In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf quips: “History is too much about wars; biography too much about great men;” literary history, she might have added, is too much about sons murdering their fathers. Canonical readings of the canon have often insisted on the vaguely Freudian (if not biblical) model of literary creation susceptible both to “anxieties of influence” and to creative revisions imposed by strong misreadings. Criticism has followed the same reactive pattern in order to clear new ground for further research: the debate between “traditionalists” and proponents of “cultural studies” all but repeats this familiar and combative dialectic. Between formalist and sociopolitical readings, French texts have been mined by many different critical trends; but the perspectives that do not fit neatly into one or the other of these agonistic moves tend to be left out. Dominick LaCapra has suggested that “one issue for readers today is whether a different, ‘noncanonical’ reading of the canon, which resists symbolic resolutions as well as narrowly formalistic interpretations, may be one force in reopening texts to the[ir] broader sociopolitical effects” [731].

In the case of Baudelaire, the way to do this “noncanonical” reading might well be to go back to a discursive field which includes biography and oral histories, and to resist the temptation either to eulogize the innovations of the poet of modernity or to denounce the patent racism of his images. The challenge today is to return to the scene of writing and the conditions of production of the early poetry—in other words, to look at the text from *outside* of conventional literary, critical or cultural history, to reclaim it for *our* side, that of a more global francophonie. To do so might mean to map out once again the contested terrain of culturally and politically sensitive readings such as the ones Christopher Miller and Gayatri Spivak claim to do. Their readings, however, do not take into account the residual cultural element of the poetry, that is, the vernacular language it appropriates. This language is all but buried beneath the emergent theoretical practices of postcolonial criticism and its vaguely nationalist agendas. Critics have tended to look for

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1. My use of the terms “residual” and “emergent” follows that of Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (121–27).
Paris: Avenue du Président Wilson, at the place de l'Aïma
symbolic resolutions and to settle cultural scores at the expense of historical and geographical specificity, despite claims to the contrary.

The facts of Baudelaire’s youthful travels in the Indian Ocean have remained relatively obscure. While doing research in the islands of Mauritius and Réunion on two separate occasions during the past few years, I came across written documents and watercolors that helped me reconstruct the historical and visual contexts that appear to have been Baudelaire’s in 1841. By re-examining the criticisms that have been lodged against the exoticizing rhetoric of his poetry, I want to foreground the links between the Creole culture with which Baudelaire became familiar and the now canonical texts he produced. These links can allow us to bypass the sterile opposition between “literary studies” and “cultural studies” or between aesthetics and politics; they demonstrate the urgency of re-visioning the canon not just from the perspectives of its margins, but as an important source of muted cultural knowledge. The questions with which I begin, then, are the following: where did Baudelaire actually go on his travels in 1841? and why does this matter to the field of French studies?

* * *

Il faut en finir avec la légende de l’Inde parcourue par Baudelaire. Elle était séduisante, Gautier l’a adoptée, Banville ne l’a pas négligée. . . Mais la vérité vraie est que Baudelaire, embarqué malgré lui, brûla la politesse à l’Inde. . . . Peut-être Baudelaire abandonnait-il complaisamment au commun public ces bruits de longues pérégrinations en pays fabuleux, parce qu’il en tirait, avec des couleurs de mystère, l’air de revenir de loin. Dans tous les cas, il ne nous parlait jamais de ces voyages. À peine, à son retour, nous dit-il quelques mots d’une station dans l’île Maurice ou l’île Bourbon.

[It is time to put a stop to the legend of Baudelaire’s trip through India. It was seductive, Gautier adopted it, Banville did not neglect it. . . But the real truth is that Baudelaire, embraced in spite of himself, avoided India. . . It is possible that Baudelaire obligingly fed the public rumors of his long peregrinations in fabulous countries because it gave him the mysterious appearance of having returned from faraway places. In any case, he never talked about his voyages. Upon his return, he scarcely mentioned to us his brief stays in Mauritius and Réunion.]

This comment made by Ernest Prarond, a friend from Baudelaire’s youth, sums up the facts: Baudelaire never went “en pays fabuleux,” that is, he did not set foot in those legendary continents which have nourished the imagination of Europeans since Marco Polo. He was, however, careful to construct his own myths around these travels.

Who can blame him? India, Africa: these were the stuff of his youthful dreams. Having settled for Mauritius and Réunion, exotic but little-known islands instead of fabulous continents, he must have felt that his experiences did not live up to his contemporaries’ expectations. For the inhabitants of island colonies, the feeling is a familiar one: islands are “dust on the ocean” and “confettis of Empire” [Morisset and Waddell 89], and their peoples suffer from “traumata of insignificance.” 13 Islands do not

2. Letter dated 1886 by Ernest Prarond to Eugène Crépet, the poet’s first biographer, as cited in Dayre and Pichois [76–77]. Although “La Réunion” became the official name of “Bourbon” in 1793, the locals continued to refer to it under the previous name well into the twentieth century.

3. The phrase is Patrick Bellegarde-Smith’s. See my discussion in Autobiographical Voices [6].

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have the same status imaginatively or politically as the larger continents of Africa and Asia. Islands do not bestow on the traveler the same aura of acquired knowledge or esoteric wisdom; they are mythical, seem unreal, and tend to be seen as places of escape and rest, hideaways onto which an infinite number of desires can be projected. They do not appear to have any cultural integrity of their own, unlike older civilizations. They are seen as the residues of Europe’s dream of empire, *tabulae rasae*, which need not be taken very seriously.

Baudelaire’s strategies of avoidance (“il ne nous parlait jamais de ces voyages”) can perhaps be explained by the fear of ridicule. His journey dead-ended in exotic tropical islands which profoundly influenced his sensibility, but the traces of Africa and India which he found there would have been hard to explain without a general theory and a history of métissage as would be developed by twentieth-century thinkers [see Bernard and Gruzinsky; Glissant, *Poétique*; Amselle; Bhabha; and Lionnet]. His lack of precision regarding his destinations has led both his contemporaries and his critics to construct their own imaginary geographies of the “faraway lands” he visited. Christopher Miller has even collapsed dissimilar locations and their inhabitants into vaguely substitutable entities. Miller engages twice with Baudelaire’s writings, and twice errs in his understandings of the poet’s strategies of representation, first in his 1985 book, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*, and then in a 1995 essay, “Hallucinations of France and Africa in the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 and Ousmane Socé’s *Mirages de Paris*.” Miller discusses two poems, which I will call Baudelaire’s Indian Ocean poems: “À une dame créole” and “La belle Dorothée;” he also focuses on “À une Malabaraise” and “Le cygne,” as does Gayatri Spivak, and they both misread crucial elements of the text. Miller fails to discriminate among distinct places while proceeding to expose what he perceives to be Baudelaire’s contributions to nineteenth-century exoticism and other myths of alterity and femininity. Gayatri Spivak, in “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” chooses “Le cygne” as a pretext for uncovering “a curious tale” [230], that of the disappearance of the “Malabaraise” or Indian woman behind a vaguely “African” one. Like Miller, she denounces Baudelaire’s misnamings and his use of European poetic conventions which subsume historically specific female subjects; but she, too, fails to address the exact historical details of Baudelaire’s Indian Ocean voyage and the people he encountered there. Her strategy, which is to “reveal the degree to which imperialist discourse homogenizes and misnames its others . . . risks the very carelessness for which it indict Baudelaire,” as Laura Chrisman puts it [499–500]. This approach is symptomatic of a larger problem, that of the status of local histories in the production of knowledge, of the erasure, neglect, or sheer invisibility of local knowledges in mainstream academic discussions of topics which relate to “marginal” areas of investigation—such as the southwestern Indian Ocean and its “poussière d’îles,” the Mascarene islands, of which Mauritius and Réunion are part.

