true, in fact, that at the 1992 Republican Convention in Houston, Texas, paleoconservative Pat Buchanan whipped up his crowd by describing the Democratic Convention as “a ‘giant masquerade ball’ of ‘cross-dressing,’ gay rights, abortion on demand, and women in combat.” The crowd applauded uproariously when he stated that this was “not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God’s country...There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America.”⁶¹¹ Buchanan’s call to arms is underpinned, in his speech, by a characterization of the opposition as “a giant masquerade ball” where cross-dressing is assumed to carry in its wake all of the other political issues that he and his audience define as immoral to the point of going directly against God. By casting these demonized traits of the Other in terms of change and battle, Buchanan also seems to suggest to his crowd that they are newfangled abominations inconsistent with the conservative mission of protecting and preserving tradition.

But as we have seen (and as Buchanan and his crowd seem to have forgotten, Ecclesiastes’ admonishment that there is nothing new under the sun notwithstanding), cross-dressing and other forms of sartorial code-switching are most definitely not new phenomena. The preceding chapters trace several decades—even centuries—of real-life examples showcasing how sartorial code-switching has operated in individual lives and

⁶¹¹ Susan Estrich, “The Changing Face of the GOP : Practicing Politics of Exclusion,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-08-23-op-7103-story.html>.

their larger cultural settings. These four case studies of George Sand, Sarah Bernhardt, Colette, and Josephine Baker allow us to reflect on the similarities and differences between our own time and place and theirs. How much have we really changed? For George Sand, masculine attire and a male pseudonym became tools with which to increase her physical and financial autonomy, at the same time providing a way to negotiate her complicated split class background and articulate new, more liberatory visions of gender- and class-based relationships. Sarah Bernhardt used sartorial code-switching to perform a cultural balancing act between Christianity and Judaism while living in an almost unprecedented media spotlight that she managed, through intelligent maneuvers, to turn mostly to her advantage. Colette's visual and literary code switches between human and animal references provide a window onto her views regarding feminine embodiment throughout decades of shifting cultural attitudes toward corporeality and women's liberation. And Josephine Baker used racially subversive sartorial code-switching in multiple contexts, particularly in *Si j'étais blanche*, to seize additional agency in a racially hierarchical environment. Brandon Allen's statement of sartorial triumph—with its implications for members of marginalized populations like the other young gay black men who may now feel more empowered to emulate role models like him, Billy Porter, or Ru Paul—would be in good company here.

Although these are the stories of individuals who successfully leveraged their ability to code switch and, as I have argued, achieved increased autonomy and even celebrity status in their lifetimes thanks partly to that ability, they are also stories that demonstrate the tensions between group dynamics and individual choices within

institutionalized social structures—what sociologists have termed “social agency.”⁶¹² The paradoxical freedoms and limitations inherent in any individual’s social agency are often indexed very specifically to their places inside larger systems, mirroring fashion’s own drive to conform and stand out simultaneously. Sartorial code-switching, then, is an abundant sociological area of study that can teach us about everything from large-scale systems to instances of what are (or may at least appear to be) one-off historical exceptions. When sartorial code-switching is used as a mode of analysis it can restore a full contextual picture of the “specific historical, social, and political configurations that make certain [social] conditions possible and others constrained.”⁶¹³

Sartorial code-switching is, as I have argued, a process of rapid back and forth alternation and/or a hybrid combining of vestiary (in Eicher’s expanded definition of this term) identity markers on the same body. In this sense it most closely approximates Ciara Colin Cremin’s scholarship on “crisscross” dressing. Cremin explains that the term “crisscross-dresser” is designed to “invok[e] the idea that gender is in permanent negotiation and does not, like the term “cross-dresser,” imply that one is simply putting on and taking off a mask.”⁶¹⁴ Sartorial code-switching encompasses and surpasses this notion by throwing not just gender but every metric of social identity, such as race and class, into “permanent negotiation.” What cultural messages does a gender non-binary

⁶¹² Michael A. Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 67.

⁶¹³ Suzanna Danuta Walters, “Sex, Text, and Context: (In) Between Feminism and Cultural Studies,” In *Revisioning Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1999), 250.

⁶¹⁴ Ciara Colin Cremin, *Man-made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-dressing* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 3.

person send today, for example, when they alternate between masculine appearance one day and feminine appearance the next—or, as is often the case, when they combine indicators from both sides of the gender binary into one fabulous outfit? And what happens to the cultural equation when that individual is perhaps not just a gendered minority, but also a racial and/or classed one as well? The visual contrast between Allen’s close-shaved head and off-the-shoulder gown, for example, can open space for a cultural dialogue about what gender has been, in a given time, place, and context, and the myriad of possibilities for what it can become. It can also, as in Allen’s case, open a dialogue about the difficulties faced by gay and lesbian members of the black American community. Even when intersectional and hybridized identities are met with resistance (as was often the case for the women studied in this dissertation and certainly remains true for many of their cultural counterparts today), such pushback can teach us a lot about the underlying values and anxieties of wider culture at a given moment.

In borrowing linguistic terminology I also intend for the term “sartorial code-switching” to gesture toward the very 21st-century idea that language itself is often in flux, messier at its boundaries with other languages and alternate modes of communication than we would sometimes like to think. This has certainly always been the case, but is now perhaps more obvious to casual observers than in the past. Textspeak and other relatively new forms of slang are just one example that mirrors fashion’s increasingly fast and multi-referential pace as digital technologies continue to put cultures, subcultures, and countercultures in contact with one another. The result is sometimes innovative, sometimes referential, and sometimes continues to result in problematic episodes of appropriation. But fashion’s ability to quickly spread visual

messages has perhaps never been greater. Trendy sartorial code-switching examples from our particular moment in the 21st century include unisex hairstyles like long hair with a side shave; K-pop bands' appropriation of hip-hop fashions and attitudes; body grooming practices like “manscaping”; the gender anxieties and cultural blind spots surrounding the perennial and much-debated “man bun”; the exorbitantly expensive clunky “dad shoe” adaptation of older, traditionally lower-class tennis shoe styles; debates over how much of black culture the Kardashian sisters have co-opted; and internet makeup artist vlogger James Charles becoming the first male CoverGirl, just to name a few.

Many of these examples would not fit into traditional narratives about historically-loaded notions like “cross-dressing” or the older term “transvestism,”⁶¹⁵ but with an expanded sartorial code-switching lens the affinities between various forms of boundary-crossing become apparent. Sartorial code-switching, then, is a concept that enables us to trace continuities between the past and present as we move into our cultural future.

⁶¹⁵See Bonnie Bullough and Vern L. Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), vii for a more detailed explanation of how cross-dressing has, until relatively recently, been clinically pathologized, which partly explains the range of related terms that attempt to grapple with its nuances from various angles—for instance “gynemimesis,” “femmiphile,” “androphile,” “femme mimic,” “transsexual” or simply “fetishist.” The appeal of an umbrella term like “sartorial code-switching” is that it is able to encompass these concepts and others in a streamlined way.

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