

Bohemianism, the Cultural Turn of the Avantgarde, and Forgetting the Roma

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# Bohemianism, the Cultural Turn of the Avantgarde, and Forgetting the Roma

Mike Sell

The rousing finale of *Rent*'s (1996) first act takes place in a stylishly déclassé restaurant, at which place a multicultural, multiply gendered, variably doomed and destined clique of artists, intellectuals, upwardly mobile con artists, cross-dressers, activists, and slumming trust-fund kids belt out "La Vie Boheme." Raising their glasses, they pay rock 'n' roll homage to an alternately inspirational and titillating rogues gallery, including Buddha, Langston Hughes, Lenny Bruce, Allen Ginsberg, Maya Angelou, the Carmina Burana, "emotion, devotion [...] causing a commotion," leather-clad dildos, and last but not least, "wine and beer." It's an undeniably thrilling moment when knocked out with the right mix of high decibels and youthful energy, a number seemingly designed to carry the audience to the theatre bar already buzzing.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the thrill of the number is the rapid-fire remembering required of the listener: In addition to those already named, "La Vie Boheme" tosses out almost two dozen more references at up-tempo, making it at once pop anthem and pop quiz. Jonathan Larson is obviously a big fan of the bohemian genre; he packs the show with its relics: the romantic up-and-down narrative, the tried-and-true punch lines, surefire comic and tragic generic tricks, outré costumes, and, of course, hip cultural references. In the process, he manages the tough trick of being at once innovative and utterly traditional. In this respect, the number is like the show as a whole, *Rent* being both rock opera and "memory theatre" (see Yates 1974). Indeed, despite all the popular press about *Rent* remaking the modern musical, it is in many ways a very old-fashioned show. I was especially charmed at a production in Chicago where I had the opportunity to witness a bourgeois couple right out of the pages of the *Communist Manifesto*—in matching furs, no less—stomping down from the balconies in a huff. I had seen the bourgeois insulted, just like all the books on the avantgarde said they would be!

*Rent*'s invocation of its bohemian ancestors is another aspect of its old-fashionedness. Henri Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (1845), Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896), Jack Gelber's *The Connection* (1959, Living Theatre production), Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001)—to name only the best known in a very fecund line—are all memory texts, texts that are *about* the struggle to remember in the face of poverty, cultural marginalization, and public health crisis, and are a form of memory, as they all aim to recover that which has been discarded, to raise their glasses to their glorious peerage. Bohemian memory is both form and content. And this is true not just of those works most easily called "art." Those who live

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1. The significance of bohemianism and the presence of the Roma in bohemian culture was first suggested to me by Indiana University of Pennsylvania student Molly Held in an undergraduate research paper she wrote for me.

the bohemian lifestyle are most often noted for their passion for the unprecedented—the shocking, the outré, the newest import, freshest hybrid, hardest drug—but they are romantic in their lasting love for the antique—the first editions, dusty paste jewelry, forgotten vinyl records, passionate doomed love affairs, and (if I may nod to the recently closed music club CBGB) the graffiti- and bill-encrusted walls of their grimy haunts. But the bohemian also forgets, and what has been forgotten and how it has been forgotten prove on close inspection to be of real significance to our broader understanding of cultural provocation and politics. That’s what I’ll be doing here—describing what and how the bohemian forgets even as she proclaims an especially radical form of remembering.

But before getting to that, a few notes about bohemia’s relationship to the avantgarde, the latter being my ultimate object of concern. As Irmeli Hautamaki reminds us, the avantgarde couldn’t exist without bohemia (2003). In fact, bohemia and the avantgarde came into being around the same time and place—Paris in the 1820s—where technocratic protofuturist military engineers from the École Polytechnique rubbed shoulders with neomedievalists and professional conspirators in the style of the Conspiracy of Equals. What bound the two then (and binds them even today) is a common concern with history, a belief in the authenticity granted by critically positioned historical consciousness and history-minded activism, and the intentional flouting of the kind of historical consciousness and mindfulness upheld by authorities (Right, Left, or other). Indeed, it’s difficult to imagine the bohemian without thinking of her living in the time of intoxication, the candle-length love affair, the melancholy decline of a neighborhood, or the blossoming of a revolutionary movement. In this respect, the bohemian is part of a broader trend of historicist thought, a trend that includes pioneering historiographers like Jules Michelet, Alexis de Tocqueville, Leopold von Ranke, and Jacob Burckhardt (those who helped forge the “grand narratives” of European historical thought during the 19th century) as well as those who actively criticize such historiography, Jean-François Lyotard (1979) and Hayden White (1973) coming immediately to mind. And don’t forget the avantgarde, itself a diverse, mercurial trend in historically conscious, historically catalytic temporal practice.

Let us not forget either that the avantgarde and bohemia are not coincident. While vanguardists often bought into the tales of the historiographers, bohemians never quite fit. The bohemian tends to believe, to the contrary, that history is not to be found in the grand narrative movements of European conquest and liberal progressivism, but rather in unexpected and devalued places and moments, in the greasy remains of a low-budget banquet, for example, or the flash of passion that disrupts sacrosanct sexual, racial, or class boundaries. My point here is not the synonymy of vanguard and bohemian, but rather bohemia’s function as one of a handful of cultural, political, and ethical tendencies out of which comes the avantgarde. The bohemian is fundamentally a creature of the modern moment and always something of a modernist. Regardless of where history is to be found, the bohemian assumes that authentic existence is historically conscious existence. To be bohemian is to be a memorialist. To remember in a certain way is to be authentic in a certain way. This combination of memory and authenticity is a hallmark of bohemian otherness and a wellspring for the critical-creative minority movements conventionally understood to be the avantgarde.

Even a postmodernist like performance historian C. Carr can find herself irresistibly drawn by the ontological, memorial, and critical-creative promise of bohemia’s *longue durée*. In the concluding pages of *On Edge*, a survey of late 20th-century performance in the United States, she writes, “There has always been a single bohemian tradition,” though noting that this tradition rarely “include[s] something like the Harlem Renaissance, still the demimonde most bohemians know least about. (It’s barely mentioned in most boho histories)” (1993:323). Despite Carr’s incisive critique of bohemia’s long-term penchant for casual racism and selling out, one can’t help but sense a tone of nostalgia in her book’s closing pages, a yearning for the great bohemian hangouts of the past—Paris’s Left Bank, New York’s Washington

Square and East Village. This nostalgia stands in a most uneasy relationship to Carr's precise descriptions of the kinds of racism, sexism, and homophobia that are integral to that single bohemian tradition. So, while it's a curious enough feature of a survey of late-20th-century performance to find it concluded with a chapter titled "The Bohemian Diaspora," it's more curious still that it is in such a diaspora that Carr finds the terms with which to contend with the dilemma of radical performance at the end of the millennium. In a book desperate to find signs of authenticity, of something "tangible" (325), her final chapter turns to history, to memories of bohemia, to the great sites of bohemian resistance.