In this paper, I want to suggest that the poet contributed more to making other cultures and languages visible and present within mainstream French literature than his critics are willing to grant, and that he is more important to francophone studies than either Christopher Miller or Gayatri Spivak understand. I will argue that the Mascarene islands are the repressed of Baudelaire’s travels, and that they return in the form of a feminine voice to which these critics are not attuned. Miller mistakenly takes this voice to be linguistic “noise,” whereas Spivak’s rush to render the Indian woman visible behind the African denomination (the word “négresse” in “Le cygne”) impairs her ability to focus on the specificities of these insular regions. This results in both critics’ failure to do justice to the oral contexts of the Mascarenes and to the regional realities that Baudelaire echoes. I want to stress, like Miller or Spivak, that nineteenth-century European literature cannot be fully understood without in-depth knowledge of the geographies and historico-cultural arenas which marked and inspired the writers and travelers of that epoch. But my goal is
to add a greater density of details and specificity to that context. Though Spivak is sensitive to this particular issue, her approach eliminates the possibility that a poem can be the site of a multiplicity of voices, including the reported or indirect speech of the local women. Spivak thus loses an opportunity to recognize and honor those voices, however mediated they may be. Finally, I will make a plea for a more sustained and historicized “multiculturalism”: one without which literary criticism of classic texts runs the risk of creating embarrassing misunderstandings and wiping out islands as crucibles of globalization from the history of intercultural exchanges.

Let me then rehearse some of the neglected facts of Baudelaire’s biography before demonstrating the ways in which the Creole cultures of the Indian Ocean made their mark on his poetry.

On 18 April 1839, at the age of 18, Baudelaire was suspended from the collège Louis-Le-Grand in Paris, where, as an interne, he was preparing the bachot. He had to enroll in another school, and he spent the summer studying. He became bachelier in August. Free at last, he started living a dissolute life in the Quartier Latin in the company of a young Jewish prostitute named Sara, also known as “La Louchette,” while making his first contacts with writers and artists, including Nerval and Balzac [Pichois and Ziegler 126]. His bourgeois mother was worried; his stepfather, the strict Général Aupick, was not pleased with this bohemian lifestyle. Aupick had many contacts in the merchant marine and arranged to have the young Charles embark on a ship that was sailing to India. The family hoped that the change of scene and l’air du large (the sea air) would cure him of his “melancholia” and his excessive interest in literature: the purpose of the voyage is to interest him in “reality,” to blunt his excessive love of words. The Paquebot des Mers du Sud set sail from Bordeaux to Calcutta on 9 June 1841. Under the watchful eye of Captain Saliz, Baudelaire remained a recalcitrant passenger: he did not respond to the cure as planned. As Saliz writes to Aupick:

Dès notre départ de France, nous avons pu voir à bord qu’il était trop tard pour espérer faire revenir M. Baudelaire [sic] soit de son goût exclusif pour la littérature telle qu’on l’entend aujourd’hui, soit de sa détermination de ne se livrer à aucune autre occupation. [Pichois and Ziegler 150–51; Roy v]

[We could see on board the ship that it was too late to hope to change either M. Baudelaire’s exclusive taste for literature as it is defined today or his determination to engage in no other occupation.]

After almost three months at sea, the Paquebot arrived in Mauritius on 1 September 1841. There, in Pamplemousses, the young Charles was the guest of a magistrate and planter named Gustave-Adolphe Autard de Bragard and of his wife Emmeline, who was famous for her beauty. On September 18, the Paquebot set sail for Bourbon. On September 19, Baudelaire disembarked in Saint-Denis with all of his belongings. The Feuille hebdomadaire of Saint-Denis dated 21 September 1841, recounts the following anecdote:

Au moment de débarquer du vaisseau ancré en rade, le jeune Charles Baudelaire n’agrippe pas assez rapidement l’échelle de corde du débarcadère. Gêné par les livres qu’il porte sous les bras, et dont il n’a pas voulu se séparer, il est happé par une lame au moment où il surplombe la mer, et tombe à l’eau. On le repêche non sans mal et surtout non sans dommages pour ses précieux livres. [see fig. 1] [qtd. in Maurin and Lentge 446]

[As he was attempting to disembark from the ship anchored in the harbor, the young Charles Baudelaire fails to grasp quickly enough the rope ladder

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connecting to the wharf. Impaired by the books he was carrying under his arms, and which he would not entrust to anyone else, he is caught by a wave at the moment when he is suspended over the sea, and falls in the water. He is rescued with some difficulty and with much damage to his precious books.

Another version of these incidents is related in La chronique de Paris dated 13 September 1867:

À l’arrivée à Bourbon, il se passa un fait qui peint bien les allures de Baudelaire. On sait qu’à Saint-Denis de Bourbon, à cause de la rudesse habituelle de la mer et des difficultés qu’offre le seul point possible d’atterrissage, le débarquement s’opérait jadis au moyen d’une échelle de corde suspendue, à l’extrémité d’une jetée en pilotis, à une sorte de gigantesque potence. Pour débarquer, il faut saisir les échelons au moment où la vague qui se soulève et s’abaissealternativement est à sa plus grande élévation.

Bien que renseigné sur cette précaution nécessaire, Baudelaire s’obstina à monter à l’échelle avec des livres sous le bras . . . et gravit l’échelle lentement, gravement, poursuivi par la vague remontante. Bientôt la vague l’atteint, le submerge, le couvre de douze à quinze pieds d’eau et l’arrache à l’échelle. On le repêche à grand’peine; mais, chose inouïe, il avait toujours ses livres sous le bras. Alors seulement il consentit à les laisser dans le canot qui se tenait au pied de l’échelle, mais en remontant il se laissa encore une fois atteindre par la vague, ne lâcha pas prise, arriva sur la rive et prit le chemin de la ville, calme, froid, sans avoir l’air de s’apercevoir de l’émoi des spectateurs. Son chapeau seul avait été la proie des requins. [qtd. in Pichois and Ziegler 149–50]
[The circumstances surrounding the arrival in Bourbon clearly revealed Baudelaire’s demeanor. It is well known that in Saint-Denis de Bourbon, because of rough seas and the difficulties presented by the only possible landing spot, disembarkment used to proceed by means of a rope ladder tied to a kind of gigantic gallows built at the extremity of a peer built on piles. To disembark, one needs to catch a rung of the ladder just when the wave which goes up and down is at its highest elevation.

