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## **As above, so between: configuring Miss Lala as a mixed race subject**

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**AS ABOVE, SO BETWEEN: CONFIGURING MISS LALA AS A MIXED RACE  
SUBJECT**

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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**BY**

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College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

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## **ABSTRACT**

Elizabeth Fei situates Miss Lala, the subject of Degas' "Miss Lala at the Cirque Fernando" painting to recenter Lala's racially mixed body as a crucial site for understanding how discourses of race and gender manifested then and continue to manifest. Using images, articles, and recollections of her act, Fei recovers Lala's subjectivity by drawing on three main aspects of Lala's identity: her black womanhood, her circus performances, and her multiraciality. Fei contends that to configure Lala as a mixed race figure allows for all of the possible ways she might have identified to emerge as it is dexterous and adjustable by nature. This exercise, she argues, primes us for the work needed in scholarship activism.

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## PREFACE

I was never meant to fly.

As a child and teenager, I spent ten years in the circus, performing aerial hoops, triple trapeze, high wire, dance, and contortion and always felt out of place. At the time I never could exactly place why. I knew that I didn't look like most of my teammates. At 5'5" and anywhere from 150-175 pounds, I remember how big my costumes always looked next to my teammates and how embarrassing it was when we had to step on the scale or get measured for shows in front of each other. I knew that my coach hated me, or at least acted like it. She would stand underneath me while I was working (ignoring my skinny, mostly white teammates) and scold me when I didn't do something perfectly. During shows, she would make sure that I had the apparatus closest to her so that she could keep watching me. And, while living in Minnesota this shouldn't have been a surprise, it wasn't until years later, reflecting on my experiences as a performer I also realize that about 90% of my teammates were white and that I, a mixed race, Chinese American girl, was decidedly not.

Looking back, I realize now my uncertainties likely stemmed from anxiety about my own identity due to dominant discourses of whiteness, femininity, and beauty surrounding me. Unlike other teammates who seemed to fit nicely and seamlessly in these prescribed boxes, everything around me—from the size of my costumes to the regulation of my body—was sending me messages that my existence in that space was simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, depending on what was most convenient for the moment. While I didn't have this language at the

time, much of my experience can be summarized in the quote by Zora Neale Hurston: “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite not fitting in with the rest of my team I always loved to perform and that is why I kept with it so long. There was something that felt good and safe about being up in the air, doing something that I knew not everyone could do. Something transcendent, otherworldly, and superhuman. Upon reflection, I wonder if being in the air, spinning, and twirling, provided me an opportunity to reform the gaze of those who I thought were already looking at me. While on the ground my size, my gender, and my racial ambiguity were all cause for suspicion, disdain, or curiosity, in the air all of the anxiety around this became wrapped up in the spectacle and fantasy of circus artistry. Somehow, the razzle-dazzle, normally a sensationalistic force, became simultaneously a normalizing mechanism, as well as an opportunity for me to redefine and challenge these norms that I found constraining.

While there have been many years since then, filled with too many sedentary hours, countless accusatory gazes, infinite “what are yous,” and not nearly enough cardio or books about mixed race circus performers, my body still remembers and craves that feeling: the broadened space where things that might be considered abnormal are beautiful, powerful, and worthy. In many ways, it is this quest to reclaim and create this space that motivates my scholarship in critical ethnic studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing ... and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979), 154.



## INTRODUCTION

For four nights in January 1879, Edgar Degas made his way to the Cirque Fernando in the neighborhood of Montmartre in Paris, France.<sup>2</sup> His reason? He was creating drafts of a painting that he would eventually create entitled, “Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando.” (see Figure 1). A reconstruction of Lala’s<sup>3</sup> act, as presented in Peta Tait’s 2005 book *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* gives us some insight into this moment

She hung upside down with her knees bent over at least one trapeze, suspending a second trapeze below her from an iron jaw. In the first part of the act, a boy, a woman and a man took it in in a foot hold from the second trapeze bar holding a third woman by the arms. At some point in her act, Lala hauled herself up to the roof with a rope, probably attached to an iron jaw threaded through a pulley. (This process may have been used to reach the trapeze from the ground in the three-storey-high Cirque Fernando.) Lala may have copied Dare’s trick of suspending an adult male body with an iron jaw apparatus, which was connected to a swivel at the front and centre of a belt worn around his waist. This allowed his body to spin horizontally. Following this trick, Lala lifted three men. A drawing of the trick has two upright men hanging on to Lala’s arms, and another off an iron jaw, while Lala is hanging upside down from the trapeze with one leg over the bar. For the finale, Lala hung upside down again, while a small brass cannon was maneuvered into place from its wheeled carriage by three men (some commentaries cite four or five or six men to embellish its heaviness), and, using a pulley and iron jaw, Lala lifted it up into the air with a chain. The cannon was then fired, which echoed loudly in London’s Aquarium, and the shock of the blast caused Lala to recoil involuntarily.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Genealogical research obtained from Ancestry.com, coupled with corroborating details from Edmund Desbonnet’s brief biography of Lala (including birth location and year) indicates that Lala’s name at birth was Anna Olga Albertine Brown. However, in my research, I have noted that she went by several different names, both professionally and personally throughout her life. This project is not a biography, nor does it contend to be and aesthetically I like Lala (because it was not how Degas referred to her). Thus, I will be referring to her as Lala throughout. There is some president set for these varying identifications, see also: Maria PP Root’s “Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage” for more information on how mixed race peoples might choose to identify. (Maria PP Root, “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” In *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Sage Publications, 1996), 3—14).

<sup>4</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 70—71.

Degas' painting depicts Lala without her noted apparatus. He looks up at Lala from below, from the vantage point of the audience. She is shown from the side, looking up with her face obscured. She is being pulled to the ceiling, attached to a rope by her teeth, which is her only support. Lala's right arm reaches forward and up and her left arm reaches behind, with her legs tucked up underneath her. The architecture of the Cirque Fernando is shown behind and above her.

While reasons for Degas' selection of Lala as a subject for a painting are hard to know and are, for all intents and purposes, not widely researched, much can be discussed in considering the various components of her act. The sheer physicality of her feats aside, the subtexts of femininity, masculinity, and colonization/militarism all collude to provide an interesting reading of what made Lala's act so captivating—a reading that is further complicated with the knowledge that Lala was a mixed race black woman.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Based on biographical information compiled by Edmund Desbonnet for an entry in an anthology of body builders in 1911, discussed by Marilyn R. Brown. (Marilyn R. Brown, "'Miss La La's' Teeth: Reflections on Degas and 'Race'." *The Art Bulletin* 89 (2007): 738—65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067359>), 746).

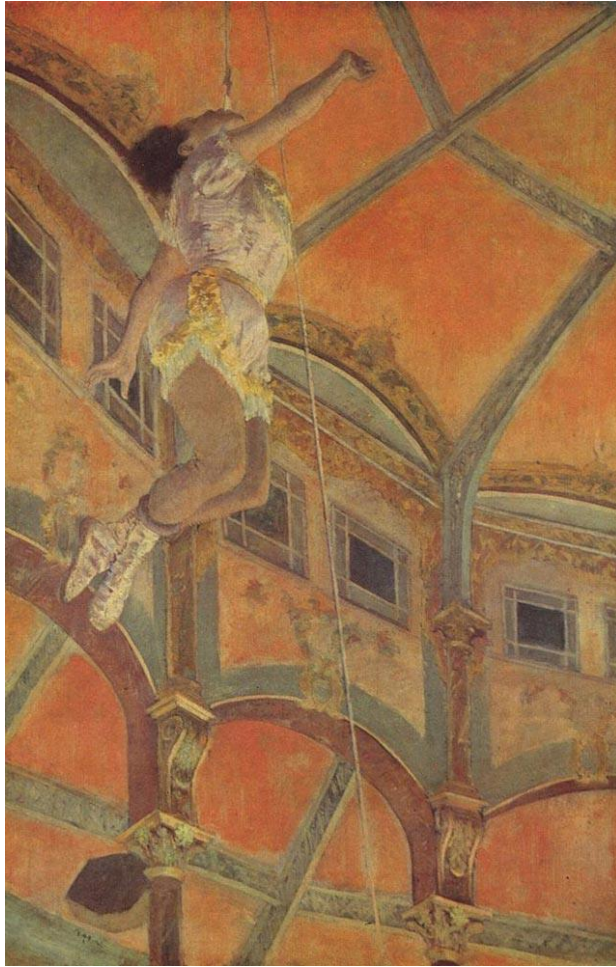


Figure 1. Degas, Edgar, *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, 1879, oil painting, 117.2 cm × 77.5 cm (46.1 in × 30.5 in), Website for National Gallery, London, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hilaire-germain-edgar-degas-miss-la-la-at-the-cirque-fernando>.

In this project, I will argue Miss La La is an important figure in broadening our understanding of how dynamics of masculinity, whiteness, and performative identity have manifested (and continue to manifest) across the spectrum. In particular, in construing Miss La La as a specifically mixed race figure, we reveal the intricacies of how she was situated within various discourses of whiteness, blackness, masculinity, femininity. In particular, centering and historicizing the ideas of La La's black femininity, her circus performance, and her multiraciality, and linking these with contemporary mixed race performance and theory allows us to create

space for recovering Lala's multiple subjectivities, as well as allows us to speak back against a consumption of mixed race identity that might commonly arise in traditional scholarship. Thus, I argue, considering Lala as a mixed race figure is an exercise that primes us for the epistemological dexterity<sup>6</sup> required for the embodied praxis of scholarship activism.