But this act of "bohemianized" memory proves highly selective even at its most critically aware. So, though the classic sites and inhabitants of bohemia are included by Carr in this memorial conclusion, there is only a single, brief mention of the "original bohemian" and this in the last lines of the book:

We've come full circle, back to the original meaning of the word bohemian: "gypsy." Of course, bohemia was always part of the exile tradition, the place where the lost ones went to find each other. But it was exile from one tangible place to another. Now that there *is* no place, the exiles have become nomads, and there's a whole culture of the disappeared. (325)

This is the only mention of the Roma in her book—and by the colloquial term "gypsy" (a term rejected by the Roma themselves). This casts the book's final lines in a light that demands very careful attention. The allusion to the Roma, highly attenuated as it is, is absolutely appropriate to the terms set by Carr's examination of the dilemmas of radical performance in our own times. Yet, at the same time, it is weirdly disembodied, ahistorical, and naive. For the Roma, finding a place for community has always been a life-threatening quest, their "disappearance" not just a consequence of mass-media hypocrisy and the malign neglect of federal funding agencies, but of "gypsy hunters," Nazis, and skinheads.

To be clear: I'm not criticizing Carr for an act of political incorrectness; in fact, I don't think that a more historically textured discussion of the "original bohemian" would add a thing to her analysis of late-20th-century performance. Rather, I'm interested in why the bohemian is suddenly remembered by Carr, how Carr's epilogue, not unlike Larson's showstopper, both demands and repeats a gesture that is ubiquitous to representations of bohemia. Here we see the "gypsy" playing a curious role: the simultaneous invocation and erasure of the Roma provides some critical leverage on questions of historical consciousness, cultural identity, and ontological authenticity—but does so precisely by erasing, by forgetting, certain enabling dimensions of that consciousness, that identity, that authenticity, that might provide a more complex understanding of cultural activism. By exploring and explaining Carr's reflex, I hope to restore those dimensions in order to add a bit to our understanding of cultural activism. Describing the Roma "presence" in bohemia and the bohemian presence in the history of the avantgarde enables a better understanding of race and racism not just as tools for the disempowerment of certain kinds of people, but also for those who would challenge such disempowerment—in other words, the kind of critical declarations that got those fur-clad theatregoers in such a huff.

But it's not easy to describe that presence. The Roma seem to fall into a category described by Toni Morrison as "unspeakable things unspoken" ([1989] 2004) and by Peggy Phelan as the "unmarked" (1993). The Roma, not unlike the African American, is an

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“invisible thing” that is “not necessarily ‘not-there,’” a “void” that is “empty, but [...] not a vacuum” (Morrison [1989] 2004:2306).

As is commonly recognized, the special talent of bohemians has always been the ability to discover new ways of living, ways that confront and/or avoid authority in new, surprising, and always interesting ways. Indeed, more than just a counterculture, bohemia is, in many respects, a seedbed for the very concept of culture. Bohemia developed at a time when Western European authorities and their rebellious subjects were suddenly and sharply hungry for a *concept* of culture—not in the “high culture” sense (the sense preferred by 19th-century European elites), but rather a concept of culture that would provide the means to effectively counteract the guerrilla insurgencies, ultraconservative rural enclaves, and urban-dwelling subalterns who were causing perennial consternation among the ruling elite.

The “discovery” of culture by the bohemians occurred at a time and place that possessed only the most rudimentary academic, criminological, and popular discourses on culture. A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhorn (1952) demonstrate that the term “culture” was identified as an object of scientific study not until about 1843 (around the time that bohemia’s first wave had already peaked), and largely in order to differentiate a field of practices not covered by the concept “civilization,” which “refers primarily to the process of cultivation or the degree to which it has been carried” (13). Culture, on the other hand, described an “extraorganic or superorganic” state or condition “in which all human societies share even though their particular cultures may show very great qualitative differences” (13–14). The unity of aesthetics and ontology has always been the hallmark of both bohemia and the avantgarde; blurring the line between art and life has always been about the organic unity of art and life, either its consummation or its shattering. It is important to note, however, that elite French intellectuals and academics of the 19th century openly resisted the idea of a specifically cultural politics. Even by 1952, the year Kroeber and Kluckhorn’s book was published, “[i]n French, the modern anthropological meaning of culture has not yet been generally accepted as standard, or is admitted only with reluctance in scientific and scholarly circles, though the adjective cultural is sometimes so used” (11–12). Indeed, we should recall that Claude Lévi-Strauss’s first significant works on structural anthropology weren’t published until later in that decade, and the radical ethnographic project of the Surrealists had been largely eclipsed by World War II and the Existentialists. What this means is that the ability to recognize, remember, and revolutionize the field of activities, gestures, beliefs, and expressions that is “culture” was pioneered by bohemians in a situation in which the “expert” discourse on cultural politics went no farther than police harassment and editorial-column disdain.

If bohemia is to be understood as the birthplace of cultural studies, then it is vital that we situate that birth within a context of revolutionary backlash. César Graña, in his classic work on bohemia, has noted the impact on bohemians of the multiple waves of political reaction that took place in the early 1800s in France. He writes,

Popular suffrage in France before the revolution of 1848 had actually reached its peak immediately after 1789, when something less than half a million had been given the vote. By introducing tax qualifications, the Bourbon restoration had brought the figure down to 100,000, chiefly landowners and wealthy merchants and manufacturers. The Orléans monarchy reduced the electoral tax to accommodate the middle businessman and certain professional groups, but no one beyond that. In 1846, out of a population of 35,000,000, the “legal nation,” the electorate of France [...] was 250,000. (1964:13)

Offering a kind of “imaginary solution” to the increasingly intractable problems and hardening authoritarianism of the French liberal state, the bohemian counterculture served at least somewhat effectively to protect the interests and express the resistance of those marginalized by the modernizing, capitalizing, counterrevolutionary nation-state.

This “cultural turn” and its influence on the avantgarde are two of the main concerns of this essay; another is the category of “race.” For a variety of reasons, culture simply could not be conceptualized by marginalized French urbanites or the authorities who policed them without thinking about race. Contra Carr, bohemia’s relationship to blackness extends beyond its brief dalliance during the Harlem Renaissance. Right from the start, bohemian cultural activism required an ideological supplement, a symbolic and performative fortification that provided a sense of groundedness, of chthonic authenticity. The ethnic group known popularly as “gypsies,” but more precisely as the Roma (who, again, reject the term “gypsy”) supply even to those who have forgotten them both a conceptual structure and an ontological model for living virtuously and authentically apart from the mainstream. It is by way of mimicking, appropriating, mythologizing, and, ultimately, erasing the Roma that the idea of challenging political authority through fashion, sex, drug use, cuisine, creative expression, etc., came into being.