Though informed of this necessary precaution, Baudelaire obstinately resolved to climb the ladder with his books under his arm... and he climbs slowly, solemnly, while the next wave approaches. It soon reaches him, submerges him, covering him under twelve to fifteen feet of water and making him fall off the ladder. He is rescued with great difficulty; and incredibly, he is still holding on to his books. Only then did he consent to leave those in the canoe still roped to the foot of the ladder, but while climbing, he was hit by another wave, did not fall off, arrived ashore, and made his way to town, calm, cold, without appearing to notice the emotions of the spectators. Only his hat had become food for the sharks.]

The scene described in these papers evokes very well the recalcitrant young traveler, the loner, ill at ease, but stubborn, refusing assistance and unable to adapt to the exigencies of the moment. Baudelaire got off the Paquebot des Mers du Sud, and he abandoned Captain Seliz and his crew because he had the firm intention of catching the next ship back to France—rather than continue on to India as originally planned. But he would have to wait for some forty-five days, until 4 November 1841, for the next ship—L’Alcide—which would return from India—to set sail from Saint-Denis on its way back to Bordeaux. Baudelaire’s first contact with Bourbon was a very wet and unpleasant one—and he will later deny ever having set foot there. In a letter to the Parnassian poet Leconte de Lisle, a native of the island, with whom he will correspond later on in Paris, he declares:

*Je n’ai jamais mis les pieds dans votre cage à moustiques, sur votre perchoir à perroquets. J’ai vu de loin des palmes, du bleu, du bleu, du bleu,...*

[Maurin and Lentge 446]

[I have never set foot in your mosquito-ridden cage, in your nest of parrots. I have only seen palm trees from afar, and vast expanses of blue, blue, blue...]

Whereas in Mauritius Baudelaire was welcomed with open arms by the local elite, in Bourbon, he seems to have spent his weeks frequenting black prostitutes and writing. On 20 October 1841, Baudelaire sent the poem “À une dame créole,” dedicated to Emmeline de Bragard, in a letter to her husband. This original version differs slightly from the later one published in Paris, first in *L’artiste* in 1845 and then in the 1857 edition of *Les fleurs du mal*:

*Le 20 octobre 1841*

_Mon bon monsieur A., vous m’avez demandé quelques vers à Maurice pour votre femme, et je n’ai pas oublié. Comme il est bon, décent et convenable que des vers adressés à une dame par un jeune homme passent par les mains de son mari avant d’arriver à elle, c’est à vous que je les envoie, afin que vous ne les lui montriez que si cela vous plaît._

_Depuis que je vous ai quitté, j’ai souvent pensé à vous et à vos excellents_
amis.—Je n'oublierai pas certes les bonnes matinées que vous m'avez données, vous, Madame A., et M. B.

Si je n'aimais et si je ne regrettais pas tant Paris, je resterais le plus longtemps possible auprès de vous, et je vous forcerai à m'aimer et à me trouver un peu moins baroque que je n'en ai l'air.

Il est peu probable que je retourne à Maurice, à moins que le navire sur lequel je pars pour Bordeaux (l'Alcide) n'y aille chercher des passagers.

Voici mon sonnet:

Au pays parfumé que le soleil caresse
J'ai vu dans un retrait de tamarins ambrés
Et de palmiers d'où pleut sur les yeux la paresse,
Une dame Créole aux charmes ignorés.

Son teint est pâle et chaud; la brune enchanteresse
A dans le cou des airs noblement maniérés;
Grande et svelte, en marchant comme une chasseresse,
Son sourire est tranquille et ses yeux assurés.

Si vous alliez, Madame, au vrai pays de Gloire,
Sur les bords de la Seine ou de la verte Loire,
Belle, digne d'ornier les antiques manoirs,
Vous feriez, à l'abri des mousseuses retraites,
Germer mille sonnets dans le coeur des poètes,
Que vos regards rendraient plus soumis que des noirs.

Donc je vais vous attendre en France.
Mes compliments bien respectueux à Madame A.

C. Baudelaire.

[20 October 1841]

My dear Monsieur A., you asked me, in Mauritius, for a few verses for your wife, and I did not forget you. Since it is good, decent, and appropriate that verses addressed to a lady by a young man should be handed to her husband before reaching her, I am sending them to you, so that you may only show them to her if you so desire.

Ever since leaving you, I have often thought about you and your excellent friends.—I shall certainly never forget the wonderful mornings that you granted me, you, Madame A., and M. B.

If I did not love and miss Paris so much, I would stay as long as possible in your company, and I would force you to love me and to find me a bit less baroque than I seem.

It is unlikely that I will ever return to Mauritius, unless the ship that is taking me back to Bordeaux (the Alcide) should need to fetch passengers there. Here is my sonnet: . . .

[The original poem differs from the later versions in a few small details: notably, in lines 4 and 9, the words “Créole” and “Gloire” are capitalized.]

So I will be waiting for you in France.
My respectful compliments to Madame A.

C. Baudelaire

The published version (1845) reads as follows:

A Une Dame Créole

Au pays parfumé que le soleil caresse,
J'ai connu sous un dais d'arbres tout empourprés
Et de palmiers d'où pleut sur les yeux la paresse,
Une dame créole aux charmes ignorés.

Son teint est pâle et chaud; la brune enchanteresse
A dans le cou des airs noblement maniérés;
Grande et svelte en marchant comme une chasseresse,
Son sourire est tranquille et ses yeux assurés.

Si vous alliez, Madame, au vrai pays de gloire,
Sur les bords de la Seine ou de la verte Loire,
Belle digne d'ornir les antiques manoirs,
Vous feriez, à l'abri des ombreuses retraites,
Germer mille sonnets dans le coeur des poètes,
Que vos grands yeux rendraient plus soumis que vos noirs.

[For A Creole Lady]

Off in a perfumed land bathed gently by the sun,
Under wide trees tinged with a crimson trace,
A place where indolence drops on the eyes like rain,
I met a Creole lady of unstudied grace.

This brown enchantress's skin is warm and light in tone;
Her neck is noble, proud, her manner dignified;
Slender and tall, she goes with huntress's easy stride;
Her smile is tranquil, and her eyes are confident.

Madame, if you should come to the true place of pride and glory—
Beside the green Loire, or by the pleasant Seine,
Adorning ancient mansions with your stately ways—

There in the shelter of the shady groves, you'd start
A thousand sonnets blooming in the poet's hearts,
Whom your great eyes would render more servile than your slaves.]

