

New Encounters with Les Demoiselles d'Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism (The Art Bulletin). Anna C. Chave

What was “the amazing act upon which all the art of our century is built”? What is “the most innovative painting since Giotto,” the ‘harbinger comet of the new century,’ ” the very “paradigm of all modern art,” no less? What is the modern art-historical equivalent of the Greatest Story Ever Told? What else but the monumental *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* painted by Picasso in 1907? Six years ago, this single painting, “probably the first truly twentieth-century painting,” occasioned a major exhibition at the Musée Picasso in Paris commemorated by a ponderous two-volume catalogue. The director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York swore he would kill himself if the plane transporting the work to that event were to crash. What can account for such hyperbole, for such an unparalleled fixation on a particular picture?

“In mystical terms, with this painting we bid farewell to all the paintings of the past,” pronounced André Breton of *Les Demoiselles*. More than any other work of art, Picasso’s picture has been held to mark or even to have precipitated the demise of the old visual order and the advent of the new. That an historians should have conscripted *Les Demoiselles* to serve in such a strategic capacity might seem odd, however, if we take into account that the cognoscenti resoundingly rejected the picture at the time it was painted, and that it remained all but invisible to the public for three decades thereafter, when it finally found an audience—though at first only in the United States. The painting “seemed to everyone something mad or monstrous,” the dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler recalled; “Derain told me that one day Picasso would be found hanging behind his big picture.”

Why have historians parlayed this once reviled and ignored image of five rather alien-looking prostitutes vying for a client into the decisive site of the downfall of the prevailing visual regime? Undeniably, Picasso violated pictorial convention in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: by his deidealization of the human form, his disuse of illusionistic space, and his deployment of a mixture of visual idioms. In the standard art-historical narratives, however, these violations on the artist’s part tend to get conflated with the putatively violent aspect of the women he depicted, who often come to assume a kind of autonomous agency. And whereas Picasso’s contemporaries fingered him as the perpetrator who “attacked” his female figures, later accounts often cast the artist together with the viewing public as the prostitutes’ victims. Leo Steinberg experienced the picture as a “tidal wave of female aggression... an onslaught”; Robert Rosenblum perceived it as an “explosion” triggered by “five nudes [who] force their eroticized flesh upon us with a primal attack”; and Max Kozloff deemed it simply “a massacre.”

*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is generally credited not only with a momentous act of destruction, but also with one of creation. Long designated the first Cubist painting—“the signal for the Cubist revolution” in its full-fledged dismantling of representational conventions—the painting is now more loosely considered a curtain raiser or trigger to Cubism. Others had pulled crucial triggers before Picasso, however. When Baudelaire told Manet, “You are only the first in the decrepitude of your art,” he referred to the

scandalously frank picture of a courtesan, Olympia, rendered with startling flatness in 1865. For that matter, a compressed or otherwise compromised female form, often that of a prostitute or femme fatale, would come to serve almost as an avatar of modernism. Feminist critics have lately diagnosed this fact, that the avant-garde's testing of cultural limits so often played itself out on the female body, as symptomatic of a visual regime where "Woman" serves as "the very ground of representation, both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history."

The Greatest Story Ever Told was perforce a narrative of exclusion, then: a story told by a heterosexual white male of European descent for an audience answering to the same description; and the stories told ever since about that Greatest Story have mostly been no less narratives told by straight white males for a like public. Virtually every critic who has addressed *Les Demoiselles* has not only assumed what is indisputable—that the picture's intended viewer is male and heterosexual—but has also elected to consider only the

experience of that viewer, as if no one else ever looked at the painting. (Through *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso "tells us what our desires are," one critic declared, peremptorily.) No doubt Picasso's chosen subject dictates this scenario, since today, just as in 1907, prostitution marks an indelible social boundary between the sexes: between men, who can routinely contract for the sexual services of women, and women, who have never had a comparable opportunity.