To make sense of how remembering the Roma can prompt a broader rethinking of avantgarde history and theory, I need to begin by making two points, which I’ll describe briefly here, then delve into more deeply later. First, I need to describe two aspects of the bohemian lifestyle: “theatricalized authenticity” and exoticism. The combination of theatricality, authenticity, and exoticism has often served as an effective way to criticize, delegitimize, and appropriate tendencies and institutions of modern liberal society. For Parisians in the 1830s and ’40s, theatricalized authenticity and exoticism opened a bit of space in an increasingly claustrophobic sociopolitical environment, an environment that was the consequence of a backlash that transformed a revolutionary republic into a modern bourgeois state thoroughly invested in the management of its radical, nonmetropolitan, immigrant populations. As I’ll ultimately show, exotic appearance, speech, and everyday life habits guaranteed the bohemian not just a sense of living apart, but also a deep sense of authenticity, a grounded sense of belonging. Imagined authenticity compensated for a very real alienation and danger.

Having described in detail the aesthetic characteristics and racist logic of bohemianism, I will then briefly describe an understudied moment in avantgarde history, the “cultural turn” of the avantgarde, which occurred from 1825 to 1855. Considering this turn together with the racist logic of bohemia, I can then move to the conclusion that the cultural turn of the avantgarde in the mid-19th century was a racist turn. Though this turn would ultimately be overshadowed in the 1880s by the distinct and more broadly dispersed racist logic of colonialism, the vanguard potential of bohemianism’s racialism has retained some power and efficacy ever since, contributing to such important developments as the Surrealist critique of racist imperialism (1925–) and the Black Arts Movement (1965–1975). Race has also served as a conceptual and practical handhold on the avantgarde for the police; the racialization of the avantgarde by authorities has led to large-scale anti-avantgarde initiatives such as the successful counterinsurgency war waged by Great Britain in Malaya, which exploited ethnic differences between Chinese and Malay; the Counter Intelligence Program of the Nixon administration, which targeted radical African American organizations in the 1960s and ’70s; and counterinsurgency operations in Kenya, Malaya, Algeria, and South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the role of the Roma in the cultural turn of the avantgarde can help us to understand in more complex ways the ongoing relationship between race and power in the modern era.<sup>3</sup>

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2. It is interesting to note that the *Small Wars Manual* (2005) of the U.S. Marine Corps has been recently revised; among the many changes from the 1940 edition is the deletion of all mention of “racial psychology” or “racial characteristics” and a call for a cultural studies approach to counterinsurgency; soldiers are advised to understand the integral relationship of military and civil objectives as they enter the theatre of operations.
  3. I am using the term “racialist” to describe a discourse in which biological, ontological, and theoretical assertions based on race are made—as well as contested. “Racist” refers to those situations in which racist discourse is used to promote the degradation and exploitation of persons defined by racist discourse as distinct from those doing the degrading and exploiting.

## Two Characteristics of Bohemia

### I. Theatricalized Authenticity

The rebellions, petty and grand, of bohemians are rebellions on *display*. The bohemians are at all the big events of the season. They hang out on street corners, loud, gaudy, seemingly incapable of minding the line between private and public. Murger describes bohemians as those who have “given evidence to the public of their existence” ([1845] 1903:xxix). The bohemian “hides in the light,” to recall Dick Hebdige’s (1989) description of “spectacular subcultures” like the British punk scene of the 1970s and ’80s. Bohemians are rebels, attractively so. As Mary Gluck puts it, bohemia’s “alternative vision [of self and modernity] cannot be found in any literary text or ideological tract produced by members of bohemia. It was, rather, performed through gestures, clothes, lifestyle, and interior decoration” (2000:356). Gluck notes in particular the 19th-century craze for dress inspired by “Gothic novels, fashionable romances, romantic dramas, and melodramas, whose colorful images saturated the world of popular culture” (358). Perhaps the most famous bohemian act of theatrical authenticity occurred around the so-called “Battle of *Hernani*,” when a group of outrageously dressed French youth, led by Théophile Gautier, stood publicly in support of their idol Victor Hugo against the philistine bourgeois hordes. Much was said of Gautier’s long hair and bright crimson sash, leading me to conclude that the invention of the bohemian marks, in part, the invention of “visibility politics.”

But to be so theatrical was to put at risk authenticity. Gautier, for one, made it a point of “keeping it real” both in life and print, perhaps in part due to the theatrical celebrity that had propelled him into the public eye. In an 1843 review of the dismal little melodrama *Les Bobémiens de Paris*, he “angrily objected to the application of the ‘charming’ word to the dubious street people (‘cranky ruffians,’ ‘frightful villains,’ ‘hideous toads who hop in the mires of Paris’) who populated the play [...]” (Brown 1985:1). Not just ethnophilic, class-conscious elitism is at work here; as Marilyn R. Brown has shown, the deeper issue in Gautier’s ire is national and ethnic solidarity. To wit, Gautier backs up his critical authority by describing a trek he took through Spain a few years earlier—no small accomplishment in an age before superhighways and personalized combustion engines—during which he saw the “real bohemians.” Gautier declares, “Along with the *gitanos* of Spain, the gypsies of Scotland, the *zigueners* [*sic*] of Germany, here are the only bohemians that we recognize” (in Brown 1985:1). The claim of authenticity is ratified by both the “real bohemians” and the Gautier group, who made sure to outfit themselves in “authentic” nomad gear in preparation for meeting the “authentic” nomads of the Spanish hinterlands.

Gautier’s paradoxically theatricalized authenticity is also well represented in an illustration by Gustave Bourgain (1890; fig. 1). In it, we see a group of artists, specifically a group from the antitraditionalist Barbizon school, painting a band of “gypsies”—three women huddled around a cooking fire and a man striking a provocative pose in front of a wagon home. Bourgain titles the image *Gypsies* and intends the uncertainty: Who are the gypsies here, the artists or the folks by the wagon? Well, both, of course. But there’s a deeper quality of ambivalence to be found when we take note, following Brown, that the male bohemian in the image is not a “real” bohemian, but a surrogate in gypsy drag (1985:5). The irony would be rich enough were he simply some anonymous actor looking to pick up a few *sous* and lunch. However, the role was played by the rabble-rousing poet Jean Richepin. Born in the French colony of Algeria in 1849, he had acquired a well-earned reputation by 1890 for stirring up the impoverished classes with impassioned verse, competitive drinking, and full-time commitment to the life of the nomad. He was, in the truest sense, a bohemian of the first rank: ornery, political, and a dexterous drunk. Bourgain is the kind of case that shows how, as Brown puts it, “from its inception, [...] bohemianism was a ‘picturesque’ response to, and sublimation of, the failure of” the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the recourse to art and attitude in order to allow the torch to be carried on (9).