4. Letter published in Le cernéen, 22 juin 1866. Reprinted in Pichois and Ziegler [153–54]. The poems are from Baudelaire, Les fleurs du mal. I have modified the translation when it wanders too far from the literal meaning I am interested in stressing. All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.
The poems “Bien loin d’ici” and “La belle Dorothée” both published later in Paris, are specifically about his experiences in Bourbon. In this slave-owning plantation culture of the French colony, the still adolescent and rebellious poet was not an attractive or sought-after guest. Very different historical circumstances from those of Mauritius can help explain why the bourbonnais had a dim view of French intruders. At the time, the Franco-Mauritiens—like the Autard de Bragards—were living under British rule and made every effort to hold on to any vestige of French culture. Visitors from France were always welcome, even sought after. In 1841, the francophone elite was already fast becoming a cultural as well as a numerical minority: the surrender to the British crown in 1814 had resulted in emancipation in 1835 followed by the arrival of large numbers of indentured laborers from India. In Bourbon, by contrast, slavery still existed, and the local planters were suspicious of intellectuals, rebels, and libres penseurs (freethinkers) from France. The Revolutionary Convention had decreed the abolition of slavery on the 16 Pluviôse An II (4 February 1790). But the local Colonial Assembly had refused to comply with the decree, and in 1801 it threatened to secede from France if the ruling was imposed. Revolutionary ideas, and the intellectuals who are always under suspicion of transporting them, were not welcome on the island, nor were they in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Unlike Haiti, which became the first independent black nation in 1804, the Mascarenes did not embrace any kind of revolutionary agenda. The Colonial Assembly’s aim was primarily to protect the interests of the landowners—mostly white planters but comprising also a certain number of freeborn mésis. Outsiders from France—nicknamed the “zoreilles”—were perceived as potential troublemakers, especially if they were, like Charles, too visibly bohemian, rebellious, and at loose ends. The planters were worried about their future, haunted by the specter of emancipation. The slave revolt of 1811 had been severely repressed, but the phenomenon of marronnage was becoming more and more widespread. The mountainous interior of the island provided ideal hiding places for maroons (or runaways). When Baudelaire arrived in 1841, abolition was a mere seven years away, and figures like Sarda Garriga—the counterpart of abolitionist Victor Schoelcher in Martinique—were causing planters plenty of worry. Despite the fact that Baudelaire spent twice as long in Réunion as he did in Mauritius, he seems to have been completely ignored by the locals. The 1840s correspond to a period of intense endocentric and endogenous attitudes on their part, and their chilly reception may well have caused the poet’s denials.

These denials may explain why critics like Miller are confused by the colonial cartographies that emerge from the poetry, or why they are given to blurred chronologies and hazy geographies. Baudelaire explain up his readers for critical confusion, “fogs” or “mirages,” to use Miller’s critical vocabulary [see “Hallucinations”]. But such denials, and the resulting blindness of the critic, is more pointedly a symptom of the difficulty in thinking about French literary history in terms of local knowledges and the impact they may have had on the conditions of production of the literature. This problem is made manifest by the persistent inability to theorize what Mireille Rosello has called “the insularization of identities,” and to invent new identifications on the basis of those fragments of local stories which help to undermine the problematic search for unity that Edouard Glissant has called the “obsession of the One.” The unfinished and fragmentary quality of the colonial past and the epistemologies that derive from it can begin to be

5. See Claude Pichois’s commentary in Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes [1119].
6. By 1850, one-third of the total population of 180,000 was Indian. Today, about 68% of the population of 1.2 million is Indo-Mauritian.
7. The contrast between “insularity” as static essentialized identity and “insularization” as dynamic, provisional, and tactical identity formation is discussed in Rosello, “Caribbean Insularization of Identities” [see esp. 571–77]. The critique of homogeneity and the “One” is in Glissant, Le discours antillais [see esp. 28–32].

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contextualized once we shed light on the historical frameworks and the motivations of writers like Baudelaire. When one looks at the cultural history of the 1840s, it becomes fascinating to realize that Baudelaire himself is an “exoté”—a young man from post-Revolutionary France—in the eyes of endogamous planters and their entourage, and this “exoté” will be viewed differently in the context of each of the two islands. The direction of the exoticizing gaze is not initially what we have assumed, what we have been trained to see: it is in fact Baudelaire who has been put in the place of an “other” from across the seas. His own reversal of this exoticizing gaze, his focus on the black cultures of the islands, reflects an initial identification that cannot be understood in terms of simple binarisms as critics have done.

Thus, when Miller discusses “À une dame créole” in a chapter of Blank Darkness, he shows how the rhetoric of nineteenth-century “Africanist discourse” functions to negate Creole realities and to construct absence and void as the paradigmatic themes and motifs emerging from encounters with non-Europeans. His general argument is valid and convincing. However, he negates Baudelaire’s actual encounter with the Creole realities and prejudices that the poetry actually conveys very well. Miller misreads the poem’s context, stating:

The poem is about ambiguity and the possibility of moving along a scale of colors and places, from the purple islands where ignorance rains from the trees, to the banks of the Seine and the green Loire: from the Ile de la Réunion, where the sonnet was written, to the Ile de France, the center of the center. [101]

Oddly, Miller never once mentions Mauritius, which had been known as the Ile de France before 1814, when it was ceded by Napoleon to the British, who changed its name back to Mauritius, the name given by the earlier Dutch colonists. But in Miller’s reading, Mauritius has disappeared from history. He actually confuses and conflates Mauritius, Réunion, and the kind of imaginary Africa that he takes the poetry to be representing. He assumes that M. and Mme. Autard de Bragard were Baudelaire’s hosts in Réunion (rather than Mauritius—[Blank 98]) and does not distinguish between the different kinds of places that are either evoked or actually mentioned by the poet.

Nowhere in this poem does Baudelaire mention the “Ile de France” by name. Yet Miller extrapolates and infers a comparison between “purple islands” and “the Ile de France, the center of the center,” that is, the area around Paris, “sur les bords de la Seine” where Baudelaire returned soon after leaving the Mascarene area. But, as I have pointed out, “Ile de France” was also the earlier name of Mauritius given by the French settlers between 1715 and 1814. So when Baudelaire writes about the “vrai pays de Gloire / Sur les bords de la Seine,” the irony for his dédicataire, Mme de Bragard, must have been obvious, because behind the “vrai pays de Gloire,” the metropolitan Ile de France, we have an implicit reference, in filigree, to the other Ile de France, its namesake in the antipodes where the “dame Créole” resides, and where the Franco-Mauritians, now defeated and subjugated to the British, are holding on to their connection to France, the “vrai pays de Gloire.” Here we see that local history resists marginalization, and meaning emerges along a chain of significations that include differential understandings of “France” or “Ile de France” as nodes in a complex network of linguistic correspondences that could not have been lost on the author of “Correspondances,” nor on his destinataires.