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<sup>6</sup>I first learned about the concept of 'epistemological dexterity' from a conversation with University of Minnesota American Studies scholar, and Latino Studies professor Tlahtoki Xochimeh. A play on the idea of 'epistemological modesty' espoused by David Brooks, 'epistemological dexterity' refers to the ability to flex one's epistemology depending on context.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Attempting to recover and centralize Lala's subjectivity and agency is a thorny process at best, and at worst, risks recreating some of the oppressive power dynamics that I as a critical scholar wish to problematize and dismantle. There are, it seems, no existing personal narratives of hers. We do not have her journals so do not know how she may have felt as a mixed race black woman circus performer in Europe (particularly Paris and London) in the 1870s and 1880s. Such a process is not unique to Lala. Indeed, even for historical subjects whose histories are well-documented through primary and secondary accounts, there is always an amount of dealing with how they saw themselves and how others saw them that, in turn, produces varying amounts of instability in the construction. Furthermore, to borrow a note from Gayatri Spivak, in order to truly let the "subaltern" Lala speak, we must consider approaches that signify a departure from traditional Western theories and methods (theories and methods that serve to marginalize subordinated voices).<sup>7</sup> In turn, it is important to construct a methodology that takes into account the various intersecting discourses that Lala may have found herself within, as well as all of the discourses that conspired to solidify her image in public memory. Such a methodology ought to also be sufficiently pliable as to offer us the space for additional subjectivities to exist concurrently. By looking at the myriad literature that speaks to these various discourses, as well as at frameworks for the expansion of these and other discourses we are, in turn, able to create an overarching framework for understanding Lala's significance both at that time and today.

Given the intersecting ways in which Lala's life would have been lived, as well as the various ways we might read her experience today, this project utilizes a mixed-methods approach

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<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (1988): 21—78.

in order to maximize understanding of how each of these various components. Firstly, historical research and literature review/analysis will be utilized in order to provide important historical grounding in the ways that (mixed) race, blackness, femininity, and circus arts would have all been treated at the time and in the place that she lived. Visual analysis will be utilized (for Degas' painting, as well as other depictions of Lala) as well as critical discourse analysis of journal articles about her as important evidence with which we can corroborate the conceptions articulated by other scholars. Performance analysis will additionally be used in order to discern the significance of Lala's act within these various contexts. Finally, this project is an exercise in queer speculation.

Philosophically this project will situate itself within intersectional frameworks and theories that take into account ideas of gender, sexuality, and race.<sup>8</sup> This project utilizes an understanding of intersectionality as a term to delineate how various systems of oppression interlock, collude, and accumulate in order to contribute to the positions of women of color (and black women, in particular). This project benefits not only from the conception of interlocking oppressions as expressed, but also the underlying imperative of combating these interlocking oppressions. While the ties between a late 1800s circus performer and the present-day problematic dynamics of white supremacy, toxic masculinity, anti-blackness, and ongoing colonization might seem tenuous at best, it is by analyzing the ways that various intertwine that

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<sup>8</sup> Intersectionality is, for all intents and purposes, difficult to define. Patricia Hill Collins devotes an entire article to working through the idea in "Intersectionality's Definition Dilemmas." This work will ground itself in a conception of intersectionality as expressed by the Combahee River Collective's statement, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives." (Combahee River Collective. *'A Black Feminist Statement'*. na, 1977).

we can begin to understand their origin and, in turn, begin to think of strategies for dismantling them.

Important theoretical frameworks to this project include critical (mixed) race theory, performance theory (ideas of the gaze and spectacle), feminist theory (ideas of objectification and body), and art history (theories of orientalism and primitivism). In particular, the growing body of work within critical mixed race studies asserts the mutability of race in order to draw attention to arbitrary (and harmful) patterns of racialization which help to situate this thesis in a greater context of ethnic and cultural studies. The project will also ground itself within performance theory, in particular, emphasizing the idea that performance simultaneously serves as a reflection of and production of self, in addition to providing a potential site of political resistance to harmful systems and ideologies. Feminist theory is additionally important for this project, particularly in considering the context of the grounding visual of Miss Lala in the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. Finally, along these same lines, orientalism and primitivism (particularly within art history) will provide important theoretical grounding for understanding the representations of racialized bodies—particular in relationship to the grounding painting. Overall, this project will aim to simultaneously embody and discuss the work of narrative and performance as an essential component to understanding the particular dynamics of mixed race identity in relationship to dominant narratives.

## MAPPING THE LITERATURE (Literature Review)

### MISS LALA'S TEETH

Far and away the most comprehensive examination of Lala is art scholar, Marilyn R. Brown's 2007 article, "'Miss La La's' Teeth: Reflections on Degas and 'Race'." While it is just a single article, the bodies of literature that it beckons to (as well as the ones it does not) have been so instrumental to my project that I would be remiss if I did not call out Brown's work specifically. Starting with Degas' portrait of her, and by additionally looking at depictions of her in posters and news articles, and coupling this with knowledge about of Degas life as well as broader racial discourses at the time when he created the painting, Brown critically discusses the ways that Degas was captivated by Lala and how this captivation was situated within the broader society at the time. Brown's work is well-researched and well-conceived—so much so in fact that I initially did not want to take on this project for fear of being redundant. In reading this article, however, one particular line stuck out to me. Brown writes

I had originally hoped to recuperate "Miss La La" as a historical agent and subject, however unstable. I wanted to move beyond seeing her as a stereotypical colonial object for male modernist self-projection. I learned along the way that links between ideologies of race and modernity are inescapable and that my attempt to listen to the subaltern voice of Miss La La could at best yield fragmentary results<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, in reading through the article, Brown seems occupied with constructing the dynamics of Degas' gaze that led him to paint her, as well as the gaze of the audiences who were riveted by her performances in the 1870s and 1880s. While she seems to have problems with "listening to the subaltern voice of Miss Lala"<sup>10</sup> she, later on, seems to

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, "'Miss Lala's' Teeth," 742.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



have no trouble with surmising why Lala would have been an “irresistibility ambiguous” figure for Degas based on his heritage.<sup>11</sup> Thus, I saw an opportunity to fill this gap, by utilizing additional (more contemporary) frameworks to think about Miss Lala’s experience, who she was, and what she might represent today. Rather than looking at Lala’s existence as “fragmentary” in a pejorative sense, I hope to recuperate Lala’s subjectivity by unifying the various possible ways she may have lived her life. While Brown is adept at discussing the racial discourses (particularly evidenced through art and media) that surrounded the creation of the painting, I saw an opportunity to layer in additional ideas of femininity, performativity, and circuses, to name a few, in order to place greater emphasis on the actions she performed and the profession she chose. Through the inclusion of these additional ideas that were aspects of Lala’s identity I hope to speak to Brown’s work and, ultimately, build upon it.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CIRCUS**

One primary way that I have sought to center additional elements of Lala’s subjectivity is through the inclusion of social receptions of the circus at the time when she was popular. Before beginning this project, I had no idea that so much work had been done in the ways of circus and representation. Unfortunately, most of the critical work that I found centered on the role of the American circus, rather than the European circuses like Lala performed in. While the trope of the transient circus troupe harkens to a very limited conception of the circuses more stationary origins, even permanent structures (such as the Cirque Fernando where Lala performed) made

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, “Miss Lala’s’ Teeth,” 744.

use of performers from around the globe.<sup>12</sup> Particularly in Europe, performers' limited engagements ensured that transience was an embedded feature of their personal and professional lives.<sup>13</sup>

In light of the lack of expansive critical literature around European circuses, three main scholars, Paul Bouissac, Helen Stoddart, and Peta Tait proved exceedingly helpful. An extremely helpful book which helps to bridge concepts of circus with performance studies (discussed later) is Paul Bouissac's 2010 work, *Semiotics at the Circus*. Drawn extensively from Bouissac's own experience with the circus, the main takeaway from this work, in addition to its observations about the semiotics of circus acts, is the way that Bouissac demonstrates his ability to read performance as text.<sup>14</sup> This ability serves as a template for the ways that we might read Lala's performance later on in this study.

*Rings of Desire*, a book by Helen Stoddart provides a broad overview of the cultural and aesthetic history of the circus. Stoddart utilizes both historical research as well as analysis of depictions of circus in literature and media in order to ground her analysis. Of particular importance to this project is Stoddart's final chapter, which discusses representations of the female aerialist in literature and film which provides context for understanding the gaze of audiences witnessing aerial acts.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, her discussions on the aesthetic origins of circus

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<sup>12</sup> Even in the United States, where traveling circuses were more common, circuses were performed in amphitheaters until 1825 (Rodney A. Huey, "An Abbreviated History of Circus in America," Federation Mondiale du Cirque, [http://www.circusfederation.org/uploads/circus\\_culture/about/america-huey.pdf](http://www.circusfederation.org/uploads/circus_culture/about/america-huey.pdf)); Lala herself was born in Prussia while the Fernando was located in France.

<sup>13</sup> Brenda Asseal, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 2005, 31—32.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Bouissac, *Semiotics at the Circus*. (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), 22—24.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*. (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2000), 166—188.

provide a helpful roadmap for situating the circus within existing theoretical frameworks of performance. Together, these aspects provide a language for understanding circuses that allows us to glean the essential features of the circus with the aim of constructing what it may have been like for Lala as a circus performer. Finally, Peta Tait's work is instrumental in bridging both the work of Bouissac and Stoddart. Tait's work centers specifically on the cultural rhetoric that served to construct the figure of the aerialist, in particular, as well as introduces the idea of gender ambiguity of both male and female aerialists.<sup>16</sup> Her dedicated section on so-called female strong men has a dedicated section on Lala as well as miniature case studies on other performers which helps to have meaningful comparisons with which to make sense of Lala's profession.<sup>17</sup>

## **PERFORMANCE STUDIES**

Dovetailing nicely with circus history are frameworks in the field of performance studies. Utilizing performance studies as a lens through which to look at Lala's position as a mixed race woman allows us to recover some of her subjectivity by looking at how the circus feats she performed may have not only been read by audiences at the time, but also how they might be read today, and what all of this might say about the identities that Lala may have been constructing for herself. Additionally, performance studies literature in helping to map connections between Lala and more contemporary mixed race performers.

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<sup>16</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 70—74.