Among my objectives in the present text, then, is to examine where *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* positions some of its unanticipated viewers; to explore the painting from, as it were, unauthorized perspectives. What follows is a study in reception, present and past, in short, but one that takes its focus through the critical lenses of gender and race. (Examining the painting's reception history from a given, raking angle, not in a full, even light, will bring some neglected aspects of that history into relief while, admittedly, flattening

or obscuring other elements that would figure prominently in a more general or comprehensive kind of reception study.) Poststructuralist and reception theories have shown that all publicly circulated images accrue meanings beyond their makers' intent and control, or that the meanings of works of art are more contingent than immanent, for in the act of interpreting art works critics shape their significance by shaping how and what the public sees. As for the terms in which *Les Demoiselles* has been read, they have often been incipiently sexist, heterosexist, racist, and neocolonialist: so I will argue. (I should perhaps add plainly that neither Picasso's own intentions for the picture nor his susceptibility to the biases enumerated above are the principal subjects of investigation here.)

To begin with, the place that *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* conspicuously marks out for a client-viewer is hopelessly unsuited to me—a heterosexual, feminist, female viewer. But I can find some basis to identify with its protagonists. Although my privileged background has insulated me from the desperate straits that have long driven women to toil in the sex industry, like other independent women I none the less have an inkling of what it means to be treated as a prostitute. When I traverse the city streets alone I am subject to pestering by strange men who lewdly congratulate me on aspects of my

anatomy while ordering me to smile. If I am not mistaken for a prostitute, given my reserved dress and behavior, I remain prey to that pervasive suspicion that a trace of whore lurks in every woman—just as an “honest” woman supposedly lurks in ever)’whore.

As it happens, the streets in my own longtime neighborhood on Manhattan’s Lower East Side encompass a major prostitute “stroll.” The streetwalkers I encounter there are a lower class of prostitute, more drug-addicted and ill than the type of woman Picasso portrayed, but I occasionally see them assume the poses of the two demoiselles at the center of the painting, their arms crooked over their heads in an age-old formula for seductive femininity. On the Lower East Side, as in Picasso’s picture, however, the woodenness of the women’s stances and their faces’ masklike stolidity suggest that they know they are party to a tiresome artifice. Like virtually all women, I have engaged in such half-hearted acts of simulation, engaged in such a “masquerade,” and this helps me to view the demoiselles empathetically: they seem to me at once to demonstrate and to withdraw from patriarchal stereotypes of femininity, as if in an act of noncooperative cooperation. These women—who are Picasso’s fictions no doubt, but fictions founded on his observations of actual, disgruntled women and prostitutes—these women can be had, of course, but on another level they are not for the having, and that puts the client-viewer in a position of nerve-wracking uncertainty; of not knowing what lies behind the mask. For women, meanwhile, the price of this strategy is a profound sense of alienation, insofar as “the masquerade ... is what women do ... in order to participate in man’s desire, but at the cost of giving up [their own].”

A different kind of masquerade, an act not only of mimicry but also of minstrelsy, is figured by the two boisterous women on the right-hand side of the picture, where Picasso caricatured sacred African masks and employed them in a brazenly disrespectful way. Mimicry is an act of appropriation and “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge,” observes Homi Bhabha, adding, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.” These demoiselles offend me, then—and yet, I confess, they attract me too: not because their outrageous headgear pokes fun at Africans but because it makes fun of the prostitutes’ clients, despoiling their sexual appetites. In the boldly squatting figure at the lower right—with her backside turned as if she were “mooning” the johns, while her mask is swiveled forward to terrify them—and in the energy of the woman barging through the curtains above her. ! see bodies that educe comparatively natural and confident postures. And I identify with these disruptive figures who impetuously signal their clientele to get lost, while damning the consequences.