The prose poem “La belle Dorothée” also offers a precise instance of cultural and linguistic hybridization that critics have failed to recognize and that reinforces the specificities of the geographical area that inspired it. The next-to-last paragraph reads as follows:

Peut-être a-t-elle un rendez-vous avec quelque jeune officier qui, sur des plages

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lontaines, a entendu parler par ses camarades de la célèbre Dorothée. Infailliblement elle le priera, la simple créature, de lui décrire le bal de l'Opéra, et lui demandera si on peut y aller pieds nus, comme aux danses du dimanche, où les vieilles Cafrines elles-mêmes deviennent ivres et furieuses de joie; et puis encore si les belles dames de Paris sont toutes plus belles qu'elle.

[Perhaps she is going to meet some young officer, who on far-off shores heard of the famous Dorothy from his mates. Without fail the simple creature will beg him to describe the Opera, and will ask him if one can go there with bare feet, like at the Sunday dances, where the old Cafrines themselves get drunk and furious with joy; and again, if the most beautiful ladies of Paris are more beautiful than she.]

Miller picks up on Baudelaire's use of the term "Cafrine." He speculates that it "may have been Baudelaire's invention." He searches for clues about the word "cafrine" in the Grand Larousse, the Littre, and the Grand Robert, where, he notes, the word "is not to be found" [Blank 120n35], adding, "[The word] represents an unnecessary insistence on the feminine gender" [120]. According to the French dictionaries Miller consults, the adjective cafré serves both as the masculine and feminine forms of the noun cafré from the Arabic kafir or "infidel" (see fig. 2). Miller speculates that the suffix -ine would therefore appear to add an excessively feminine quality to the description. He deduces that the rhetoric of the poem thus devalorizes and overracializes the black woman. "The double feminine," he explains, "coincides with [Baudelaire's] most frankly Africanist scene" [122], thus buttressing the general argument of his book that the Africanist topos in Baudelaire is coded as absence and void—as also happens to be the case in Gobineau and in a long Western tradition within which Africa is represented as a feminized void. But this argument bypasses any understanding of the local cultures which Baudelaire is in fact able to communicate to his readers, despite his refusal to acknowledge having ever "set foot" in those countries.

In fact, I want to suggest that the word "Cafrine" in the prose poem actually gives us the sound of the voice of the black woman herself, a voice Baudelaire knew, had heard, and that he lets us hear in the reported speech or indirect discourse of the sentence: "elle . . . lui demandera si on peut y aller pieds nus, comme aux danses du dimanche, où les vieilles Cafrines elles-mêmes deviennent ivres et furieuses de joie . . . [she will ask him if one can go there with bare feet, like at the Sunday dances, where the old Cafrines themselves get drunk and furious with joy]." Indeed, if Miller had looked for clues in a different archive from the ones produced in France—the French dictionaries he consults—he might have found out that "Cafrine" is a word from the local Creole language that is still spoken today, and he thus would not have dismissed it as "noise" produced by Baudelaire's exotic imagination. Robert Chaudenson's Le lexique du parler créole de la Réunion gives the following explanation:

les néologismes créoles formés par suffixation [-e] et [-in] [comprennent le mot] cafrine/[kafrin]: femme de race noire, de type africain: le mot sert de féminin à "cafre," prononciation créole: [kaf]. [Chaudenson 2: 1041]

[Creole neologisms produced by adding the suffix [-e] or [-in] include the word cafrine/[kafrin]: woman of the black race, of African type; the word is the feminine of "cafre," creole pronunciation: [kaf].]

During my research in the Indian Ocean, I found two series of watercolors which were acquired by the Archives Départementales de La Réunion in the early 1990s. The first was

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Fig. 2: “Femme Caffre,” from Francois Levallant’s 1791 Voyage dans l’intérieur de l’Afrique and reprinted in Miller’s Blank Darkness [121]. Baudelaire was familiar with this work.

Fig. 3: “Une Cafrine et son petit,” watercolor by Hyppolite-Charles-Napoléon Mortier, Marquis de Trévisse, who traveled to Ile Bourbon in 1861 and 1865–66 while he was Secretary of the Embassy and attaché to the Mission in China (Archives départementales de La Réunion).

Fig. 4: “Malabare créole, Malgache,” watercolors by Jean-Baptiste Louis Dumas, Directeur des Ponts et Chaussées, Ile Bourbon, 1829–31 (Archives départementales de La Réunion). They are both dated 1830.

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Fig. 5: I picked up the postcard in a bookstore in Saint-Denis, La Réunion, in September 1996. It reads: “My lichees are sweet like our native girls... don’t be shy, come and taste!...” The sexual innuendoes show the degree to which the native woman continues to be exoticized for the purposes of global tourism. This does not, however, take away the fact that “ti kafrine” (in Creole) continues to be a term of endearment.

Painted in the 1860s by Hyppolite Mortier, Marquis de Trévise, Secrétaire d’Ambassade in China, who made several journeys to Réunion. The second is by Jean-Baptiste Louis Dumas, an engineer who was director of the Ponts et Chaussées in Réunion between 1829 and 1831. They illustrate the different female “types” that Baudelaire would have encountered during his stay there [see figs. 3 and 4]. I also found postcards published for the mass tourist market that use the words “ti kafrine péi” (native black girl) to refer to an exoticized young female figure who is offering sweet fruits as she welcomes the tourists with her alluring smile [fig. 5]. It is interesting to note here that the image is that of a very young, childlike figure, who is wearing a cook’s apron: her youthfulness and domestic appearance are belied by the alluring Creole caption. One wonders whether the intent is to lure Western adult males into blissful domesticity with underage females? Would this be what Baudelaire himself saw in the young black women he encountered in Bourbon? Women of his own age, he who had barely turned twenty that year?

Be that as it may, Creole languages, as they appear in the poetry and in the postcards, are the product of a creative encounter between African and Indian languages and those of the masters. The site of this encounter is the site of production of both subjectivity and agency. “Cafrine” in Baudelaire’s poem is the point of emergence of the other’s voice in his text, the site of heteroglossia and hybridity in language, “le lieu par excellence de la capture de l’autre [the very site at which the other is contained in the text]” [Felman, La folie 128], or “le lieu où le poète se laisse traverser par de l’autre [the site at which the poet is traversed by otherness]” [Cixous 158], the place where Baudelaire is both seduced by the voice of the woman and enshrines her, imprisons her self-designation within his own discourse. If, as Shoshana Felman argues, “la place du sujet... ne se définit pas par ce qu’il dit, ni par ce dont il parle, mais par le lieu à partir d’où il parle” [the location of the subject... is not defined by what he/she says, nor by what he/she talks about, but by the

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site of enunciation—the place from which he/she speaks)" [La folie 50], then the word “Cafrine” registers a locus of enunciation that is geographically quite specific and at the same time hybrid. “Cafrine” is the trace of the encounter between two subjectivities, a masculine one and a feminine one, the latter echoing across the centuries thanks to the poetry of a rebellious young traveler who immortalizes her while screening out the dominant voices of the French colony—the ones that had sketched him in their chronicles as an awkward, nerdy, bookworm from beyond their shores. In so doing, he contains the “Cafrine” within his representation of her, but he also delivers her to posterity in her own Creole language—something no historiography has yet done.4

To recognize the Creole origin of “Cafrine” in this classic 1841 text is to engage in what Peter Hulme has called a form of “local remembering.” In his reading of Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea, Hulme insists on the need to find “geocultural frameworks which will allow us to make connections that transcend the usually national or colonial categories. . . Local history [he adds] . . . still remains largely untold, and its connections with literary production largely unexplored” [15–17]. Hulme calls for a “politics of locality” that remains sensitive to two needs: “to treat the history of ‘local’ places like Dominica [the setting of Wide Sargasso Sea] as worthy of serious historical investigation” and “to recover the colonial and imperial dimensions of . . . canonical literature” [17]. Only by attending to both of these needs will we reach an understanding of the local as part of “a network which is anything but local,” he concludes.