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

At its core, performance studies looks at actions and their significance.<sup>18</sup> Richard Schechner's 2013 book *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, in particular, pinpoints the aims of performance studies in a way that is particularly relevant for this project:

Thus, performance studies does not “read” an action or ask what “text” is being enacted. Rather, one inquires about the “behavior” of, for example, a painting: how, when, and by whom was it made, how it interacts with those who view it, and how the painting changes over time. The artifact may be relatively stable, but the performances it creates or takes part in can change radically. The performance studies scholar examines the circumstances in which the painting was created and exhibited; she looks at how the gallery or building displaying the painting shapes its reception. These and similar kinds of performance studies questions can be asked of any behavior, event, or material object.<sup>19</sup>

While my research attempts to focus on Lala's existence more broadly than simply considering the moment when Degas painted her, the process that Schechner describes outlines the ways that considering the varying contexts in which something is viewed and perceived affects our understanding of it. Drawing this logic outward, by examining the various contexts in which Lala performed her work, looking at how that work (and similar work) was talked about, and finally considering what this work may have mean to Lala and her various identities, it's possible to construct a similarly comprehensive idea of her subjectivity as well as the potential resonance of these constructive dynamics today.

An additionally helpful text in the realm of performance studies is Dwight Conquergood's 2002 article, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.” In this article, Conquergood discusses the radical potential for performance studies in that it rejects the assumed privilege of the textual knowledge produced by the academy.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Conquergood writes:

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *TDR (1988-)* 46, no. 2 (2002): 145—56.

“The constitutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, using a framework of performance studies provides the opportunity for us to analyze the traditionally valued knowledges along with knowledges that are not as valued (for instance, knowledge of the body) and end up with a more well-rounded analysis that incorporates all of these knowledges.

### **ART HISTORY AND THEORY**

Despite my aims to center Lala’s experiences, rather than Degas’ gaze, it’s still important to examine the various art movements that influenced his painting of her, as well as other, related artistic movements that have particular strained relationships with racialized and gendered bodies. A rather helpful article in considering the relationships between art and race at the time is James Small’s 2003 article, “‘Race’ As Spectacle in Late-Nineteenth-Century French Art and Popular Culture.” Smalls article discusses the contradictory positionality of racialized bodies (in particular black bodies) in French art—namely, the fact that while that race was often represented and marketed in popular media there was a dearth of representation in the so-called “high art” of Impressionism.<sup>22</sup> At one point of the article, Smalls discusses Degas painting of Lala specifically, noting that the piece is rather unique in that it was able “include and obscure simultaneously, to leave the black presence in and remove it from his revered high modernist practice.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Conquergood, “Radical Research,” 145—56.

<sup>22</sup> James Smalls. “‘Race’ As Spectacle in Late-Nineteenth-Century French Art and Popular Culture.” *French Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003): 355.

<sup>23</sup> Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 381.

Beyond Impressionism, additional artistic theories prove helpful in broadening our understanding of the ways Lala's existence may have been dealt with artistically. In that regard, I turn to Margo Machida's 2009 book, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary*. While the fact that Machida's subjects are contemporary Asian American artists, the theories she discusses still have relevance to the way that we consider how Lala may have been conceived of by Degas and/or the audiences who viewed her act. Her second chapter, "Othering: Primitivism, Orientalism, and Stereotyping" discusses three of these concepts that would all seem to be applicable. In her discussions on stereotyping, Machada highlights the dualistic nature assimilability and un-assimilability—which mirrors the contradictory positionality highlighted by Smalls. With regard to Orientalism, Machada discusses this more generally as a way that Western art tends to exoticize that which it regards as other in order to preserve senses of national security and exceptionalism.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the ideas of Primitivism emphasize the "backward" nature of the "otherized" cultures depicted.<sup>25</sup> Armed with certain knowledges about the various contexts that Lala may have found herself in and subject to (vis a vis research in Circus History, Performance Studies, and Art History), I can begin to construct a loose frame of the various historical contexts that would have affected the way Lala existed and walked through her various worlds.

### **FEMINISM and THE GAZE**

As there are few primary texts and sources that reference Lala specifically, let alone ones that emanate from her own voice, feminist frameworks prove additionally helpful in situating Lala's

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<sup>24</sup> Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, 57—60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 70—76.

experiences as well as legitimizing the ways that I have elected to recover her subjectivity through a process of layering various historically-contextualized aspects of her identity (performer, black woman, mixed race woman, circus artist etc.). One particularly helpful framework (that also relates with critical mixed race studies and queer theory, which I will discuss later on) is Chela Sandoval's 1991 discussion of her theory of differential consciousness.<sup>26</sup> As Sandoval states, US third world feminism demands the capacity to re-center oppositional techniques depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted.<sup>27</sup> Though written several years ago, I find Sandoval's discussions of maintaining flexibility, even and particularly in the face of opposition, quite relevant to discussions of the various intersectional positions that Lala herself occupied. Much in the way that Sandoval categorizes third world feminists' multiple oppressions give them the experience of being attuned to and navigating layers of power, the mixed race person's experience at navigating multiple layers of their own identity, as well as evaluating and adjusting their position in relation to others makes them especially eligible for this task. Embedded in their bodies is an epistemological dexterity which floats between the multiple ways of knowing, being, and relating with the world.

While it's important to not allow the voices of those who looked upon Lala to obfuscate the ways we might surface her own experience, we cannot examine the ways that Lala was looked at, remembered, and memorialized in these various contexts, however, without thinking about 'the gaze.' At its most basic, the concept of 'the gaze' refers to the relational act of looking upon a subject, and that subject's subsequent sensation of being looked upon. It has roots in

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<sup>26</sup> Chela Sandoval, "US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World." In *Feminism and Race*, ed. Kum-Kum Bhavani, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 261—280.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

psychoanalysis, critical theory, and film theory, and has relevancy within several of the fields that are central to this project. Most specifically, this project takes foundational the conceptions of the ‘male gaze’ as discussed in Laura Mulvey’s 1975 text, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” as well as its subsequent critiques voiced by bell hooks and Lorraine O’Grady.<sup>28</sup> Both the idea of a male audience (who in Lala’s case might be Degas or other spectators) looking upon Lala’s body as well as how Lala might, in her own way, gazed back at them are important concepts that I aim to wrestle with in this project.

## QUEER THEORY

One final field that lends important understandings to this project is queer theory. A concept that has been particularly useful in thinking about how the relevancy of Lala’s experiences today is queer temporality. Queer temporality is discussed at length by several scholars in “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion.” This thesis borrows a lot from how it is discussed by Carolyn Dinshaw, who construes queer temporality as the refusal to adhere to linear historicism. This refusal, she writes, opens “the possibility of touching across time, collapsing

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<sup>28</sup> O’Grady applies hooks’ theory of the oppositional gaze to an analysis of Manet’s Olympia and, more broadly, a discussion of black female subjectivity. She contends that “To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves.” (Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity.” In *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003): 174—186 ); In simplistic terms, in Mulvey’s conception of the male gaze the woman is the passive object to be looked upon, while the man is the active person engaged in the looking. (Laura Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema.” In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 14—26); hooks critiques Mulvey’s conceptions of the gaze with regard to black women. She contends that black women exist outside the binary that Mulvey outlines. As a result, hooks argues that black women develop an ‘oppositional gaze’ which involves a powerful assertion of black women’s right to look back at white supremacy and patriarchy. (bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” In *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003): 94—105).



time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then..."<sup>29</sup> As I have attempted to do by creating linkages between Lala's experience, my own, as well as the performances of more contemporary mixed race performance artists, queer temporality inspires a similar building of transtemporal communities. More generally, this work borrows from queer theory in its discussions of an inherent instability of identity categories. In particular, Judith Butler's work on the repeated acts (and associated instability) of hegemonic identity markers.<sup>30</sup> The theoretical implications of Butlers arguments call into question the usefulness and appropriateness of beginning theorizations from a gendered body. As the body itself, as well as the gender prescribed on top of it, are both comprised of unstable definitions, any theories built from this starting point are necessarily problematic. Thus, it is important in this project to not only think about the way Lala herself may be construed as queering certain boundaries of race and gender, but also the ways that current queer performances might be read in the same vein. In doing so, this project aims to create the very transtemporal communities discussed by Dinshaw.

### **CRITICAL MIXED RACE STUDIES**

In attempts to fill in this loose frame, it's necessary to then turn to texts that speak to the various known axes of Lala's identity. One notable aspect of Lala's identity which spoke to me as a mixed race woman was the fact that Lala was a biracial black woman. A particularly helpful body of work than assists us in understanding the significance of Lala's multiracial in critical mixed race studies (CMRS). While CMRS is a more contemporary field, emerging out of

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<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw and Lee Edelman and Roderick A. Ferguson and Carla Freccero et. al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007): 177—178.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination (1990)." In *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 119—37.

scholarly work in the 1980s in the US<sup>31</sup>— that is perhaps more unified in its common subjects than its methodologies or theories—its transracial, transnational, transracial framing inspire a similar broadening in the ways that we think about Lala’s subjectivity. In fact, as I will argue in my project, it is this very framing of CMRS that allows for the multiple ways that Lala may have seen herself and interacted with the world. Additionally, critical mixed race study work speaks directly to the ways that current mixed race performance artists might situate themselves within dominant discourses.

An instrumental article which helps to map the breadth of CMRS is the 2014 article, “Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies” by G. Reginald Daniel (and other eminent mixed race scholars, including my thesis adviser Laura Kina and former DePaul Critical Ethnic Studies director Camilla Fojas). This article discusses the ways that mixed race lives have been instrumental in broadening conceptions of race and includes the various principles, values, and approaches that mixed race studies scholars have adopted throughout history. In one particularly poignant excerpt, Daniel writes:

On the one hand, critical mixed race studies places mixed race at the center of focus and encompasses analyses, portrayals, and renderings of the racial consciousness and agency among racially mixed people. It also examines social forces that inform mixed-race experiences and identities. On the other hand, the field also brings into sharp focus the extensive “racial blending” that has characterized human history from time immemorial but that has been ignored, obscured, and erased by several hundred years of Eurocentric thought supporting notions of racial (and cultural) purity.<sup>32</sup>

While the article’s framing is mostly American-based and situated 100 years after Lala, the historical framing of the mixed race studies discipline as well as the principles contained within

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<sup>31</sup> G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas. "Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies." *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel, “Emerging Paradigms”, 18.

the article ring true to ideas I want to consider in my project. In particular, it's important to consider the social histories that conspire to create mixed people's particular positionality—both in the past and today.