In other critics’ accounts, the demoiselles in Africanesque masks have never figured in any way as sympathetic, but only as repellent—indeed, as by far the most repellent of all five women, who are generally viewed as disease-ridden harpies. The demoiselles appear not hideous or sickly to me, however, but plain and strong. Their exaggerated, stylized features render them somewhat comical—a bit like the simple figures in the “Little Jimmy” cartoons that Picasso loved at the time he painted this picture—but no more ugly than the artist himself appeared in self-portraits of this period, similarly stylized images that critics do not call grotesque. True, the demoiselles are thick-

limbed, angular, and broad-featured, a physiologic type associated with laborers' stock, but Picasso also had a stocky body and critics hardly find it gross.

To my eye, the unmasked faces of the three figures on the left side of the picture suggest not syphilitic monsters but the glazed-over visages of hard-worn pros. The two women at the picture's center appear to direct a jaundiced gaze toward the unending parade of men before them. The woman farthest to the left, the most covered and stiffly restrained of the figures, seems especially businesslike; she evokes a madam holding open the drapery for the patrons' sake while keeping a steady eye on her charges. (I note that her two hands and one of her feet are visible, moreover, whereas, among the other four women, only a single hand and no feet were depicted: thus Picasso symbolically disabled those figures.) Together, the demoiselles might recall the prostitutes and madams in Brassai's later photographs—unashamed, competent, solid, and tough-looking women trapped in miserable circumstances.

If being the same sex as the demoiselles, the second sex, puts me at a disadvantage in front of this picture, it entails some advantage too—a moral advantage over the men who are supposed to be standing where I stand, men who would readily exploit fellow human beings in this vile way. Instead of letting me bathe in a sense of innocence, however, the picture brings me also a guilty thrill at gaining this close-up view of a tawdry ritual that men ordinarily perform well removed from the curious and censorious gaze of women such as myself. That sense of my anomalousness at the scene of this impending transaction underlines the separation between the demoiselles and myself, driving home the fact that prostitutes were and are far more vulnerable than I. Yet the demoiselles are not, after all, the streetwalkers who are most often the targets of psychopathic Jack the Rippers and Joel Rifkinds; they reside in a brothel under state-regulated conditions, and they appear to me quite unafraid. The terror in this situation has appertained instead, for reasons I shall explore, to the male viewing public.

By no means would I wish to argue that there has been a uniform and univocal response to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* amongst its male audience. Yet I can state that something like a prototypical male response to the picture has emerged, particularly in treatments of it over the last two decades—a response centering on the awfulness and fearsomeness of the depicted prostitutes. Given that prostitution originated and exists precisely to fulfill male desires, how are we to account for the unmitigated dearth of pleasure expressed by male viewers of the painting? So gripped by anxiety has the (prototypical) male viewer been that he has failed to anticipate any gratification the demoiselles' nude bodies might augur. As Charles Bernheimer portrays him, this viewer quails before the spectacle of women who embody “his worst fears of their atavistic primitivism, animalistic destructiveness, and cold, impersonal eroticism.” Such feelings of “deep-seated fear and loathing of the female body” are often attributed equally to the picture's author. And William Rubin comments that such attitudes are “commonplace in male psychology” in any case, so that Picasso's great achievement in *Les Demoiselles* was to make this syndrome emerge as “a new insight—all the more universal for being so commonplace.”

That contempt for women is integral to normal male psychology was suggested, predictably, by Freud; noting the prevalence of men's “desire to depreciate” women,

he observed that “the curb put upon love by civilization involves a universal [read: male] tendency to debase sexual objects.” In this light, we might note the critics’ penchant for describing the women Picasso depicted not simply as prostitutes, but as whores, sluts, harlots, strumpets, trollops, and doxies (to take Steinberg’s lexicon) or as “a species of bitch goddess” whose bodies “may not even deserve the name human” (as Kozloff calls them). That the psychological mainspring of the response to *Les Demoiselles* has been more contempt and fear than desire surely stems in no small part from the fact that viewers find themselves exposed not to just any brothel, moreover, but to a “brothel reverting to jungle”; one inhabited by more or less exotic-looking women.