Figure 1. Gustave Bourgain, *Gypsies*, 1890. Bourgain captures the multiple ironies of bohemian identity. In it, he portrays a group of “bohemian” artists painting a “bohemian” (i.e., Roma) camp, in front of which poses the Algerian-born “bohemian” actor and rabble rouser Jean Richépin—one bohemian posing as the other in front of still others (reprinted in Brown 1985).

The gypsy was a complex character for non-Roma French and was repeatedly associated with theatricality. As a term, “bohemian” suggested to the French the nomadic entertainers of the day—*saltimbanques*, bear wrestlers, jugglers, and the like—and a range of theatrical types such as the congenital liar, juggler, con artist, dancer, and pickpocket. Theatricality also informed the legal status of the bohemian: In addition to tracking the movement of Roma through their association with itinerant performers, European anti-gypsy legislation regularly targeted Roma dress and language, long a favored fashion style for unruly non-Roma youth. Racist anti-gypsy legislation in France since the 15th century almost always targeted both ethnic Roma and entertainers, not to mention the wannabes who tagged along emulating their dress, dialect, and gesticulations. In the 1864 words of Paul Boudet, French Minister of the Interior, the *bohémien* was “vagabond,” “dangerous foreigner,” and, as street performer, “the natural auxiliaries of the Socialist establishment” (in Brown 1985:24).

Thus, anyone attempting to correct historical understanding regarding the Roma must get in among the smoke and mirrors of gypsy camps composed not just of ethnic Roma, but of revolutionaries, painters, jugglers, con artists, and, at least some of the time, magazine illustrators. I agree with Gluck when she argues that the central problem surrounding efforts to construct a sociology of bohemia is the inability to get past the deeply embedded myths surrounding it. After all, with such myths in the way, we will always fail to “connect the social and the aesthetic dimensions of the bohemian and thus reestablish the historical specificity and concreteness of the figure” (2000:352). I also agree that we should ask a series of questions that attempt to stabilize historically and sociologically the bohemian, questions such as, “What were the historical preconditions that explain the emergence of the cultural bohemian? What were his characteristic features? What were the sources of his vision of modernity



and how did he implement them within the historical world?" (353). However, Gluck's timely advice takes no account of the Roma or the dynamic of theatricalized authenticity surrounding them. As a consequence, her conclusion is deracinated and risks overlooking the effects of theatricality and race on cultural bohemianism, and the implications these effects have on visions of modernity such as those professed by bohemians or vanguardists.

Alaina Lemon (1996) points out, in a nuanced analysis of racial politics at the Moscow Teatr Romeni, that any effort to study the Roma must inevitably contend with theatricalized authenticity. She notes that there is a specific function for the idea of "authenticity" in Russian Romani society, one rooted in theatrical performance, an idea that is common among all Roma, not just entertainers. She writes:

One reason it is so difficult for Romani performers to contest what is or is not authentic in a production, to challenge tropes that have dominated up to now, is that being seen as authentic is much more problematic for them than for actors in other, non-ethnic theatres. Audiences and actors usually make a "basic conceptual distinction" between a fictive "staged role" and a real "stage actor." But this role separation does not apply to Romani performers in Russia—Roma are supposed to play themselves, as *Roma*. (489)

As Lemon demonstrates, remembering the Roma as an ethnic group carrying with it a history of violence and harassment, scholars and historians introduce race into the conversation, and, as a consequence, basic conceptions of identity, difference, and community are at once complicated and clarified. At the same time, we introduce performance into the conversation, carrying with it all the complexities and baffling ironies of performativity. Lemon continues:

[T]he case for Roma in Russia is complicated precisely by the fact that the tendency to perform is located within the "true Gypsy." Indirectly, such tropes of performance affect even nonperformers, who are expected simultaneously to be temperamental (expressive) and capricious (improvisational), as well as calculating (rehearsed) and dishonest (masking). (481)

Theatricalized authenticity is shared by bohemians and Roma alike, a sense that true being is not possible except through a theatricalization of self, a making public of a secret identity in declarations and exhibitions of public derring-do that are also exercises in subversive disguise and deception, an effort to "hide in the light" and, in the very act of hiding, demonstrate a fragile sense of otherness. It is with bohemia, not Italian Futurism (as asserted by Goldberg 1988), that the history of avantgarde performance really begins. To borrow a phrase from Stanton Garner, bohemia marks the "bodying forth" of the avantgarde, its emergence as a mode of ideologically motivated "radical actuality" (2000:530).

## II. Exoticism

"Exoticism" is defined rather blankly by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "tendency to adopt what is exotic"; "exotic" defined as (1) outside, extrinsic, or foreign in character and (2) as something "of or pertaining to striptease and stripteasers." According to this definition, "exoticism" describes a mode of appropriation, of sex and sexual display, and ethnicity. In this respect, there is perhaps no better emblem of bohemian exoticism than the gypsy dancer, resplendent in cloth, coins, and utterly titillating ethnicity. She is the obsession of Hugo's hunchbacked bell ringer in *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) and she is a celebrity ghost haunting Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2002). The courtesan Satine, played by the luminously pale Nicole Kidman, is an uncanny Esmerelda, at once familiar and alien; beauty surrounded by vicious patriarchs, salvation offered by a figure of offensive aesthetic temperament (Christian for Satine, the hunchback for Esmerelda). But of course, Satine's beauty is entirely denuded of the gypsy's "blackness," and, rather than coins, Satine wears diamonds. In the case of both ethnicity and value, Satine is a second-order displacement of the Roma: just as Kidman's paleness displaces the metaphorical blackness that displaces the Roma, the diamonds Satine

celebrates displace the coin that displaces the material acts of production and exchange.

The case of Satine reminds me again of Morrison:

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’: that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. (Morrison [1989] 2004:2306)

Kidman’s whiteness draws attention to what Phelan would describe as the “unmarked” racist foundation of that exoticized whiteness. Her paleness is heightened by the deep, rich, dark colors against which it is cast by the film’s set designers, lighting technicians, photographers, makeup artists, and post-production team; it speaks to a whiteness so pure it compels a confrontation with its racial and optical other. Satine is Luhrmann’s version of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), with its black servant and burst of flowers heightening the rosy flesh of its primary subject. In it, we see a whiteness whose luminosity is enabled by the black choker traditionally worn by the prostitute and the spray of flowers presented by a black servant rendered almost invisible by the deep tones of the background. The bold invitation of Olympia’s whiteness is that it allows one to appropriate, to visually “adopt” a blackness comprised of love, desire, economic exchange, and compulsory visibility.