An additional helpful work is *Mixed Race Hollywood* by Mary Beltran and Camilla Fojas. This work provides an overview of very basic terminology utilized in mixed race studies and also highlights the top-level debates within mixed race scholarship and history, including ideas of miscegenation and the more current “generation mix.”<sup>33</sup> Beltran and Fojas additionally discuss multiracial tropes in media, with a particular focus on the depictions of interracial relationships on screen as well as genre criticism. This project benefits from the work of Beltran and Fojas on the history of mixed race spectatorship which speaks directly to the more contemporary mixed race performers featured in my project. Additionally, the language they employ to talk about how mixed race bodies are wielded within media is relevant for any era. Utilizing the readings from this book, it becomes possible to draw upon existing frameworks for how multiraciality was conceived of and deployed in media throughout history, including Lala's time.

One final work I would like to highlight that speaks to the mixed race dynamics of my project is Ralina Joseph's work *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*. Joseph discusses the particular experiences that are unique to mixed race black people. Again, as is typical for many texts that venture to place themselves underneath the label of mixed race scholarship, Joseph's work is centered mostly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also in the United States. Despite these shortcomings, Joseph's work provides us with understanding

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<sup>33</sup> Mary C. Beltran and Camilla Fojas, eds, *Mixed Race Hollywood*, (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 1—20.

of how social and political structures intertwine with multiracial identity and provides frameworks for articulating these dynamics within Lala's life.<sup>34</sup>

With critical mixed race studies' explicit ties to critical race theory and ethnic studies, many people might find themselves asking, why mixed race in particular? After all, aren't all marginalized identities (and the people who possess them) destined to constantly maneuver against, between, among dominant (white) narratives, in lives characterized by perpetual counterpoint? In answering this difficult question, I emphasize that the cornerstone of critical mixed race studies is the emphasis upon self-identification, the flexibility of identity categories, and the importance of the constructed nature of identity. To construe Lala as a mixed race figure, then, means to make space for all of the ways that she may have seen herself and to consider the possibility that these conflicts written into her body might have been ideas she herself thought about or experienced. Would she have found home in the discourses around miscegenation which even at that time oscillated between hybrid vigor on one end and hybrid degenerate on the other? In allowing these various possibilities to exist simultaneously (without foreclosing any of them) we allow for the multiplicity of her identities to be accounted for, rather than absented due to the limitations of our research, record keeping, or even personal epistemologies and ontologies.

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<sup>34</sup> Ralina L. Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*. (Duke University Press, 2013), 1—36.

## DISCUSSIONS ON LALA'S SUBJECTIVITIES (Analysis)

Marilyn R. Brown found the task of recovering Lala's subjectivity daunting.<sup>35</sup> However, she recognized that knowledge of Lala's mixed race heritage provided her with a jumping off point to understanding why Degas found her so fascinating, as well as provided an opportunity to situate her within larger discourses of racial anxiety and fascination. While these discussions are certainly worthwhile and important in understanding the discourses that have historically served and continued to marginalize people of color, I find that Lala often becomes lost in these discussions. True, it is quite easy to allow the locus of analysis to stem from the Degas' paintings, the audiences that were captivated with her, or the news reporters and photographers who advertised her performances and photographed her. Yet, how do we go about capturing the humanity of a woman whose only record lies in the gaze of the people who consumed her?

A sticking point for Brown in this regard is the knowledge Lala's mixed race heritage, and she cites this as a jumping off point for her research.<sup>36</sup> I hope to take this a step further by asserting that the knowledge that Lala was mixed race does not simply provide us with helpful information with which we can draw connections to greater discourses—it provides us with a very framework with which we can analyze her life. Through their theoretical symbolism and direct application, concepts prominent to mixed race studies, such as hybridity/third space

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<sup>35</sup> Brown, "Miss Lala's Teeth," 742.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

theory<sup>37</sup> and border crossings,<sup>38</sup> are helpful lenses through which we might view, discuss, and interlink Lala's various positions as a mixed race, black, woman circus performer. Above all, these lenses assert that mixed race people are worthwhile subjects of complex socio-historical processes, rather than merely objects of analysis.<sup>39</sup>

## VENUS NOIRE

We do not know how, when, or why Lala came to join the circus. Borrowing conjecture from the discourses surrounding of American freak shows and the human zoos, one might darkly suggest that she was sold to the circus. And indeed, certain evidence on the treatment and conceptions of black people during near the time and place where Lala performed time might serve to corroborate this hypothesis. Specifically, in reading Lala's experience and viewing photos of her it is important to recognize that to many, she may visibly read as black woman, and thus would have likely been read by society as being a black woman (see Figure 2). She was referred to as "Venus of the Tropics," the "Negress," "the Black Venus," "the Mulatresse," the "dusky lady,"

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<sup>37</sup> The concepts of hybridity and third space emerge from Homi Bhabha's work on colonized peoples and colonizers. While the term 'hybrid' can carry some negative connotations, I care less about the verbiage that Bhabha uses and more about the idea that in the meeting of two potentially antagonistic or contradictory entities there is both a space where negotiations of the relationships occur (the 'third space') and a resultant new entity that is created in that space (the 'hybrid'). (Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 5—11, 371—372).

<sup>38</sup> I find Gloria Anzaldúa's, discussions of The Mestiza Consciousness exceedingly valuable in articulating the embedded nature of border crossings in the identity of mixed race peoples. (Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness." In *Feminism and Race*, ed. Kum-Kum Bhavani, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 93—107).

<sup>39</sup> Daniel, "Emerging Paradigms," 8.

and "the African Princess."<sup>40</sup> Thus, we can glean from this that linkages to monoracial black women subjects are not only useful but imperative to our understanding of Lala's subjectivity.



Figure 2. Unidentified French Photographer, *Miss Lala at the Cirque Fernando, c. 1880*, Albumen silver print, 15 ½ x 11 ¼ in. (39.3 x 28.6 cm), Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University Website, <http://www.zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu/sports-and-recreation-france-1840-1900#.WgV3CGiJPY>

For instance, those who are familiar with the life of Sarah Baartman would definitely recognize Lala's stage moniker, "The Black Venus" or "Venus Noire" as direct references to Baartman, who was known as "The Hottentot Venus" and might be keen to compare the two women's experiences.<sup>41</sup> And, indeed, there some obvious parallels to be drawn. Baartman, who

<sup>40</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 71—72; Brown, "Miss Lala's Teeth," 744.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Baartman was a South African woman who was brought to England to be exhibited in 1810. She performed on stage in a cage in both London and Paris, and was marveled for her "exotic" features. A helpful, brief description of Baartman can be found in the

was born in South Africa in 1789, was brought to be exhibited in London in 1810, and later to Paris.<sup>42</sup> Lala, on the other hand, was born in Stettin, Prussia in 1858, however, rose to prominence in Paris and London around 1879.<sup>43</sup> According to a biography compiled in 1911, Lala began performing at the age of nine, and by her early twenties, in a similar movement pattern to Baartman was performing in both Paris and London.<sup>44</sup> In understanding these parallels we may draw upon bell hook's work which imparts the idea that dominant groups find pleasure in consuming the exotic "other" as this consumption offers them the promise of feeling more "alive."<sup>45</sup> In hooks' estimation, encounters with the so-called other are marked as exciting as the "lure is the combination of pleasure and danger." Thus, it is possible to construe the public fascination with these women as an exercise in "eating the other." This intricate balancing act of pleasure and danger the consumption of Baartman and Lala is made further evident in looking at Degas' famed portrait of Lala alongside certain popular imagery of Baartman. When comparing the two, it is not hard to see similar similarities in how each woman's silhouette is positioned relative the background: face-obscured, side view profile with attention called to the shape of her buttocks (see Figure 3). These poses both women find themselves in call attention to their (apparently overt) sexuality, coupled with the danger of their unknowability—and in Lala's case the actual physical danger her act put her in.

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introductory chapter of Deborah Willis' anthology *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her Hottentot* (Deborah Willis ed., *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her" Hottentot"*, (Temple University Press, 2010), 4—5).

<sup>42</sup> Willis, *Black Venus 2010*, 4—5.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, "Miss Lala's Teeth," 746.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> hooks, bell, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 26.





Figure 3. Williams, Charles, *Love and Beauty - Sartjee the Hottentot Venus*, 1822, Hand-colored etching, Height: 288 millimetres x Width: 218 millimetres (trimmed), The British Museum Collection Online.

At the end of Baartman's life, her buttocks and genitals would be used in ways that would contribute to the alleged "science" of race—a science which (mis)informed the ways that constructions of race became conceived, tested, and imbued into public discourse. When Baartman died in 1815, her body was obtained for study by Georges Leopold Cuvier, a famed physical anthropologist and surgeon general appointed by Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>46</sup> Cuvier made a plastic mold of her body, dissected her buttocks, examined her vulva and her womb, and preserved her brain and genital organs in specimen jars.<sup>47</sup> This action demonstrated an enduring and disturbing pattern of using black women's bodies to demonstrate the superiority of white masculinity. As Mitchell explains

The emergence and importance of so-called hard sciences in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a means to explain nature cannot be

<sup>46</sup> Robin Mitchell, "Another Means of Understanding the Gaze: Sarah Bartmann in the Development of Nineteenth-Century French National Identity." In *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* ed. Deborah Willis. (Temple University Press, 2010), 41.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

underestimated in defining of race and nation, because the “empirical knowledge” proved by scientific study became an important way to make sense of so many confusing reorganizations...Race and gender became inextricably intertwined with scientific constructs, merging ideas of classification of humans and animals...<sup>48</sup>

The very same science that was informed by Baartman’s body undoubtedly played upon Lala’s –both as a black woman (and also as a female aerial circus performer and mixed race woman as I will elaborate on later). Cuvier’s theories on evolution and race were grossly racist and misinformed by today’s standards and would go on to serve as inspiration for Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, who wrote *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races) in 1853, just three years before Lala was born. Among other things, Gobineau maintained in his essay that the miscegenation led, ultimately to degeneration.<sup>49</sup> Cuvier’s work would also serve as a primary point of critique for Charles Darwin, whose theories expressed in the *Origin of Species* would simultaneously explain the discourses of female acrobats and serve as ammunition for Social Darwinists who sought to maintain the “proven” superiority of the white Europeans.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Lala, while born nearly 70 years after Baartman, was subject to the same “science of race” that had been developing, over the last generation.