Inasmuch as they figure the exotic, the *demoiselles*’ bodies are doubly branded as sexual, for historically, the exotic—or, more specifically, the African and the so-called Oriental woman—has often been conflated with the erotic in the European imagination. The prostitute functions too, of course, as evidence of an excess of sexuality. And by the turn of the century, as Western women generally chafed at the bit for more freedom of movement, the “conjunction” of women and the city epitomized by the prostitute “suggested] the potential of an intolerable and dangerous sexuality, a sexuality which is out of bounds precisely as a result of the woman’s revised relation to space, her new ability to ‘wander’ (and hence to ‘err’).” Fear of the prostitute spilled over into anxiety about the sexual continence of all women, anxiety about distinguishing decent women from indecent ones, and concern that the former may yet vanish.

In the view of some astute observers of modern life, including most notably Walter Benjamin, the prostitute would emerge as a key figure of urban modernity. With the flourishing of capitalism came the ascent of the commodity, and in the prostitute’s collapsing of the distinction between the merchandise and the merchant we find (as Benjamin said) the very apotheosis of the commodity. The prostitute could be identified with and blamed for not only the encroaching commodification, the growing coldness or superficiality of social relations, but also the very “decline of love” itself. Where images of nude women once stood as tokens of plenitude and joy, pictures of nude prostitutes would stand instead as the specters of a society that no longer makes room for joy or love unless they can be bought and sold. From one feminist perspective, then, these figures raise the question: “Does pleasure, for masculine sexuality, consist in anything other than the appropriation of nature, in the desire to make it (re)produce, and in exchanges of its/these products with other members of society? An essentially economic pleasure.”

In her connection to a peculiarly modern and virulent form of social plague, then, the prostitute made a specially fitting emblem of modernity—which should help explain why *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* has been singled out as the very “paradigm of all modern art.” But such accounts of the prostitute’s moment do not explain why this specific painting attained a unique prominence surpassing that of, say, *Olympia*. After all, since it debuted in the Salon and passed after Manet’s death into the collection of the state, *Olympia* could and did serve as a continuing reference point for critics and other artists, whereas for several decades after Picasso completed *Les Demoiselles*, it remained largely unseen and unmentioned.

What made Picasso's painting initially seem less suited for public display than for the studio was that, in deploying disparate visual idioms to render different physiognomic types, he left the work in a disjunctive state, such that historians debated for some time whether it was actually finished. If the disintegration of the great traditions of painting could already be detected in *Olympia*, the evidence of that decrepitude was plainly that much further advanced in *Les Demoiselles*. And insofar as it calls the very notion of a unified style, and so the possibility of finish, into question, the painting's raptured aspect made it serve the purpose of signifying a moment of rapture particularly well. The evolution of Cubism was impelled by a realization of "the conventional rather than the imitative nature of representation," as Christine Poggi succinctly phrases it; and a corollary of that realization was "that style can be a kind of mask, to be worn at will," so that "there was no reason to observe the law of unity": an insight clearly at work in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

On another plane, what separates *Les Demoiselles* from *Olympia* are matters of class and race. Critics saw both Picasso's and Manet's prostitutes as working-class women owing to their compact muscularity and the perceived coarseness of their features/ The superior station of Manet's prostitute is evident, however, from her sumptuous accessories and surroundings; it emerges, too, from the fact that she is quite alone but for the black maid whose servitude establishes the existence of an underclass compared with which the courtesan enjoys an elevated social standing. By contrast, Picasso's subjects are humble brothel denizens, women who would have been on call, if not always on their feet, from noon until three o'clock in the morning, available to any passerby with a modicum of disposable income (on a busy day they might have serviced from sixteen to twenty-five men each, while the courtesan limited her sessions to prearranged and costly assignments). Far from having dark-skinned servants to wait upon them, the demoiselles are themselves arguably in a position of some servitude to the woman at the left; and the Africanesque masks worn by two of them symbolically elide the distinction, and so the expected discrepancy in social status, between a white woman and a woman of color. Whereas Manet's picture presumed the viewer an *haut bourgeois*, Picasso's demoted him socially, implying that he procured his sexual goods at the equivalent of, say, K-Mart and not Saks Fifth Avenue; and there were larger signs of social slippage in the implication that the prospective public for a major art work would be not the elite but the *hoi polloi*.