Exoticism plays in the bohemian myth the same ambivalent role as theatricalized authenticity does among Lemon’s Roma. Consider one of the settings in *Moulin Rouge*, on which play out a number of the film’s key scenes. The set portrays the rooftop of the megaclub, upon which stands a larger-than-life sculpture of an elephant styled in a kind of kitschy but fetching “Eastern” fashion, upon which, in turn, is discovered the “Indian-style” boudoir of the courtesan Satine. Perched on a synecdoche of the subcontinent (though judging from the ears the elephant appears to be African, not Asian), Satine’s chambers are as lovely as they are undeniably “Indian”: curvilinear, ornately trimmed, saturated in deep crimsons and golds, rich with brocade. This is the dramatic navel of the movie, the place where the sexual and economic triangle of Satine, Christian, and the Duke is established (in one of the movie’s most romantic sequences) and complicated (in one of the movie’s funniest, as Christian and his fellow bohemian artists pitch their “Spectacular Spectacular” to the Duke); it is the site of both the most impassioned declarations of interiority and the campiest performances of identity for benighted authority. The goings-on in and around Satine’s boudoir suggest that while sex and money threaten to undermine any sense of reality—compelling all the characters to camp it up to the patriarch—they also ensure that impassioned heterosexual romance resonates with a feeling of profound “authenticity,” a power to break through patriarchal lies into “true love.” In other words, Satine’s boudoir is the epitome of “exotic bohemia.” There, Satine is enticingly blackened without losing the creamy luxury of her perfect whiteness.

As with theatricalized authenticity, exoticism is often more than just a thematic element in the representation of the bohemian; sometimes exoticism is a formal dimension of the work itself, giving the entire production something of the uncanny quality of the characters themselves. That’s the case with *Moulin Rouge*, whose exoticism goes beyond the often beautiful yet kitschy self-indulgence of set and plot. Luhrmann and production designer Catherine Martin also pay homage in their movie to the over-the-top theatricality and mix-and-match aesthetic of contemporary Indian musical cinema. This is sincere homage, an homage that boosts the emotional impact of scenes such as the one in which Christian and Satine settle their doubts about their love—a scene that follows Satine’s breathless admission, “I can’t believe it, I’m in love,” and Christian’s concern that what had felt real was just an income-generating act of prostitional savvy. In a move reminiscent of Larson’s “La Vie Boheme,” over a dozen songs about love are referenced in lyric and melody, suggesting that the theatre of bohemian exoticism can be simultaneously a memory theatre, too. For example, the “exotic

East” in *Moulin Rouge* isn’t just a reference in the movie, it *informs* the movie, giving its insolent pastiche the redolence of that peculiarly un-postmodern idea that historical and cultural knowledge grants authenticity to the knower. The “exotic East” gives to Luhmann’s bohemians a rich quality of sexual and cultural otherness. It also gives the film as a whole the imprimatur of bohemian authenticity; its hipness and historical consciousness would be thoroughly appreciated by Larson’s revelers. And, for my present purposes, it provides a useful way to consider how race, racialism, and racism inform both bohemia and the avantgarde.

### Bohemian Racialism—or Racism?

Bohemianism is a complex cultural tendency, one formed through tangled acts of remembering, appropriation, self-authentication, performance, titillation, and intense feelings of love, pleasure, and anguish. It is, perhaps, this very complexity that lends itself to racialization. After all, race is a form of identification based on a paradox aptly described by a character in Lorraine Hansberry and Robert Nemiroff’s *Les Blancs* (1972). Arguing with an American journalist who insists that everyone could get along if they just cleared their heads of racist nonsense, Tshembe Matoseh freely admits that race is just a “device,” a fiction to justify oppression and exploitation, an utterly unempirical, completely fantastic idea. However, Tshembe makes certain the paradox sinks in its claws: “A device is a device, but [...] it also has consequences: once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own.” The black man in Mississippi shot by racists, he sardonically concludes, “is suffering the utter *reality* of the device” (1972:92). Tshembe himself must ultimately embrace a more “authentic” self, making an existential decision based on cultural patterns that he did not invent; he quite literally removes the clothes of the European intellectual and puts on the clothing of the revolutionary Afro-nationalist.

Recently, thinking about Tshembe’s paradox has taken a turn toward the ontological and epistemological wilds of performance. The *locus classicus* for this approach to performance is Judith Butler who, in works such as *Bodies That Matter* (1999) and the earlier *Gender Trouble* (1993), makes clear that performance is one of the ways that conventional order both reestablishes itself amidst the chronic uncertainties of everyday life and obscures identity’s links to the social, historical, and economic structures surrounding it. At the same time, Butler shows, performance can produce recognition of the process itself, either accidentally in those weird moments when all the world seems a stage, or more purposefully, in the off-kilter eroticism of gay drag. Butler calls this condition “performativity,” and her insistence on the performative nature of identity—making it at once the product of moment-to-moment improvisation as well as illusory sensation of essential permanence—has brought new attention to the performing arts as well as those sites and moments in our lives where the requirement to perform is most visible or worthy of description and criticism.

The “original” bohemians—the Roma—had been a significant component of French culture since the 1820s, impacting literary style, fashion, sexuality, and art, as well as real estate markets. Sir Walter Scott’s *Quentin Durward* (1823) was a huge hit in Paris upon its translation in the mid-1820s, sparking a brief craze among Parisian women for Scottish tartan. Performative notions of identity infuse Scott’s book. In it, the stolid Scot hero is the fascinating Hayraddin Maurabin, a gypsy who plays both sides of a civil war only to lose his life to the hangman’s rope—but not before bequeathing his legacy to the handsome and valorous main player. His face “discolored with paint and with some remnants of a fictitious beard, assumed for the purpose of disguise” ([1823] 2005), Hayraddin tells Quentin a death-bed secret that turns out to be fundamental to stopping the war and ensuring Quentin’s fame and fortune. Of particular note is Scott’s reliance on an origin myth often promulgated by the Roma themselves: that they were Egyptians who had been forced by European crusaders to convert to Christianity only to find themselves equally obliged to renounce Christianity once the Saracens kicked out the Europeans. Scott’s novel inspired scores of young men and

women to confidently proclaim themselves internal exiles of faux-Egyptian origin, not exactly a nation-within-a-nation, but a culture-within-a-nation.

As I've shown already, such self-minoritization was ultimately about blackness. This blackness is not merely an *imposed* blackness, though. Ian Hancock notes that the Roma themselves have long depended upon a system of black/white imagery:

[T]his distinction has always been a part of the Romani world view. Another term for "non-Gypsy" is *goró*, which in India means "light-skinned," while a Romani self-ascriptive label found in Northern and Western Europe is *Kaló*, which means "black." One Romani term for Eastern Europe, where the highest concentration of Romani lives, is *Kali Oropa*. [...] These are boundary-maintaining labels which persist in culture while no longer having any manifestation physically. (1998)

An especially intriguing aspect of Scott's novel is the continual misrecognition of the hero as a "gypsy." The notion that a European ethnic group (the Scots, characterized as Celtic in the novel) suffering domination by the Anglo-Saxons can be mistaken for a supposedly Egyptian tribe suffering domination by Europeans is important because it plays into a major theme of Scott's: the status and future of Europe and of those white Europeans who were still suffering conditions all too similar to those of slaves in Eastern Europe and the Americas.