The fact remains, however, that Baartman’s experience and Lala’s were very different. While in Paris, Baartman came under the care of a man name Reaux whose occupation was an

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<sup>48</sup> Mitchell, “Understanding the Gaze,” 41.

<sup>49</sup> Gobineau’s theories did not find much of an audience in France. However, unsurprisingly they had much influence in Germany during the rise of the Nazis. (George M. Fredrickson, "Mulattoes and Métis. Attitudes Toward Miscegenation in the United States and France Since the seventeenth century," *International Social Science Journal* 57, no. 183 (2005): 103—112).

<sup>50</sup> Rutledge M. Dennis, "Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race," *The Journal of Negro Education* 64, no. 3 (1995): 243—253.

“animal exhibitor” and, as I mentioned before, was often known to be exhibited in a cage.<sup>51</sup> In considering this fact, I cannot help but be reminded of the distinction between animals in the circus (whose existence served as something to be dominated, trained, and controlled) and aerial acts, strongmen, and balance artists whose talents were considered to be incredible feats of the human body. While I do not wish to imply that Baartman was in any way an animal to be dominated or controlled, the stark difference in the perception of each of these women (despite being subject to similar racializing processes) is interesting to note. One might initially point to time period differences between the two women as being a primary indicator of more progressive ideas toward race (and thus, an indication of the ways Lala’s experience may have differed from Baartman’s. However, additional evidence suggests this may not have been the case. For one, the exhibition of human subjects continued in both Europe and the United States well into the 1900s. One illustrative example is the 1878 Universal Exposition, the third of France’s national exhibitions, occurring just one year before Lala’s performance at the Fernando. The exhibition included marvels of modernity in the form of technology (including the telephone, megaphone, and phonograph) as well as cultural artifacts including the recently completed head of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>52</sup> It is not a coincidence that this exposition additionally included a display entitled “Negro Village” which featured indigenous Africans living their “authentic” lives on display for the public. Similar displays would be found throughout the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>51</sup> Rosemarie Buikema, "The Arena of Imaginings: Sarah Bartmann and the Ethics of Representation," In *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), 70—85.

<sup>52</sup> Heather Bennet, "Recovered and United Revelries: Campaign Politics and Presentations of Modern France During the Universal Exposition of 1878," *Journal of The Western Society for French History* 3 (2013): 30—47.

throughout the western world, including the United States, Italy, Germany, and England.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the proliferation of this phenomenon was promulgated by famed circus impresario, PT Barnum.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as written in Blanchard et al, “to exhibit the Other became a visible and simple sign of modernity and greatness.”<sup>55</sup> The collision of both the display of colonized bodies and the valuation of technological and cultural progress cemented the relationships between the domination of foreign bodies (particularly black and brown ones) and alleged progress. Baartman’s body had been a similarly contentious site for such attitudes years earlier. According to scholar Robin Mitchell,

The production and the viewing of black women’s bodies –by both men and women— complicated already unstable ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality. French social, cultural, and political upheavals in this era resulted in an emerging need for a more concrete national identity, often augmented by oppositional and specific definitions of blackness. Images of and writings about Sarah Bartmann articulated a means by which white French men and women could work out their fears and anxieties over political and social transitions, often in indirect fashion.<sup>56</sup>

In Mitchell’s estimation stemmed at least in part from a perceived lack of colonial prowess on behalf of France. The Haitian Revolution 1791—1803 saw the loss of France’s most profitable slave colony, Saint Domingue, resulting in a “profound setback” in France’s vision of its own militaristic and racial superiority.<sup>57</sup>

How might Lala have felt knowing that she was performing in France and London’s prestigious circuses while, years earlier, Baartman had been thrown candies to do tricks in a cage? While we do not know the answer to that question, transtemporal linkages between the two

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<sup>53</sup> Pascal Blanchard, Bruno Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Eric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, “Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West: Introduction,” In *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, (Liverpool University Press, 2008), 1—49.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchell, “Understanding the Gaze,” 32—33.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 35—36.

women reveal a near identical narrative exemplified by Lala's own life. 1871 had seen France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war when Lala was just thirteen years old. This defeat was a blow to national pride and, as such, created a ripe environment for inviting the revisions of new narratives about France.<sup>58</sup> The desire to contribute to these new narratives was additionally adopted by artists and writers at the time, who aspired to "replace memories of collapse with images of heroic resistance."<sup>59</sup> For Impressionists like Degas, the aftermath of the war in Paris, in particular, provided much fodder for their artistic pursuits including a changing urban landscape as well as vibrant city inhabitants and workers.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, like the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution provided a similarly fertile environment for working through France's national insecurities. In both instances, France had suffered defeats at the hands of populations whom they thought inferior and needed to find strategies to assuage this fear. Lala then, like Baartman became a particularly enticing subject, not only for Degas but for France's public imagination.

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<sup>58</sup> Karine Varley, *Under the Shadow of Defeat: The War of 1870—71 in French Memory*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4—5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Samu, "Impressionism: Art and Modernity." Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. October 2004. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd\\_imml.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm).

## THE CANNON WOMAN

Would Lala have known about the “negro villages” that had been presented just a year before she began performing at the Cirque Fernando? If she had, would she have situated her own fame and notoriety within this arena or with the likes of trapeze artists? Was she side show? The main attraction? Some hybrid or something else? While we cannot ask Lala the answers to these questions, one of the few things we know, and one of the ways that we can definitively connect with her is the thing that made her famous: her act. Particularly in the late 1870s and 1880s, we know that audiences were captivated by her strength and grace. Reviewers referred to her feats as “extraordinary” and “marvelous.”<sup>61</sup> These accounts greatly contrasted descriptions of Baartman, who was often described in pejorative, mocking terms.<sup>62</sup> While the lenses that audiences viewed her through were undoubtedly colored by the racial histories that I have discussed thus far—these discourses must be discussed within the context of the social history and associated aesthetics of circus, as well as the associated implications of these elements on ideas of femininity.

By the 1870s, Europe had woven into the fabric of public life and culture. The Cirque Fernando where Lala performed, for example, was a well-known meeting place for the artists located in Montmartre, including impressionists like Degas.<sup>63</sup> The position of circus in popular culture was, however, rather ambiguous, and had been ever since its inception. On one hand, early marketing tactics undertaken by the original circus impresario, Philip Astley, had originally aligned the art form with upper classes, making appeals to royalty in his advertisements for

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<sup>61</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 72.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, “Understanding the Gaze,” 37—38.

<sup>63</sup> Alastair Sooke, “Why the Circus Fascinated Modern Artists.” *BBC Culture*. March 07, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170306-why-the-circus-fascinated-modern-artists>.

shows.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, local laws had sought to distinguish circuses from spoken theatre and thus circuses developed always in a slightly contentious and subversive relationship with dominant power structures—a status which they often leveraged in their marketing in order to incite excitement with their prospective audiences.<sup>65</sup> Fernando where Lala performed was one of many permanent circus buildings in Europe.<sup>66</sup> This model typified the European circus model (as opposed to the traveling model common to American circuses) and involved permanent, indoor structures, and the utilization of several different acts, rather than one, large cohesive troupe.<sup>67</sup> In reference to the Victorian Era circuses where Lala performed later in her career, Asseal writes that they relied on a revolving door of talent, typically contracting for short time periods between one and five weeks. This was particularly the case with acts in high-demand or with extensive notoriety.<sup>68</sup> Based on newspaper advertisements we know that Lala was performing in London's Royal Aquarium as early as March 1879, which would have been just three months after Degas had painted her.<sup>69</sup> This, coupled with the numerous posters of her and articles and advertisements featuring her might lead us to conclude that perhaps Lala enjoyed a similar type of life. Unlike Facebook post assumptions might lead us to believe, additional research suggests that Lala's circus career may have been closer to an independent contractor than someone being forced to perform.

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<sup>64</sup> Stoddart discusses how Philip Astley, the originator of the modern circus, often displayed “overt royalism” in his advertisements that these were routinely addressed to “Nobility, Gentry, and others.” (Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, 69).

<sup>65</sup> According to Stoddart, until 1843 all minor theatres were prohibited from presenting straight prose drama. Circuses got around this ambiguous law by carefully selected the places where they would perform as well as the acts that they contracted with (Ibid., 16); Ibid., 67.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 14—16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 40—41.

<sup>68</sup> Asseal, *Victorian Society*, 31—32.

<sup>69</sup> *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (London), March 15, 1879. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001857/18790315/063/0024>

Further underscoring her prestige was how she was presented in relation to the people that she performed with (See Figure 4). In consulting depictions of her in articles, advertisements, and photos, it is clear that Lala was not an ancillary member of her troupe. For one, among her teammates, Lala would habitually receive top billing and often was the only one referenced by name in articles written about their performance.<sup>70</sup> Posters and prints advertising her performances would also frequently feature her alone or only minimally showcase her teammates (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). Another clue is in how the members of her troupe were named. While performing at the Fernando (and presumably for some time after), Lala performed with Troupe Kaira. Some scholars have hypothesized that Lala's given last name had been Kaira which might lead one to believe that she started the troupe herself.<sup>71</sup> While my genealogical research, coupled with archival discoveries connecting the troupe with a man named Popischil, seem to disprove this idea about her name, this does not undercut the centrality of Lala's membership in her group. One of her duet partners (and possibly her lover<sup>72</sup>) was Theophila Szterker, known professionally as "Kaira la Blanche," or "The White Kaira." This distinction to bill as Szterker as a "white" counterpart to Lala (who went by Lala or Olga on posters, but was sometimes referred to racially in articles), greatly differed from articles that were written about her at the time, which, as I previously mentioned, often referred to her race. This choice, I like to think, when situated within more current discourses of multiraciality, suggested a conscious desire on their parts to depart from the standard norms of raciality and perfected womanhood of

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<sup>70</sup> The excerpt describes Lala's "marvelous" trick for 12 lines. Her teammates get only one. (*Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*).