Among other, more evident changes, a certain downward mobility might be detected in Picasso's images of women in the period immediately preceding *Les Demoiselles*. In 1906, the artist passed from the wan, Italianate nudes of his Rose period to some bloated, marmoreal, but still classicized figures. In *Two Nudes* of that year, the figures face one another, replicate one another, so that almost the entirety of a nude female form is made available to the gaze. The figures' groins are discreetly angled out of view, however, and as with most of Picasso's painted female nudes up to this point, their legs are close together, sealing off their crotches. At the same time, the women peel apart a curtain behind them, opening a space in the pinkish brown field that might be said to function abstractly as a displaced vagina or transposed female sexual space. In a way, the picture thus subtly demonstrates what Picasso illustrated more literally in a drawing of around 1901: the conventional identity of the body of a woman with the

body of the paper or canvas—that space pliantly available to the probing of the painter’s phallic pen or brush.

Conventionally, both the act of painting and that of viewing have been described as phallic acts, acts of penetration performed on that passive receptacle, the blank field of the canvas. “I paint with my prick,” Renoir supposedly boasted. “A painter has also to paint ‘with [his] balls,’ ” bragged Picasso to his mistress, the painter Françoise Gilot. “I guess that even if a painter fucks a picture to a real climax once a year, it is quite a record,” Mark Rothko later estimated. And the critic Jean Clair once pithily proclaimed, “The gaze is the erection of the eye.” Such metaphors and the general conceit of penetration as a trope for knowing implicitly exclude the female artist and viewer, of course. But in a less obvious way, these metaphors also exclude the artist and the viewer of color, for dark-skinned peoples of both genders have long been grouped with the feminine as objects for penetration, objects not knowing but subject to being discovered and known. James Olney refers to the colonialist “perception of the [African] countryside as an immense vagina,” while Christopher Miller calls the African continent a “blank slate” endlessly inscribed with colonialist desires and fears. These various images converge, for example, in Kandinsky’s suggestive recollection of how he mastered his craft:

learned to battle with the canvas, to come to know it as a being resisting my wish (= dream), and to bend it forcibly to this wish. At first it stands there like a pure chaste virgin with clear eye and heavenly joy... And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist, who pushes into the wild virgin nature, hitherto untouched, using axe, spade, hammer, and saw to shape it to his wishes.

Deferring the matter of race for the moment, I wish to pursue another question at this juncture—one that may facilitate a much-needed feminist analysis of Cubism more generally—and that is what the phenomenon of the vaunted new “Cubist space” signified in gendered terms. To this end, I must underline the phallicism endemic to the dialectics of penetration routinely deployed in descriptions of pictorial space and the operations of spectatorship. The type of space that *Les Femmes d’Alger* inaugurated or, rather, prognosticated is a shallow space where voids seal over, becoming solid, while solids flatten and fragment. In Cubist space, movement transpires mostly laterally, through the mechanisms of passage, over borders broken down (perhaps under the pressure—to judge by the evidence of the stranger-looking *Les Femmes d’Alger*—of foreign influence). How are we to understand this sealing-off of that deep pictorial space which had for so long been identified with the feminine sexual body? And how are we to understand the disintegration of those penetrant masses which are readily identified with a masculine sexual presence? (“The radical quality of *Les Femmes d’Alger* lies, above all, in its threat to the integrity of mass as distinct from space,” Rosenblum declared; and other critics have used comparable phrases.)