Hayraddin is very much like Quentin, coming from a people not unlike the Celts, a people "who had not forgotten the lore which had been taught him." On the other hand, Hayraddin's people are quite different from Durward's: He characterizes himself as an "African Moor." Either way, Hayraddin is the scion of an originary people, with a pedigree that places him close to the roots of European civilization, a place shared by the Celts, of which tribe Quentin is a member.

He is also visibly black, a characteristic repeatedly noted by Scott and his characters, though intriguingly, when he gives to Quentin his great secret, he appears somewhat white, his face (again) "discoloured by paint" used to disguise him as a white. Most importantly, he is dead by novel's end, present only as legacy.

The ghost of Hayraddin lurked among the Parisian neighborhoods where one found artists, unmarried mothers, addicts, entertainers, political radicals, the chronically ill, and sex-industry workers. An imagined blackness gave a sense of historical and political authenticity to the kind of person who experienced identity as an uneasy mix of choice and compulsion, and politics as at once impossible to control yet unprecedentedly palpable. The bohemian myth gave existential firmness to the day-to-day chaos in which many white Europeans lived, gave to them a kind of ontological language with which to express popular memory, existential authenticity, cultural prerogative, and political entitlement in a society that saw regular and legal violence and discrimination against women; the poor; and political, ethnic, and epidemiological minorities. The myth of bohemia was the performative language with which those alienated by an unprecedented modernity could make sense of an existence thrillingly close to disaster and terror.

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## The Cultural Turn of the Avantgarde

What I'm calling the cultural turn of the avantgarde began almost immediately after Henri de Saint-Simon invented the modern figure of the avantgarde in the 1820s, characterizing it as a union of scientists, industrialists, engineers, and artists who would push forward with world-altering projects like the Panama and Suez canals. As Egbert has shown in his indispensable *Social Radicalism and the Arts: Western Europe* (1970), Saint-Simon's first theory of the avantgarde was based in an essentially mechanistic, technocratic concept—the earliest adherents of the avantgarde idea were in fact military engineers and Saint-Simon's doctrine is remarkably similar to our own neoconservatives'.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after this coining, a kind of theoretical schism occurred among the Saint-Simonians. In a text either written with or penned entirely by Olinde Rodrigues, "L'Artiste, le savant, et l'industriel" (1825) we find what Egbert characterizes as an "organic," "romantic" concept of the avantgarde, one that emphasized communal living and the inherent radicalism of innovation, regardless of whether it had practical applications or not. Begun in 1825 with one of Saint-Simon's last attributed writings, the cultural turn was more or less complete by 1855, the year of the Paris Exposition, at which we find an independent art show mounted by the perennially angry Gustave Courbet.

Courbet's *Pavilion du Realisme* flaunted aesthetic independence and ideological radicalism in the faces of solid citizens like those I encountered on that Chicago staircase. But, and this is no small qualification, he did so just up the mall from the Colonial Exhibition, where all the "goods" of colonialism, including gleaming black bodies, could be encountered in dazzling display. Though bohemia carries on to this day, the racial myths that sustained it during its first three decades of existence were trumped by (and perhaps paved the way for) colonialism. The "blackening" of bohemia took a different form starting in the 1920s, when the decolonization movement cast it in a distinctly African hue, beginning with the Moroccan Rif movement of 1925, whose insurgency against French occupation forces catalyzed the French Surrealist group's turn to explicitly anticolonialist activism.

During the three decades between Saint-Simon and Courbet, the avantgarde experienced a significant change in character, transforming from an essentially technocratic, paramilitary concept to what would prove a more widespread and persistent model of arts activism, but one whose relations to colonialism and all its attendant effects have gone largely unexplored to this day. As James Harding has recently written:

From its very inception, the Western [...] avantgarde has consistently found itself entangled in the cultural politics of colonialism. Examples of this entanglement are not difficult to find since they are often scantily masked beneath aesthetic categories like primitivism or negritude [...] or beneath a patronizing embrace of Asian performance traditions [...]. (2006:18)

Whether the "Negro poems" at the Dadas' Cabaret Voltaire or Antonin Artaud's blown mind at the Balinese exhibition of another, later Exposition, the avantgarde has been entangled both practically and theoretically with the colonized and colonialism.

In "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avantgarde Performance," Harding precisely describes a basic problem with the way the avantgarde has been understood, and a number of the issues and recommendations that he makes dovetail tightly with my own purposes here. Harding argues that without adequate attention paid to the entanglements of avantgardism and colonialism, we risk

turning a blind apologetic eye [...] or, if we only see the entanglement and dismiss the idea as another ideological conduit for European cultural hegemony, then we have

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4. It was also racist in nature, as I demonstrate in the chapter dedicated to race in my current book project *The Avant-Garde: Race Religion Food War*. However, the nature of that racialization is not germane to the reaction against it, so in the interests of brevity, I'll leave it alone here.

failed to recognize the extent to which [...] the avantgarde not as a European but as a fundamentally global phenomenon. (19)

Doing so, we can better understand the “contested intercultural exchanges,” “transnational phenomena,” and the “processes of global hegemony and [...] counterhegemonic resistance” (23). Restoring the spatial dimension of the avantgarde—a dimension often forgotten by those who emphasize the avantgarde as a futurological, time-oriented tendency—Harding suggests the metaphor of “rough edges” to describe a way of thinking about the avantgarde that emphasizes it not as “subsequent to the moments of intercultural exchange,” but rather “in the exchanges themselves” (23). By focusing on the “sites of cultural exchange and contestation,” the avantgarde appears like a “plurality of edges devoid of an identifiable center, a plurality that the rectilinear center-to-edge/edge-to-center convention in scholarship on the avantgarde has obscured” (24).<sup>5</sup>

Harding’s assertions are accurate and important, enabling critics and scholars to recognize the complexity and ambivalence of the avantgarde’s relationship to colonialism and Eurocentrism. Ultimately, however, Harding doesn’t acknowledge two important features of that relationship, features that suggest a way to press his conclusions even further:

1. By describing colonialism and Eurocentrism as the relationship between a colonial center and a periphery, Harding overlooks the equally important role of national formation and of the kinds of cultural and police force applied to those *within* the so-called center. The “savage primitivism” fashioned by Alfred Jarry, for example, was primitivism based not on the rude arts of some distant people, but of an ethnic “other” within French national boundaries. Kimberly Jannarone (2001) has shown the deep connections between Jarry’s puppet shows and his childhood in the Breton region of France, a region that bore the brunt of urban centralization and cultural homogenization. We might look at the recent avantgarde culinary tendency in the Basque region of Spain in such a light. The intertwining of traditional regional cuisine, the principles of French nouvelle cuisine, and deconstructionism is a complex consequence and response to the region’s uneasy relationship to both Spain (e.g., the Basque separatist movement), the nascent European Union, and its own recently liberated economic elites (see Lubow 2003).
2. Despite all appearances, the avantgarde is not a European invention and is, therefore, not just cause but consequence of intercultural exchange. The concept of the avantgarde developed over a long-enduring process of hybridization with Islam that began with the Crusades and reached its first fruits in the intercourse among Western European romantics, Orientalists, and critical tendencies in Islam, particularly Sufism. The “non-European” has played a central role in the invention of the avantgarde (Saint-Simon, for example, often paid homage to the Arabs’ introduction of science into European culture), though that role, much like that of the Roma, has been occluded by critics and historians.<sup>6</sup> The “gypsy” is only one role that the Arab has played in avantgarde history.

The avantgarde has often been creator and advocate of new ways of thinking about the interconnections of ontology, representation, and place—putting those thoughts into action. Along the rough edges described by Harding, vanguard communities have consistently *performed* the processes and possibilities of minoritization, doing it for, with, against, and as minorities themselves. Further, vanguard communities have repeatedly utilized the culturally significant practices and sensitized position of minority identities—the Roma, the African American, the Mexican, and others—to outrage, challenge, engage, and attack. Examining bohemia’s role as a crucible for what we now call “cultural politics” enables us to understand

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5. For more on how intercultural exchange has constitutionally impacted the avantgarde, see also the essays collected in Conlon and Gabara (1999) and Sell (2002).

6. A more detailed exploration of the impact of the Arab on the avantgarde is found in the chapter on religion in my current book project *The Avant-Garde: Race Religion Food War*.

in more precise ways how and why the avantgarde and race relate to each other as persistently as they do. The bohemians of Paris pioneered a new form of sociopolitical practice that has proven highly useful for countless activist tendencies—Right, Left, and otherwise. The ubiquity of race and racialized thinking in the avantgarde is not just a consequence of the ubiquity of racial thought and racialized power in the modern world. The avantgarde has been an agent of that ubiquity, at times altering it in favor of the disempowered, at times working

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to strengthen the already empowered. The rough edges are rough, indeed.

This is no more clear than when we turn to the Right, where we discover another avantgarde structured in part around the Roma. The field of modern criminology was founded by Cesare Lombroso, who originated a racist theory of crime arguing that criminality was an inherited defect not exclusively, but most commonly found among “inferior” races like the “gypsies” (Lombroso [1911] 1972). Lombroso argued a classic racist-vanguard line later perfected by the Italian Futurists, though advocating the establishment of an elite police force—rather

than a cadre of poets, dancers, and “aeropainters”—to patrol the social borderlands along which troublesome populations lurked. The Roma was a prime example of “the criminal mind,” to recall the title of Lombroso’s highly influential work of 1876. He was backed up on this by B.A. Morel and Rafael Salillas, the latter of whom, according to Lou Charnon-Deutsch, considered “gypsies by nature and occupation [...] more akin to the delinquent than to the normal elements of society” (2005). Though discredited for some time now, Lombroso and his followers established criminology as a scientific field, but a field with a persistent concern (some would say “obsession”) with phenotypical markers such as blackness, fashion, gesture, and leisure habits. When we put Lombroso back in the picture, racial profiling appears not accidental but integral to criminology, a strategy that allows authority to get a toehold on cultural radicalism.<sup>7</sup>

One of the great ironies of avantgarde studies is that among its masterpieces is one by a man who despised the avantgarde and, intriguingly, considered himself a disciple of Lombroso. Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* is dedicated to the Italian criminologist “in open and joyful recognition of the fact that without [his] labors it could never have been written” ([1895] 1968:vii). Nordau writes,

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the [...] anthropological family who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil. (vii)

Nordau’s book is a veritable anthropology of the *fin-de-siècle* avantgarde, with chapters on the “Pre-Raphaelites, Symbolism, Tolstoism, the Richard Wagner Cult, Parnassians and Diabolists, Decadents and Aesthetes, Ibsenism, Friedrich Nietzsche, Zola and his School, and the ‘Young German’ Plagiarists” (xi–xiii). In this unapologetically racist, sexist, homophobic, and Eurocentric book, Nordau effectively extended the traditional European habit of equating the Roma with marginalized cultural producers; by doing so, he helped produce the very

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7. Andrew Perry confirmed this suspicion in a paper completed for my research writing class at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Spring 2005.

discourse by which academics comprehend the avantgarde. For authorities in the 16th century, it was the cads in headscarfs and pantaloons who were to be watched; for the 19th-century European, those with palette and model.

Nordau's prognosis? Cautiously optimistic, but he strenuously recommends a return to the "flexible and ductile" forms of classical Greek art, greater authoritarianism, increased surveillance of the social life of "nervous" and solitude-seeking youths, and a national commitment to assist the "inexorable fate" of those "whose mental derangement is too deep-seated" (in other words, hurry them toward death; 551). Those who would argue that this book is not a precursor to the Nazi's Final Solution had best attend to these lines. "This book is obviously not written for them," Nordau continues, but *about* them, because they show "the disease of the age 'to its anatomical necessity' (to use the excellent expression of German medical science), and to this end every effort must be directed" (551). Nordau's book maps exactly the kinds of rough edges Harding discusses, though from a distinct political perspective. It is a study that capably applies the racist theories of Lombroso while affirming the importance of cultural activism in the constitution of modern Europe. The connecting link between Lombroso and Nordau is, of course, "bohemianism," the performative cultural strategy that linked the alienated and marginalized cultural producers of urban Paris to the harried but defiant immigrants in their midst. For Lombroso, the bohemian is an ethnic group; for Nordau, a counterculture. For both, the threat to ontological purity posed by the performance of otherness was a threat to the very survival of Western Enlightenment. I'll leave it to others to fully explore the influence of Nordau's book on the discourse of avantgarde studies; I am convinced that it is pervasive. Any hope for the development of a truly critical field of avantgarde studies will rest on the thoroughness of that exploration.

## The End of the Cultural Turn

Courbet's pavilion and the colonial exposition were connected by more than a broad fairground avenue and a steady stream of bourgeois strollers. As a consequence of his increasingly radical political perspectives and a passionate desire to connect with a popular audience after the failed revolution of 1848, the style and content of Courbet's painting had increasingly broken in terms of style and content from the representational and political codes upheld by academic institutions of the time (Clark 1999). His two great works from 1849, *The Stone-Breakers* and *Burial at Ornans*, present an unglamorized yet sympathetic view of working-class life, carried out in a style that, to his contemporaries, was aggressively unrefined and explicitly antiacademic.