<sup>71</sup> Tait refers to Lala as Olga Kaira, citing Desbonnet's 1911 biography of her (Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 70).

<sup>72</sup> Laurie Fierstein, who conducted research on the pair, had the opinion that they were life partners. (Brown, "Miss La La's Teeth," 746).



the time which underscored not only Lala's identity as a mixed race black woman, but also her position as a renowned circus performer.



Figure 4. Anonymous, *Olga, Kaira la Blanche, Popischill and the little Kara (flying trapeze)*, n.d., monochrome print on cardboard, 12.4 x 8.6, Photographic Collections of Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean, Reference number: 00188659.

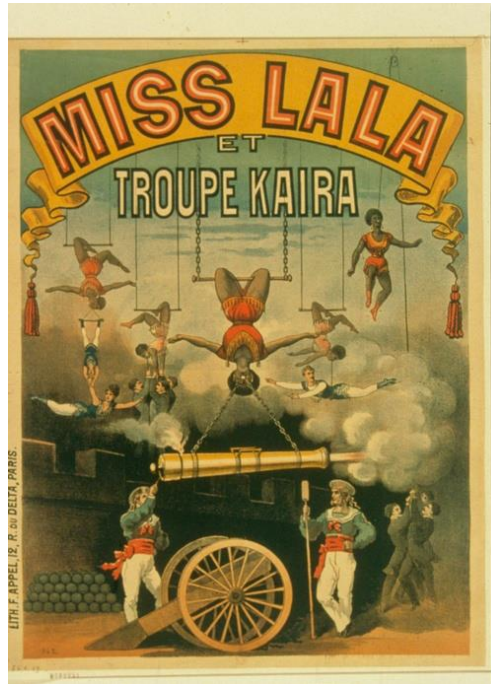


Figure 5. Appel, F., *Miss LaLa surnomme La Femme Canon*, ca. 1879, color lithograph, 22 X 16.5 in. (56 X 43 cm), New Museum Online Archive, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/images/5485>.



Figure 6. Cheret, Jules Jean, *Folies-Bergère. Miss Lala*, 1880, color lithograph, 57.2 cm (height); 42.9 cm (width), Les Arts Decoratifs Online, <http://collections.lesartsdecoratifs.fr/folies-bergere-miss-lala>.



Figure 7. Desbonnet, Edmund. "*Miss Olga et Kaira*," photograph, from Desbonnet, *Les rois de la force*, 351.

Female aerialists (and, in particular, the iron-jaw performers like Lala) were particularly hard to place within commonly-held discourses of beauty and vitality at the time.<sup>73</sup> On one hand, they were subject to the greater discourses surrounding aerialists. For example, according to Tait, the dissemination of theories from Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* coincided with an increase in the number of trapeze acts, due to the ways that the acts played upon ideas of physical adaptation, muscularity, and the improvement of (masculine) bodies that were espoused by Social Darwinists.<sup>74</sup> By 1870, she writes that male aerialist's abilities to perfect their bodies became synonymous with "the promise of human physicality, its future."<sup>75</sup> As a woman aerialist, however, Lala's displays of physical prowess (commonly associated with men), as well as male aerialist's graceful movements (commonly associated with women) mutually informed a feeling

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<sup>73</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 33.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

of gender ambiguity for all aerialists. However, despite these ambiguities, aerialists managed to avoid the disdain that may have been associated crossing these arbitrary gender boundaries. Tait specifically discusses the irony surrounding so-called female strongmen (she construes Lala as such) in that they were often described as embodying a perfected womanhood during the Victorian era.<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to note, in turn, that the very rhetoric that served to marginalize and devalue her blackness (a rhetoric that the vile treatment of Baartman had helped to inform) was the very same rhetoric that inspired awe of her physical and artistic abilities as an aerialist. Somehow, however, within the context of the circus all of this boundary crossing became palatable and, even further, admirable.<sup>77</sup>

This contradictory positioning of gendered discourses might seem confusing for some, however, the knowledge that Lala was a mixed race black woman provides some context for understanding this dynamic. Sometimes Lala's performance marked her as an "ideal specimen" of her race. In recounting the words of a reporter, Tait writes:

She does all that her muscular rivals have done, and a great deal more ... Lala, as we have hinted, is a representative of a dark-skinned race, but in the matter of strength she is prepared to assert her superiority of the boastful people who will have it that all the virtues are associated with a light complexion.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 69.

<sup>77</sup> We cannot underestimate the effects of colorism and colonization in this conversation. The fact remains that Lala's skin was much lighter than Baartman's if we consult their photos and thus, compared to Baartman, Lala held a relative proximity to whiteness. Lala was also born in Prussia and lived in Europe all her life, whereas Baartman was born to a Khoisan family in what is now South Africa, but then was ripe for European colonization. Thus, while her talents and the spectacle of the circus may have let her black womanhood "be esteemed" (as expressed by Tait), it also may have served to obscure some of these other underlying dynamics; Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 76.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

Reading this excerpt, I cannot help but be reminded of the ideas of hybrid vigor that often become associated with mixed race people.<sup>79</sup> In another example, Desbonnet expresses jealousy at the size of her biceps.<sup>80</sup> While one might potentially read this emphasis on her muscularity as a tactic to de-gender Lala in a maneuver that would be not dissimilar from how black women were treated at the time it helps to notice that white women aerialists performing similar acts to Lala (such as Leona Dare) were often admired based on similar terms.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, it seems that the sheer amazingness of Lala's act was enough to redeem (though, as evidenced thus far, not entirely erase) the intersecting oppressions she would have been subject to as a mixed race black woman.<sup>82</sup>

While Degas elected to not depict Lala's most notable trick in his painting, her grand finale of firing of a cannon hung between her teeth continued to be a primary point of fascination for her audiences. At times, articles referred to her as "La Mulatresse Canon," or the "mulatto canon woman."<sup>83</sup> In posters of her, many prominently featured the cannon. In one illustrative instance, further attention was drawn to the cannon by performing an act of what might only be construed as an act of nineteenth century Photoshop—replacing the top of one of the posters containing "Miss Lala" with bold letters advertising both her name and, in even bigger, bolder letters "La Femme Canon."<sup>84</sup> The canon itself, of course, was undoubtedly phallic. Thus, we cannot overemphasize the significance that Lala, as a woman of color, was the body

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<sup>79</sup> The precursor to such ideas is the concept of a "hybrid degenerate" – essentially the embodiment of the "worst of both worlds." While hybrid vigor would initially seem like a vast improvement, this rhetoric reinforces the fetishization of mixed race people and also utilizing them as post-racial totems or indicators of a post-racial society.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, "Miss Lala's Teeth," 746.

<sup>81</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 77–80.

<sup>82</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Brown, "Miss Lala's Teeth," 738.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 744.

that bore the metaphorically and physical weight of the undercurrents of insecure white masculinity.

To revisit the national anxiety following the Franco-Prussian war for a moment, the fascination with the cannon could very well have appealed to the public need for reassurance of their military prowess. This was mirrored further by the societal infatuation with circuses and aerialists as a whole. Since their inception, Circuses had always been wrapped up with ideals of militarism and domination. Philip Astley, who is often cited as the creator of the modern, western circus was a retired military officer who began the art by training horses to do tricks in a ring.<sup>85</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France, Circuses were increasing in popularity. In particular, aerial acrobats rose to prominence in Europe to the 1860s, just two years after Lala was born, and quickly captivated the public imagination. Tait's work accounts for this phenomenon by the ways that aerial appealed to prevailing notions of beauty and superior physicality. She writes: "There was a metacultural significance in the juxtaposition of flying acts demonstrating bodily mastery of air space and spectacles presenting expansionist stories of conquered geographical space...."<sup>86</sup> She goes on to describe the ways that aerial artistry appealed to European conceptions of mastery and domination over all spaces.<sup>87</sup> Vis a vis her deployment of the cannon Lala's performance spoke this same language.

Additional queer readings of the cannon contribute further complexity to our understanding of Lala's subjectivity. Part of this understanding would borrow from Michel Foucault's work on the relationships between power, disciplined behaviors, and the body.<sup>88</sup> In

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<sup>85</sup> Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, 13—17.

<sup>86</sup> Tait, *Circus Bodies*, 30—31.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995).

particular, it is interesting to note the way that his concept of *dispositif* makes use of highly technological verbiage that illustrate the collisions between body and (disciplining) machinery, and Foucault's continued references to the military as a point of analogy.<sup>89</sup> In this light, the cannon might be read as a metaphorical embodiment of all of these various structures and thus, Lala's mastery over it suggests a subversion of these ideals. The cannon perhaps could also be seen as an extension of Lala herself, in which case, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* provides some relevant context. In the work, Haraway utilizes a cyborg metaphor in order to advocate for the dissolution of social boundaries between people.<sup>90</sup> The 'cyborg' (or "hybrid between machine and organism") Haraway writes, calls attention to the arbitrary boundaries of race and gender within society and serves as a template for dissolving these boundaries.<sup>91</sup> Thus, Lala the cyborg intertwined with her cannon could be seen to have been resisting rigid boundaries with regard to her race and gender. Despite feeling "dangerous," however, as Haraway's conception of the cyborg might suggest these so-called transgressions set the stage for a revised framework of political organizing that Lala herself contributed too but would never see the fruits of during her lifetime.

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<sup>89</sup> Jim Gerrie, "Was Foucault a Philosopher of Technology?", *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 7, no. 2 (2003): 66—73.