The word “Cafrine” is a node in just such a network of signifying practices that can help us arrive at a more global understanding of “French” literary history. Baudelaire’s use of the local dialect in this prose poem is an undeniable clue about the conditions of production of the poem and the contexts within which it acquires meaning. By allowing local history, geography, and gendered language to persist (and to resist limited definition from within the pages of the Larousse or the Littéré), Baudelaire is better able to validate the existence of local political realities than are his contemporary critics. Even if, in a fit of anger at the white Creoles who snubbed him, Baudelaire denies ever having set foot in Bourbon, his text speaks a different truth, transgressing his wish to disavow his experiences and serving instead as a rare locus of memory for the colonized female subjects of the island. As Felman states, “Le scandale en littérature c’est que l’altérité surgit, se donne à voir, là où on s’y attend le moins [The scandal in literature is that alterity emerges, becomes visible, where you expect it the least].”5 The otherness of the local vernacular produces hybridity within the poetic text. The irony in Miller’s interpretation is that he misses the deconstruction of standard French that Baudelaire performs in “La belle Dorothée” more than a century before such deconstruction will become the trademark of francophone writers (like Ahmadou Kourouma, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Axel Gauvin, and Patrick Chamoiseau) in their literary practice. If Hedi Abdel-Jaouad can argue that Isabelle Eberhardt is the precursor of several generations of Maghrebian writers because of her “linguistic ‘corps-à-corps’ with French to make it express a [different] ontology” [116–17], then we can perhaps claim Baudelaire as the elusive precursor of many francophone writers who search for a thematics and a stylistic practice that will correspond to their hybrid identities and thus generate a new ontology.

Ten years after the publication of Blank Darkness, in his 1995 essay, Miller once again rehearses the colonial topos in Baudelaire’s poetry. This time, he makes reference

8. I am well aware that the etymological origins of cafre, kafir or “infidel,” do not point to a “positive” view of the African “infidel” as defined by the Islamic conqueror and then taken up by the European colonizer. Nonetheless, this is the case of a term which has been reappropriated and transformed by the logic of Creole grammar into a feminine term still used by Creole women today in La Réunion. See also Lorraine.

9. Statement made during the discussion after her lecture “Rereading Femininity” at the University of Michigan, March 1980. See also Felman, “Rereading Femininity.”

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both to what he terms the “Africanist” poems (“Le cygne,” “La belle Dorothée,” “À une dame créole”), and to the one titled “À une Malabaraise.”

from “Le cygne”

*Un cygne qui s’était évadé de sa cage,*  
*Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,*  
*Sur le sol raboteux trainait son blanc plumage.* . . . [lines 17–19]

*Je pense à mon grand cygne, avec ses gestes fous,*  
*Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime,*  
*Et rongé d’un désir sans trêve! . . .* [lines 34–36]

from “The Swan”

*A swan who had escaped from his captivity,*  
*And scuffing his splayed feet along the paving stones,*  
*He trailed his white array of feathers in the dirt.* . . .

*I think of my great swan, his gestures pained and mad,*  
*Like other exiles, both ridiculous and sublime,*  
*Gnawed by his endless longing! . . .*

from “À une Malabaraise”

*Pourquoi, l’heureuse enfant, veux-tu voir notre France,*  
*Cet pays trop peuplé que fauche la souffrance.* [lines 17–18]  
. . .  
*Comme tu pleurerais tes loisirs doux et francs,*  
*Si, le corset brutal emprisonnant tes flancs,*  
*Il te fallait glaner ton souper dans nos fanges*  
*Et vendre le parfum de tes charmes étranges,*  
*L’œil pensif, et suivant, dans nos sales brouillards,*  
*Des cocotiers absents les fantômes épars!* [lines 23–28]

[from “To a Malabar Woman”]

*O happy child, why do you want to see*  
*Our France, a country reaped by misery,* . . .  
*How you will cry, regretful of the trip,*

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If, in the brutal corset's crushing grip,
You have to sell your beauty in the street,
Out of this muck to glean some food to eat,
While through our filthy mists your vision sees
The phantom spars of absent coco-trees.]

Referring to these passages, Miller claims that:

In 'Le Cygne,' cultural and temporal barriers are everywhere, exile is pandemic, and the African woman is enfolded within an apparently universal problem. Difference is everyone's preoccupation and labour. In 'À une Malabaraise,' a single cultural barrier is built up between France and a colony (in this case the French enclave on the coast of India); the world is bisected and difference is a matter of categories and exclusions. ["Hallucinations" 41]

Quoting the following lines from “À une Malabaraise”: “Pourquoi, l'heureuse enfant, veux-tu voir notre France / Ce pays trop peuplé que fauche la souffrance,” Miller adds: “The single Malabarese woman is an alien, while the speaker is a natural/national (from the same root) belonging to notre France. The woman is advised to stay where she belongs” [41]. I do not want to quarrel here with Miller’s interpretation of the exclusions to which immigrants are subjected in France and that, in his reading, the poem prophetically outlines. I do want to propose a somewhat different articulation of the oppositions that the poem constructs. For Miller, these exclusions are revealed through the binary opposition between a “citizen” and an “alien.” Because his goal is to make Baudelaire’s poetry function as an instrument for his critique of hybridity, “métissage culturel,” and the “fog of intercultural space” that the encounter between France and Africa generates, Miller adds that “nationalism claims to blow [the fog] . . . away in order to establish clear boundaries and claim ‘Africa for Africans’” [41].