One could argue that the space in full-fledged, analytic Cubist paintings is penetrable to a slight degree, but only at the viewer’s peril owing to the pictures’ shattered aspect; or one could say that a painting such as “*MaJolie*” (Woman with a Zither or Guitar) of 1911-12 (Fig. 4) is effectively impenetrable and that, in either case, this sealing-over of the pictorial space has a subtly emasculating or dephallicizing effect on the male

viewer. If his penetrant member no longer functions as a passkey to the world of knowledge, with its keyholes newly obstructed, he must prepare to apprehend pictures—and perhaps not pictures alone—in another way.

Some Cubist paintings do allude, obliquely and teasingly, to the canvas as a female sexual space. But they do so with a new focus on female self-penetration, which renders the male organ extraneous. In *Girl with a Mandolin* (Fanny Tellier) of 1910 (Fig. 5), the nude woman's torso visually echoes the body of an instrument that is (also) at once volume and void, while her hand's placement at the rim of the sound hole carries a mild autoerotic suggestion. In *Ma Jolie*, by contrast, the woman's body melds with the body of the instrument, while both are shattered to the point that the viewer cannot distinguish mass from void. If the canvas remains in any sense a female space, it is no longer a fully available or penetrable one/' Rosalind Krauss thus pinpoints *Girl with a Mandolin* as the moment when Picasso "watched depth and touch—what we would call the carnal dimensions—disappear, quite literally from sight." Picasso's move to seal off the canvas from the penetrating movement of the viewer could be construed as an attempt to protect that viewer from what he had come to perceive as the horrors of the space the canvas once opened up. In 1912, as he began the process of building up forms materially on top of the canvas—in a further move away from opening up spaces behind the picture's surface—he crowed to Braque, "I am in the process of conceiving a guitar and I use a little dust against our horrible canvas." Why the canvas had become horrible in Picasso's sight is the question—though a further question is whether it was more a matter of an artist contriving to be rid of pictorial holes that had become repugnant to him, or whether those holes had, in a sense, already sealed themselves off insofar as artists had been progressively disusing the potentially deep space of the canvas since the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The phenomenon of the gradual and inexorable flattening of pictorial space in the evolution of modernist art has been variously explained. Long established was Clement Greenberg's formalist delineation of an ongoing consolidation of the means unique to each art medium, such that painting (for one) would increasingly reveal its fundamental two-dimensionality. More recently, T. J. Clark has compellingly argued that the shallowing of the picture space may be associated with a shallowing or depleting of the full texture of human experience under capitalism. But neither rationale quite accounts for the utter loathing of holes expressed by numerous modernists. I would argue that that element of horror might best be understood in relation to deep-seated and pervasive fears of the feminine body, or (in Freud's formulation) of the "dark continent" more broadly. That horror corresponds, in other words, to what some feminists have diagnosed as a crisis of masculinity brewing in the West by and after the turn of the century, as women and peoples of color increasingly made felt not merely their presence, but also their discontent with their inferiorized and subjugated status. The white male's privileged position was thus threatened by increasing claims for political and social autonomy on the part of European women, and by an influx of intriguing artifacts (such as African masks) that testified to the existence of impressive though alien visions and values in colonized societies at once derided and admired as "primitive."



To return to *Les Femmes d'Alger*, then: the picture evidences not a full-fledged, almost fully flattened Cubist space, but “depth under stress,” as Steinberg aptly put it. “This is an interior space in compression like the inside of pleated bellows, like the feel of an inhabited pocket, a contracting sheath heated by the massed human presence,” Steinberg continued, framing the experience of viewing the work almost luridly as an act of coitus. The “very subject [of *Les Femmes d'Alger*] is a connection—a passage from out here inward into the body of the representation,” he averred; “Our vision heaves in and out” in “a similitude of sexual energy,” as the painting offers us “an interior apprehended on the model of touch and stretch, a nest known by palpation, or by reaching and rolling, by extending one’s self with it.” Steinberg likewise constructed Picasso’s experience in painting the picture as a simulacrum of coitus: the artist, here a Nietzschean figure, “wanted the orgiastic immersion and the Dionysian release,” so that “one insistent theme” of *Les Femmes d'Alger* is “the spasmodic action, the explosive release in a constricted space, and the reciprocity of engulfment and penetration.