Courbet's new style was not just a reflection of a new ideology, attitude, and audience. It was an "imaginary solution" (Hebdige 1989) to an intractable sociocultural problem, a cultural device to address, concretize, and manifest the impenetrable political processes of bourgeois France. The complex nature of Courbet's alienation—which was the consequence of both choice and coercion—demanded a comparably complex ontology. In 1850, Courbet wrote a letter to a friend in which he declares, "In our oh-so-civilized society, it is necessary for me to lead the life of a savage [...] To that end, I have just set out on the great, independent, vagabond life of the gypsy" (in Brown 1985:4). Conceived as an outpost of bohemian righteousness, Courbet's *Pavilion du Realisme* ruthlessly exposed social conditions, cultural myths, and new forms of beauty characteristic of Western capitalist modernity, driving the bohemian idea to its political limits—limits defined by the absence of non-European subjects in his work. Under the eaves of that tent, we find the final and full development of bohemian countercultural racialism—and its first encounter with the cuckoo in the nest, colonialism.

On the face of it, there would seem to be no more bizarre a place for a "bohemian" to be than at a Universal Exposition, an arena generally agreed by historians to be the phantasmagorical apotheosis of a racist, colonialist, Eurocentric capitalist system. However, his presence makes much more sense when we recognize, as Walter Benjamin did ([1935] 1978),



that the Expo was both an experiment with and a statement of capitalist power, a collection of demonstrations of how visual display can be used to exploit, titillate, and patrol. Courbet's oil-and-canvas representations of the reality of hypocrisy and cruelty were on display in a tent that was itself a spatial mark of his revolt against the "optical regime" of the Salon next door. But the principled stance of Courbet and the French academicians was itself just another of the displayed goods at the Expo, as alluring and "interesting" to onlookers as the cans of palm oil and docile African workers down the way. To add further irony to the situation is the fact that the Expo was an opportunity for bourgeois self-display: one walked the avenues in part because one wanted to be seen walking those avenues.

Much like Bourgain's gypsy camp, the Expo perfectly illustrates what James Smalls calls the "racialized spectacle of modern Parisian life," a way of seeing and being seen that promoted and protected "the emergence of mass culture, heightened consumerism, and the growth of popular imagery" during the second half of the 19th century (2003:354). Rebellion and control were intertwined at the Expo—and closely watched by the wandering middle classes. The two performances, the bohemian Courbet and the commodified colonized, visually complemented each other, a spectacular intertwining of device and reality cast across a Parisian suburb.

The Expo is not unique for all its oddity. In a striking application of Butler's theories, Katrin Sieg describes a case of similarly dizzying implications in her work on ethnic drag in pre- and post-WWII Germany. Specifically, she examines the case of the popular pre-war German actor Albert A.F. Wurm, who "excelled at the representation of ridiculous Jewish characters" (2002:41). Sieg notes that his performance of an "Israelitic lady" incapable of properly declaiming German poetry demonstrates that "[w]hile her attempt at declamation is sabotaged by her own body's inability to transcend its ethnic and gendered givens, Albert Wurm's credentials as Aryan rested on his ability to impersonate a character of another gender and ethnicity successfully" (42). As a result, "one impersonation fails, becomes recognizable as a superficial masquerade, and is understood implicitly as Jewish [...] The other stays unmarked and cements together 'Germanness' and an ethic of performative control" (42). The assimilation-minded Jew is shown in these performances to be an inevitable agent of cultural and moral subversion while the Aryan impersonator of Jews is positioned as an ideal of cultural and moral vigilance.

As in Wurm's performance, what was at stake in the *Pavilion du Realisme* was culture in the most general sense: high art, certainly, but also gesture, ways of speaking, the capacity for self-display. In sum, culture as representational strategy, ontological position, and sociopolitical mandate. Courbet's authenticity as bohemian radical, on view every day at the pavilion, legitimized the artwork, but that legitimacy was founded on the distance he maintained from the colonials and the Roma. His performance of choice—the choice of bohemianism, the choice of style, the choice of politics—confirms his authenticity as a future-oriented, authentic French citizen, an outsider whose outsidership enabled profound insight, a kind of double vision (to recall *Quentin Durward's* mystical "gypsy" as well as W.E.B. DuBois's [(1903) 2004] notion of "double consciousness") into the structures of cultural command and control. If Paris was a racialized spectacle, then visibility politics, resistant or otherwise, were inevitably racialized, too. In France, the curtailing of voting rights, the reinstatement of slavery, and other reactionary trends of the early and middle 1800s compelled political activists to discover and devise unofficial, secret, and antiparliamentarian modes of action that at once challenged and confirmed essentialist notions of identity. The "ingenious techniques of social outrage" (Graña 1964:74) engineered by bohemian intellectuals, artists, and *refuseés* are, thus, best understood as the symptom of a conceptual problem and a sociopolitical impasse, an ontopolitical problem anchored to the shifting nature of power in 19th-century Western Europe. That such techniques were imagined in distinctly racial/ethnic terms by 19th-century French people is of no small importance. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has shown, race was

a device “emblematic of an important development in the way educated [men] and women thought of themselves and of what it was that made them” members of their class and nation (1995:274). But of course bohemianism is a choice for many of its members, an issue that has provided plenty of fodder for arguments about “keeping it real,” arguments along the lines of those between Larson’s authentic rebels and the upwardly mobile Benny, whose decision to break trust with his friends is the dramatic catalyst of *Rent*.

The cultural turn remains inadequately understood by scholars and critics of the avant-garde, marking a historical and conceptual gap in avantgarde scholarship and criticism that is relevant to some of the most important questions surrounding the avantgarde today—questions about its supposed Eurocentrism, for example, its adherence to the “grand narratives” of bourgeois liberalism, its crypto-colonialist character, its co-optation by the middle class, etc. Ultimately, understanding the cultural turn as I’ve described it here will enable scholars and critics—perhaps future vanguards, as well—to take into fuller account the role of race, power, and culture in the concept and practice of the avantgarde, an account that is crucial to understanding the relationship of the avantgarde to the ongoing formation of Europe, the Global System, and racist and post-racist social and political structures. Just as important, understanding the cultural turn allows the Roma to be more fully restored to their rightful place in the history of modern Europe. For all its fabulous play with memory and its commitment to foregrounding the ravages of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and epidemiophobia, *Rent*’s first-act showstopper unwittingly confirms the erasure of the original “bohemian.” In the act of remembering, a more profound tradition of forgetting is affirmed. If we don’t understand this, then there’s little chance that we’ll ever understand the avantgarde.

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