Two clarifications are in order: first of all, as I have already indicated, Baudelaire’s referent in his Indian Ocean poems is neither Africa per se nor “the French enclave on the coast of India,” as Miller puts it. This French enclave was, to be precise, Pondicherry, on the southeastern coast. It became a legal part of India in 1963. The poet never went there, and he indicates no connection to that colony. The islands with which he was familiar were—and are today—inhabited by women of African and Indian descent such as the one described in the poem. Secondly, the malabaraise may ethnically be from the Malabar coast (on the west and not the east coast of India), the point of origin of many of the Indian immigrants of Dravidian background. According to Claude Pichois’s annotated edition of the “Malabaraise” poem, it refers to a woman who worked as a kitchen maid in the Autard de Bragards’ house in Mauritius. The reference to the “Malabaraise” who wants to see “notre France,” I would propose, does not imply an opposition between “them” and “us,” the alien woman and the national subject from France, the colonized figure and the French-born poetic voice. Instead, I think we should read “notre France” as an implicit opposition to something like “ton île de France,” in the same way that “À une dame créole” opposes the two “Îles de France” in a subversive counterpoint that undermines the distinction between the center and the margin, the metropole and its periphery, between the local meaning of “France” and the imperial or global one. Just as “La belle Dorothée” does, this poem performs a deconstruction of stable meaning by putting into question all continental forms of identity, be they French, African, or Indian, and reconstructing them as hybrid, insular, and local.

Gayatri Spivak makes specific reference to the Mascarene islands in her discussion of “À une Malabaraise” and “Le cygne,” but goes on to say that “the origin of the negress in ‘Le Cygne’ is a textual palimpsest of the original of the agonist of ‘À une Malabaraise,’
one of two women Baudelaire encountered in Mauritius and the island of Réunion respectively” [230]. She rightly points out that lines 41–44 of “Le cygne” echo lines 27–28 of “À une Malabaraise,” and this, she argues, is sufficient indication that behind the “negress” of the first poem is in fact the “Malabaraise” or Indian woman of the second, a “vague woman, encountered on either one of the two colonial possessions, mis-named by white convention” since Indian immigrants to the Mascarenes “are not necessarily, not even largely, from India’s Malabar coast” [230]. She critiques Baudelaire for shifting the origin of the “negress” “on an imagined native place as generalized as ‘Africa,’” and she seems unaware that Baudelaire would have indeed encountered women of both African and Indian origin in the Mascarene islands. For Spivak, the “negress” is only a figure for “generalized otherness” [Chrisman 500], or more specifically “generalized darkness,” or as Miller puts it more suggestively, “blank darkness.” That these dark females figure rhetorically as dark others of an exotic femininity has been amply demonstrated. But my point is that these “figures” correspond to actual historical subjects whose visual presence had been recorded by chroniclers of the time [see figs. 3 and 4]. There is indeed an intertextual echo between “Le cygne” and “À une Malabaraise,” but the geographical referents are plain and simple: Africa is mentioned only in “Le cygne,” and Baudelaire puts in relation the plights of two women, one possibly from Africa (or from Madagascar? [see fig. 4, right]), the other from India [fig. 4, left]. In both cases, however, it is most likely that they would have been “Creoles,” that is, born and raised in the colony.10 They might also be of mixed parentage: African and Indian. The only thing we know for sure is that these “dark” women who fascinated Baudelaire were Creole-speaking, and that the Malabaraise lived in Mauritius. When one looks at the visual representations in figures 4 and 5, what is striking is that, in every case, the actual origin—African or Indian—is not easy to determine. Thus in the postcard printed for the 1990s tourist market, the “ti kafrine péi” has straight hair and could be part Indian. In the 1830 watercolor representation by Jean-Baptiste Dumas of the “Malabar Créole” [fig. 4], the woman’s features and her headdress suggest “créolité” rather than “indianité.”11

Furthermore, from within the Mauritian historical and colonial context, the poem “Le cygne” has a specific connotation which may justify a reading of its bird and female allegories as another site of hybrid imagery. In the course of its colonial history, Mauritius was briefly settled by the Portuguese, who called the island Ilha do Cirne, or Island of the Swan. They occupied the area for a time during the sixteenth century and discovered the indigenous dodo birds, a now extinct creature which looked like a short-winged swan [fig. 6]. They named the island after this unusual and flightless bird.12 In the late eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the main newspaper of the island echoed this Portuguese naming: it was called Le cernéen (from cirne, swan) and it had a picture of a swan on its front page, above the title which was followed by the

10. Spivak states that “the islands of Mauritius and Réunion, terrains of military colonial exchange between France and Britain, have a sizeable population of Indian origin as a result of the British import of indentured labour” [230]. But the fact is that already under French rule, Indian slaves were being brought to Mauritius. In 1806, there were 6162 christianized Indians on the island [see Lehembre 41n14 and Beejadhur]. My point is that the “Malabar” woman encountered by Baudelaire in 1841 could well have been born and raised on the island.

11. Or “coolitude,” as Khal Torabully has recently put it, making reference to the coolies who emigrated as indentured laborers in the nineteenth century. For an understanding of créolité in the islands of the Caribbean (and to a lesser degree, those of the Mascarenes), see the manifesto by Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiand, Eloge de la créolité.

12. See the entry on the “Dodo” in the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica [370–72]. When captured dodo birds made their way to Europe, they were exhibited in cages. Sir Hamon Lestrange recounts how he saw such a bird while walking around London in 1638. Is this the inspiration for the “cygne évadé de sa cage”?  

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Fig. 6: Dodo, as exhibited in the Museum of Natural History in Port-Louis.

Fig. 7: Front page of Le cernéen dated 29 Feb. 1833.
subplot "Petite revue africaine" [fig. 7], since Mauritius has always been included in the general geographic area of the African continent [fig. 8]. Le cernéen began as a weekly in 1773, stopped publication in 1790, resumed in 1832 and became a daily in 1852. We can speculate that Baudelaire might have seen it. It was widely read by all those who considered themselves educated, and it is very likely that Baudelaire's hosts, the Autards, might have shared its contents with their guest and that his choice of poetic imagery would later echo these experiences.

In "Le cygne," the poetic association between a swan, "un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage [a swan who had escaped from his captivity]," and a black woman, "la nègresse, amaigrie et phthisique [a negress, thin and tubercular]," both exiled in Europe, finds its counterpart in the "matelots oubliés dans une ile [sailors left forgotten on an isle]," men like Baudelaire, who lived his sojourn in the Indian Ocean as an extended prison sentence, feeling caged and flightless in the antipodes. Canonical readings of this poem have stressed its allegorical elements, and shown how the plight of the bird and that of the negress are linked, both becoming figures for the lost sailors and for the poet's own anxieties. Rejecting those interpretations, Spivak notes that

whereas Baudelaire, inscribing himself as poet within the tradition of European poetry, is meticulous about the specificity of that tradition, the inscription of himself as an admirer of negresses can only be deciphered by guesswork outside of the boundaries of the poem. It is seemingly irrelevant to the poem's proper functioning. And it is mired in a conventionally sanctioned carelessness about identities. [230, my emphasis]
She adds that what “troubles” her the most is Edward Ahearn’s suggestion that “the negress is somehow Baudelaire’s dark double.” This reading, she says “perform[s] a lie” [231], and she goes on to discuss Andrew Bush’s Bloomian reading, which, in her view, is “perfunctory” [see Spivak 239n15; Ahearn; Bush]. Her point is that the actual Indian women who were encountered by Baudelaire in 1841 are being falsely represented as “African” or as figures for Jeanne Duval, his black mistress in Paris, and thus their very existence is negated by this naming process, which conflates all of them as “products of hegemonic false cartography” [230].