<sup>90</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," In *The Cybercultures Reader*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 291.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

## MORE OR LESS COLOURED

The last written record of Lala is a 1919 US passport application when Lala was 61 years old. The application provides three lines for previous residences outside the US is not filled in at all and simply states: “traveled up to 1899 in different countries...” Other parts of the form are completely struck through with a line to give her room to explain more clearly (see Figure 8). Looking at the ways that opted to fill out this form I cannot help but be reminded of the ways that mixed race people have been instrumental in fighting to identify and be counted in the ways that they want—particularly with regard to the US Census. In *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, scholar Michele Elam warns us of the dangers of lionizing such things as the census as expressions of our identity, particularly when we neglect the actual political power that they hold.<sup>92</sup> Despite this, it is important symbolically to notice the implications, both personally and politically of such a transgression.

An initial reading of the event might suggest the futility of trying to be recognized within a system that does not have the space or system to recognize one’s identity and experience’s, or worse deliberately creates systems that would see their erasure. However, the way that I would propose we think about it is as pointing to the socially constructed, tenuous nature of the white state when confronted with lived realities of people of color and, in this case, mixed race people. Indeed, as evidenced by the troubles that Degas experienced while painting her it seems that locating Lala as a mixed race woman within so-called stable structures was not as easy as he would have liked to believe.

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<sup>92</sup> Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*, (Stanford, CA: University Press, 2011), 13.



124036

NOTE. - This form is to be filled out in duplicate, one copy being retained in the files of the office in which it is executed and the other forwarded to the Department.

Form No. 170. COMBINED. Fee for subject \$1.00  
 Issued March, 1917. Fee for administering oath and preparing passport application, 1.00

**DEPARTMENT PASSPORT APPLICATION.**

NATIVE.

I, Mrs. Olga Woodson, a NATIVE AND LOYAL CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES, hereby apply to the Department of State, at Washington, for a passport for myself, accompanied by my wife and minor children, as follows:

born at \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

and \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

and \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

I solemnly swear that I was born at Stettin, in the Kingdom of GERMANY, on 21 apr. 1868, that my father / Karnerl Charles was born in St. Louis and is now residing at dead for the purpose of \_\_\_\_\_ (that he emigrated to the United States from the year of \_\_\_\_\_ that he resided \_\_\_\_\_ years continuously in the United States from \_\_\_\_\_ that he was naturalized as a citizen of the United States before the Court of \_\_\_\_\_

As shown by the Certificate of Naturalization provided herewith that I am the bearer of Passport No. 75, issued by the American Legation at Brussels on 27 June 4th 1919; that my legal domicile is in Brussels, my permanent residence being at Brussels, and I have at the time aforesaid have never been to the United States arriving at \_\_\_\_\_ where I am now residing for the purpose of \_\_\_\_\_

that I have resided outside the United States at the following places for the following periods:

Travelled up to 1899 in different countries to \_\_\_\_\_

Since 1899 in Brussels from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

In Holland during the war from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

and that I desire to remain a citizen of the United States and intend to return thereto permanently to reside and perform the duties of citizenship within \_\_\_\_\_ months or when business need: it \_\_\_\_\_ years

I have not applied elsewhere for a United States passport or for consular registration and been refused. I desire a passport for use in visiting the countries hereinafter named for the following purpose:

<u>Belgium</u>	<u>Residence</u>
(Name of country)	(Object of visit)
_____	_____
(Name of country)	(Object of visit)
_____	_____
(Name of country)	(Object of visit)
_____	_____

**OATH OF ALLEGIANCE.**

Further, I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion: So help me God.

American Legation at Brussels Sworn to before me this 1st day of September 1919

[SEAL.] Norman Brown Secretary of the Legation

*Olga Woodson*

\*A person born in the United States should submit a birth certificate with his application, or, if the birth was not officially recorded, affidavits from the attending physician, parents, or other persons having actual knowledge of the birth.  
 If the applicant's father was born in this country, same should be shown through the kinship in brackets.  
 (It is desirable, but not absolutely necessary, that the certificate of naturalization of the father be submitted.  
 (See circular instruction of July 26, 1918, entitled "Protection of Native Americans Residing Abroad.")

Figure 8. Olga Woodson's US Passport Application, 1919. Retrieved from Ancestry.com.

Thus far I have attempted to avoid centering Degas in discussions of Lala's subjectivity. In my research, I have found an overabundance of scholarship on his problematic attitudes towards race and women. However, his struggles with perspective while locating here are a fascinating metaphor for the mixed body. Brown describes Degas' struggles as "sheer confusion"

in his attempts to locate Lala within the scene at the Fernando.<sup>93</sup> Degas, it seems, while never straying far from his original Baartman-esque vision for Lala, had greater trouble with the lofted beams that veered up and to the left behind her and went through several drafts and perhaps even going so far as to hire a consultant to help him get the perspective right.<sup>94</sup> Brown shares that traditionally this is thought to be indicative of Degas' quest for scientific accuracy and subsequently shares her own theory that it stems from greater discourses around the "science" of race.<sup>95</sup> With this reading it is not hard to imagine Degas looking up at Lala and asking the oft-heard question of many a mixed race person: "what are you?"

This attitude of curiosity was no doubt influenced by the similar ambiguity that marked attitudes toward miscegenation during the time when Lala rose to fame, an ambiguity marked by a simultaneous shift in attitudes toward race mixing, along with the development of complex taxonomies (and subsequent policing of these imposed boundaries) concerning race. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly in France, attitudes toward miscegenation were not lax, per se, but seen as perhaps inextricably linked to national identity as well as a necessary component of an expansionist colonial project. To the first point, George M. Fredrickson points out that earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century French national identity incorporated a "qualified endorsement" of miscegenation in the form of an intermingling of Celtic, Latin, and Germanic elements.<sup>96</sup> In addition to this, intermarriage was seen as part of a potentially necessary part of expansionism and assimilation.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Brown, "Miss Lala's Teeth," 740.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Fredrickson, "Mulattoes and Métis," 107.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

Later in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, around the time when Lala rose to prominence, however, while certain polygynists would parrot these earlier ideals in regards to miscegenation between black people or indigenous populations and white people (particularly in areas colonial settings where whites were a “permanent” minority), by and large attitudes began to shift to a more pejorative position.<sup>98</sup> These attitudes were marked by an increase in scientific racism literature that adopted a hardened, more essentialist view toward race, that promoted the idea that people originated from multiple origins, leading to natural divisions and hierarchies among them.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the public infatuation with Lala coincided with contentious notions around miscegenation that were seen as desirable in certain instances and repulsive in others.

A similar ambiguity reveals itself when we consult depictions of Lala from around the time she rose to prominence. Indeed, in consulting such renderings we see that Lala’s racial identity resisted emergent categorizations around race by refusing to be tethered to a singular category. Based on posters and advertisements, sometime around 1883, Lala and Szterker began billing themselves as a duet known as Les Deux Papillons or simply, Olga and Kaira. One depiction from around this time, during their performances at the Hippodrome shows Lala and Szterker mid-air performing a trapeze act (See Figure 9). Similar imagery would be used to advertise shows in Spain that same year. In these pictures, Szterker and Lala are shown with very different skin tones. In another rendering of the act from the same year, depicting virtually the same trick as in the initial image, assumedly from an engagement at London’s Westminster

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<sup>98</sup> Fredrickson, "Mulattoes and Métis," 107; Jennifer Yee, "Métissage in France: A Postmodern Fantasy and its Forgotten Precedents," *Modern & Contemporary France*, 11 (2003): 416.

<sup>99</sup> A listing of many such texts from Europe and the United States can be found in the chapter “Geo-Racial Mapping,” in *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* ed. John Kuo Wei Chen and Dylan Yeats.

Aquarium the two are the same color (see Figure 10).<sup>100</sup> The lack of accuracy around Lala’s skin color might be attributed to color availability were it not for the golden and darker brown colors shown in both the bull and the background. Even the shading on Lala’s body is not markedly different from Szterker. Ironically, this lack of racial fixity in visual renderings was coupled with an eagerness to locate her identity in written accounts—even when these accounts contradicted one another. An article from the 1883 Westminster Aquarium engagement states that “no one would care to question Olga’s Ethiopian descent.”<sup>101</sup> A much earlier article from 1879 concocts a fantastical tale about Lala that includes her being a former African princess while still others referred to her as a “Mulatresse” or “Mulatto.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Articles from the 1883 engagement at the Westminster Aquarium refer to an act featuring ‘Farini’s Bulls’ performing alongside Lala and Szterker. The bulls in this poster would seem to indicate that this poster is from that performance or one approximately from that time. (*Morning Post* (London), October 16, 1883, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>).

<sup>101</sup> *Morning Post* (London), October 16, 1883.

<sup>102</sup> *The Era* (London), February 23, 1879.



Figure 9. Levy, Emile, *Hippodrome au Pont de l'Alma: Les Merveilleuses Gymnastiques Kaira et Olga*, 1883, color lithograph, 2314 X 153/4 in. (59 X 40 cm), National Library of France Newspaper Archives Online, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9004252z.r=olga%20et%20kaira?rk=107296;4>.

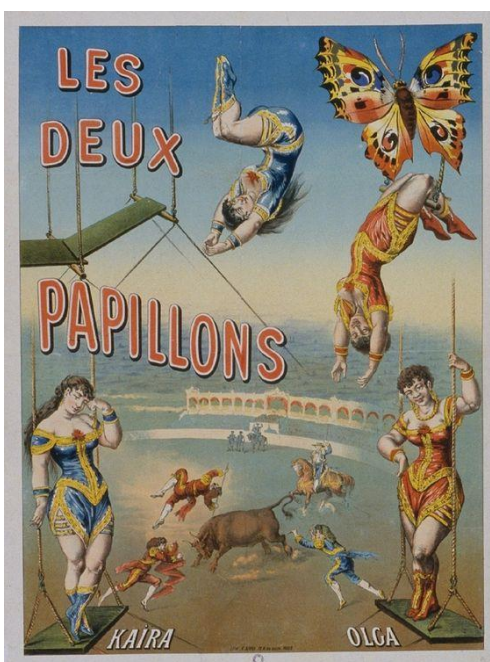


Figure 10. *Les Deux Papillons: Kaira et Olga*, ca. 1883, color lithograph, 66 x 50 cm, Médiathèque de Chaumont Website.