As my research shows, however, the swan/dodo bird points to a precise but hybrid geographical locus, one in which the dodo might be legible only as a swan, and the swan only as a dodo, depending on which perspective one adopts; the poetic or the historical one. Yet even this distinction between the “poetic” and the “historical” becomes unstable, as the swan is but a historical palimpsest for the dodo bird, and an embellished version of the indigenous fauna. The instability of this referent further points to the hybrid local identities of the colonial subjects, and to the colonial wish to transform and “purify” Creole realities as a means of dealing with the fear of degeneration connoted by the concepts of métissage and hybridity. Baudelaire’s poetry reveals an acute (if implicit) understanding of the complicated genealogies that have been the legacy of slavery and indentured labor in New World colonies. The intertextual link between “Le cygne” and “À une Malabaraise” thus simply underscores the fluidity of identities shaped by the imposition of colonial rule within these insular regions of the Mascarenes.

Did Baudelaire’s imagination transform the somewhat grotesque dodo into a poetic swan, as the Portuguese had? He does refer to this swan as a creature both “ridicule et sublime [ridiculous and sublime],” thus “signifying” (as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would say) on the Portuguese colonizers’ naming of the island [see Gates]. If indeed Baudelaire signifies on the Portuguese word cirne, the canonical interpretations of the poem can now be seen in a different historical light which allows us to reinscribe the geographical contexts of the “negress” within the rhetorical texture of the poem. The poet’s identification with the bird and the woman does not reveal his “carelessness about identities” but his astute understanding of the visual and discursive fields within which his experiences as a poet and a traveler took shape and about which he was historically and culturally quite “meticulous.”

* * *

My point is not to recover “some concealed radical message from ostensibly reactionary writing,” as Spivak says, quoting Lisa Jardine [231]. Baudelaire’s rhetoric of exoticism is distorting and serves a particular “Africanist” purpose within the field of European literary representation. Thanks to feminist cultural critiques, postcolonial studies of imperialism such as Spivak’s and Edward Said’s, and Miller’s analysis of Africanist discourses, we have learned to suspect both the causes and the effects of representational structures that overlap with imperial and colonial agendas. But I can read Baudelaire today and know that he speaks to Mauritians of realities that historians have failed to record, and that his poetry is a valuable intervention which ought to give critics pause when they carelessly assume that its residual cultural images have no historical or geographical validity. It is the critics’ epistemological standpoint which turns out to be more limited than Baudelaire’s.

Just as Shakespeare’s Caliban has been part of the imaginaire of anglophone, hispanophone, and francophone Caribbean writers, fragments of Baudelaire’s texts continue to become parts of the narratives we tell in the literary and cultural discourses
of francophonie. Think, for instance, of Aimé Césaire’s use of the phrase “comique et laid” in the Cahier [Notebook of a return . . .], a phrase from Baudelaire’s L’albatros that he slips into his text and upon which he then signifies [Rosello, “One More Sea” 182–84]. Think also of Césaire’s Une tempête, Roberto Fernandez Retamar’s Caliban, and Georges Lamming’s The Pleasures of Exile. Figures invented by Baudelaire and Shakespeare map a location that we keep on visiting and analyzing, although “critical” distance and cognitive grounding are sometimes hard to achieve when you are yourself closely implicated in the imaginative discourses (and the exotic fantasies they spin) that have become substitutes for historical knowledge.

We might do well to learn from Baudelaire to discriminate between continents and islands, between Africa, India, the East Indies, and the Mascarene islands, in other words, between continental nationalist agendas, and the status of island-nations which have always had “hybrid” identities. The intercultural space that is the familiar territory of island-nations (in the Caribbean as well as the Mascarenes) is not coded as “fog” or “mirage” by their inhabitants and writers. It is a space of painful lucidity: one in which one is forced both to recognize the differences among different local communities and to articulate anew the hybrid, heteroglossic site of their encounters and their practices of everyday life.

The nationalist agendas of these islands have been articulated around a set of vernacular discourses developed by Frantz Fanon and Césaire, Glissant and Lamming, Fernando Ortiz and C. L. R James, Benítez-Rojo, Dev Virahsawmy, and Khal Torabully. The vocabulary of these theorists includes terms such as transculturación, contrapunteo, mitissage, antillanité, créolité, indíanité, and most recently, coolitude. These words have become instruments for describing the processes that obtain in those islands. This vocabulary presages recent developments in postcolonial theory in general which have foregrounded these models as possible approaches to an emancipatory politics. Miller argues that hybridity and mitissage are coded as “mirage” by some African writers and critics of the assimilationist ideologies of French colonial and post- neocolonial discourses. I do not quarrel with that. But Baudelaire was and continues to be the wrong place to begin if one wants to analyze the rhetoric of “Africanist” discourses and the “manifestations of the ‘fog’ between cultures that French colonialism engendered” [“Hallucinations” 41]. On the other hand, Spivak’s accusation that Baudelaire’s “carelessness about identities” must be countered by “a strategy rather than a theory of reading that might be a critique of imperialism” [230] does little to illuminate the complex and multifaceted identities that were taking shape in this outpost of the empire and that Baudelaire’s poetry echoes.

When properly contextualized, Les fleurs du mal can actually help to dispel the “fog” created by critical discourses that fail to discriminate between distinct geographical entities where a variety of continental identities have come together to create the island peoples and the island-nations that were a part of Baudelaire’s own imaginaire. As Ileana Rodriguez has recently shown, hybrid insular spaces have generally been coded as feminine, and hence negative, in relation to more “virile”—masculine and continental—forms of nationalism that insist on the separate and distinct identities of their subjects. In her analysis of Simone Schwarz-Bart’s Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, Rodriguez writes,

The denationalization of the representation of woman in these narratives is the consequence of their exclusion as subjects of law in liberal republics, and of plotting the construction of nation as a series of male acts. . . .

In these senses, the only one who can claim to belong is... paradoxically, the destitute Télumée [we might read “Dorothée” here] for she has absolutely
nothing to claim. [196, my emphasis]

The *island* as hybrid locus of the feminine is a very old topos of exotic poetry that contemporary francophone writers like Césaire and Edouard Maunick reactivate. But the surprise is that contemporary critics also fall into this trap—and emphasize the virtues of national identity as negations of hybridity, as “denationalizations” of insular or feminine identities that they subsume under more muscular “continental” rubrics. The answer to these agonistic critical debates is to be found in the elements of the poet’s biography such as they appear in his own poetic rhetoric. Perhaps the time has come to reconsider Baudelaire’s poetry as one of the first places of emergence of the native Creole woman’s voice, a ventriloquized voice to be sure, but the only one we have from the first half of the nineteenth century.

**WORKS CITED**