One might initially construe these varying accounts of Lala's identity as strategic attempts to draw upon Lala's exoticism in order to spark audience interest. However, against the backdrop of shifting ideas toward race toward complex categorizations, I would like to provide an alternate reading of these contradictory depictions as well as Degas' difficulty in metaphorically "placing Lala" – one that takes into account all of her varying subjectivities through the lens of mixed race experiences. In essence, Lala's continues oscillations among and between her various subjectivities and identities demanded constant and responsive revisions of the frames that others saw her existing within. She refused to be tethered and refused to be fixed—she had to fly.

Part of the difficulty too likely lay in the very medium that Degas was using—something static meant to capture something dynamic. This dynamism, I contend, lay both with Lala's act itself, but also with the negotiations of her identity that she undertook as a mixed race woman. Indeed, traditional, archetypical representations of mixed race experiences and people often emphasize the moment of passing, the moment of not-passing, the moment of demarcation between races, or even the arrival of a post-racial society. These narrow conceptions, however, do not necessarily capture the continual adaptations, translations, back-and-forth, and adjustments required to maintain the mixed race person's position within and between families, groups, and society at large. It is these very adjustments, I contend, that set the stage for an embodied scholarship activism that moves beyond identity politics.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Chandelier identifies as an amalgam of several different cultures including Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Irish.

## LALA'S LEGACY

To what end is locating the positionality of a person who lived over 100 years ago? Indeed, with issues such as surveillance, police brutality, prevalent anti-blackness, and ongoing settler colonialism pervading our public policy and public life it might seem a waste of time for a critical ethnic studies scholar to be spending energies combing through old French newspapers and looking at old circus posters. And, I have to agree that I am extremely privileged to have the metaphorical and physical capacity to wrestle with theory and history without my immediate well-being jeopardized by making that choice for myself. However, to return to the idea of transtemporal communities for a moment, by linking our experiences through time we call attention to the ways that the insidious nature of the white gaze manifested, and continues to manifest in our lives as people of color.

If Degas' strategy of locating Lala to a fixed moment in time was futile then, perhaps it is more appropriate connect transtemporal relationships between her and more contemporary mixed performance artists (particularly mixed race, queer ones) in order to more effectively construe and locate her existence. One such performer I would like to highlight is Cocoa Chandelier, a mixed race drag artist from Hawaii.<sup>104</sup> Her performances include a variety of artistic mediums including multimedia, dance, stilting and, relevant to this project, aerial fabric, and many changes in mode. Scholar Stephanie Nohelani Teves analyzes one particular performance of hers and points out how Chandelier uses her performance to "challenge the ongoing subjection and hypercommodification of Hawaiian indigeneity," however, does so in a

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<sup>104</sup> Stephanie Nohelani Teves, "Cocoa Chandelier's Confessional: Kanaka Maoli Performance and Aloha in Drag." In *Critical Ethnic Studies: An Anthology*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 289.

way that does not outwardly address the cultural structures that her performance critiques.<sup>105</sup> In a poignant excerpt she writes:

Through the putting on and taking off of multiple signifiers, the purposeful ambivalences and complexities of Cocoa Chandelier's performance at the Universal Showqueen Pageant offers a space to imagine and engage the agonizing realities of Kanaka Maoli Indigeneity.<sup>106</sup>

Not only is Teves' article an excellent example of reading performances as text, the radical potential of Chandelier's performance to revise colonial mindsets is inspiring to think about. Thinking about connections to Lala, there is one obvious connection in that Chandelier also makes use of aerial artistry, however, more broadly, in connecting the two across time it becomes possible to situate Lala's performance as a potentially liberatory act, in turn, pushing back against some of the more exploitative dynamics of her history.

As can be seen with Chandelier, drag performance serves as a natural complement to mixed race frameworks as well as the circus. Vaginal Crème Davis serves as another demonstrative example. Jose Esteban Muñoz discusses Davis in his 1999 work *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the Performance of Politics*. A particularly important concept that Muñoz articulates in his work is the idea that Davis' work elicits discomfort in audiences by the way that she performs disidentification (performative modes "tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist oppressive and normalizing discourses").<sup>107</sup> While there are many distinctions to be made between Davis' work and Lala's performances (including time period, artistic intent, and medium to name a few),

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<sup>105</sup> Teves, "Cocoa Chandelier," 289—290.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, "The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Crème Davis's Terrorist Drag," In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (St. Paul, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.



Muñoz articulates important dynamics between spectatorship and marginalized and ambiguous bodies—relationships that both Davis and Lala work to subvert. Thus, with the knowledge that performances constitute alternate (and sometimes subordinate) knowledges, we can read performances like Lala’s (and those of more contemporary mixed race artists) as acts of creating and expressing alternative ways of knowing and being that speak to dominating power structures such as whiteness, toxic masculinity, and colonization.<sup>108</sup> To that end, Judith Butler’s work, “The Political Promise of the Performative” discusses the power of the body in provoking political conversation and action. In particular, the chapter discusses the ways that dispossessed (or marginalized) bodies might leverage their own precarious position both as a tool for protest and also a beneficiary of protest.<sup>109</sup> Key ideas from this article include the concept of the body as a site of potential social resistance, as well as the body’s performance of resistant acts. Furthermore, this article also calls attention to how marginalized people might use their bodies as a sight of resistance when no other option is open to them. Thus, from this article and other ideas of performance studies, it becomes possible to glean the ways the performance of the mixed race people, including Lala, might serve a similar political function.

Together, these connections I have mapped against the mixed race experience help to articulate a new moment for organizing. Much in the way that queer theory has emerged as an occasion to agitate existing anti-kyriarchal<sup>110</sup> and sometimes colonized ideologies, I

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<sup>108</sup> Conquergood, “Radical Research,” 152—153.

<sup>109</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, “The Political Promise of the Performative,” In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 140—148.

<sup>110</sup> Kyriarchy is a term coined by feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in order to refer to the many, interlocking and multiplicative systems of domination and submission. I apply a negation of said term here in order to speak to scholarship activist work that is actively working against all of these interlocking structures. (Kwok Pui-lan, “Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Postcolonial Studies,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 1 (2009): 191—197).

contend that the exercise in configuring Lala as a mixed race figure primes us to do the work of pushing the boundaries of organizing beyond ideas of colorblindness and identity politics. In many cases mixed race peoples have already begun the task on their own behalf.<sup>111</sup> Mixed race scholar, Andrew J. Jolivet, perhaps states it best in his musings on the intersections between mixed race identity and social justice. He writes:

...this perspective develops the potential to create new frameworks that go beyond colorblind or post-racial movements that suggest we should be a nation where race, gender, and sexuality do not matter. By utilizing a critical mixed-race sociological framework, I believe we can link common struggles for solidarity because people often have to know more about all sides of themselves than people from one ethnic community.<sup>112</sup>

While perhaps teetering closely to overly-simplistic “shared humanity” rhetoric, Jolivet’s assertions that mixed race peoples’ ability to know about all sides of themselves being an asset to social movements is intriguing. It could be argued, and often is, that anyone possessing multiple layers of identities which have been oppressed in public has experience in these activities of switching among and between narratives. After all, aren’t all oppressed identities (and the people who possess them) destined to constantly maneuver against, between, among dominant (white) narratives? With these people I would definitely agree that collective experiences of marginalization are an important step toward building movements and social change. To them I would reiterate, however, that for me, and maybe for Lala as well, it is the very experience of looking in the mirror and knowing that, even if I tried, I wouldn’t be able to leave behind the parts of my identity that I don’t agree with or that are in dissonance with other parts. I cannot

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<sup>111</sup> Daniel, “Emerging Paradigms,” 19—20.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew J. Jolivet, “Critical Mixed Race Studies: The Intersections of Identity and Social Justice,” In *Sociologists in Action: Sociology, Social Change, and Social Justice*, ed. Kathleen Odell Korgen, Jonathan M. White, and Shelley K. White, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2011), 23.

simply reject what doesn't make sense to me at the moment—I will always be considering and searching and creating what makes the most sense, and what feels right in any given moment. In turn, then, remembering Lala in this way charges us to do the same—we cannot simply set aside and reject the things that do not make sense, we must perform them to interrogate them so that we can hopefully one day dissolve them.

## CURTAIN CALL

In the course of compiling literature for my project, I have come to realize that the process of graduate research involves wanting to write about one thing, and then realizing that one thing is actually comprised of 80,000 things that I have no idea about. Starting this project, I knew I wanted to write about mixed race and circuses. Along the way, I never dreamed I would be researching French Impressionism, performing critical discourse analysis on news articles and advertisements, or mapping the connections between drag performance and a 19<sup>th</sup> century circus artist. I never thought that I would be reading news articles in English, French, and Dutch. Nevertheless, the interconnected web of disciplines that must be examined when we consider the implications of constructing Miss Lala as a mixed race figure serves as a testament to the ways that women of color (and mixed race women, in particular) are even in erasure or tokenism are always, already interwoven into the fabrics of public life.

In these moments, I find it difficult not to think of my own experiences as a mixed race woman and the oscillatory characterizations of my own identity. The idea of where my mixed race body belongs has always been and continues to be complicated. Looking into the mirror it is not possible for me to ignore or hide the various contradictory histories that conspired to locate me in this place and time. For me, attempting to hold these various identities is a dynamic, ever-evolving activity whose constant moving “among and between” can leave me in a perpetual state of nostalgia—longing to go back to the place where I just was. It is this constant longing which drives explorations for a home I may never find and yet am constantly weaving together (as I’ve done throughout this literature review) through the narratives (like Lala’s) that speak to me. It is this same longing that drives my scholarship and insistence that the unveiling, reconstructing, and creating of narratives holds the key to a truly liberatory politic for marginalized people. This

is to quote Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, the “bridge called my back,”<sup>113</sup> or as we might think about in Lala’s case, the canon held between my teeth.

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<sup>113</sup> See Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).

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