If *Les Femmes d'Alger* provides a metaphorical sex act for the presumed heterosexual male viewer, then it may well be the sex act to end all sex acts, an experience too awful to risk repeating. “Doesn’t [the prostitutes’] shattering gaze rid us of any desire to enter into the picture’s space?” queries Yve-Alain Bois. That the prospective act of coitus in question might be a treacherous one emerged also from Steinberg’s account: *Les Femmes d'Alger* “declares that if you wholly accept and undergo the esthetic experience, if you let it engulf and ‘frighten’ you . . . then you become an insider. It is in the contagion of art that . . . the distinction between outsider and insider falls away. Not every picture is capable of such overriding contagion.” Though he used the term “contagion” metaphorically here, elsewhere Steinberg and others have tied the daunting aspect of *Les Femmes d'Alger* and the anger toward women it evinces to Picasso’s alleged experience with a sexually transmitted disease. What has helped to frighten some critics, then, is the same (fantasized) prospect of being infected by the *demaiselles* with an illness that spells at best a chronic nuisance, at worst a slow and grisly death. (To my own eye, the *demaiselles* do not appear unwell, let alone syphilitic, but my disinclination as a straight female to patronize them immunizes me in any case from the possibility of contracting a disease.) “Right from the first sketches,” *Les Femmes d'Alger* was really projection of Picasso’s “complex and contradictor) feelings’ about women,” Rubin asserts, while Bois explains the artist’s production of the painting in terms of his rampant castration anxiety: “The Medusa (castration) metaphor . . . best accounts for . . . the apotropaic brutality of the finished picture.” Like the Oedipal narrative, the Medusa narrative can indeed be mapped onto many acts of cultural production; but such exercises too often lead in circles, explaining a certain masculinist vision of sexuality by a like vision of sexuality in a way that inevitably debases women. In sustaining a focus on the artist’s vulnerable psyche, moreover, we may lose sight of the social ramifications of his acts. If we wish to pursue the hoary tale of castration with the idea of moving in a new direction—one with a view to social and historical realities as well as psychological ones—we might turn our attention to the two figures at the center of the picture with their arms raised in the pose of the *Venus Anadyomene*.

An image of Venus born of the sea foam, standing and wringing water from her hair, was a topos of history painting in the late nineteenth century, realized by Ingres among

others. Unsurprisingly, what was not depicted was how the foam that sired the glorious goddess of love flowed from the severed genitals of Uranus, who had been castrated by his son Cronus in revenge for having been jettisoned into the underworld (along with Uranus's other sons, the Titans—the first human race). A buried subtext of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, then, is the story of a woman coming to power at the expense of a patriarch whose authority was unexpectedly and irretrievably revoked. From a masculinist vantage point, this is certainly a horror story, but from a feminist one it could be, to the contrary, a fable or even a good omen of vengeance won against male tyranny.

Although the female body figures in male fantasy as mapped by Freud as a castrated body, it is not thereby simply a figure of impotence; rather, the woman's putative "wound" becomes invested "with such intense negative cathexes that the castrated woman becomes phallic through her association with this powerful fantasmatic energy." As Steinberg and others see them, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* are eminently phallic: the prostitute second from left "arrives like a projectile"; the one in the center is "a pillar nude"; the crouching figure at the right evokes "a jumping jack"; and all the women "start up like jerked puppets." To construct the female figure as a phallus is, in Freudian terms, a fetishistic strategy, a gesture at once of recognition and disavowal of the alarming fact that women have no penises. Numerous critics have framed Picasso's act in creating *LES Femmes d'Alger* in related terms, as a self-ministering ploy to exorcise his private "demons," his fear of women and others. "My first exorcism-painting," the artist once called the picture, in an oft-quoted statement.

Picasso's irrational fears would not, of course, die with Picasso. For the past two decades, critics have repeatedly explored and, it seems, empathetically reexperienced the artist's fears while discounting the more justified pain of those his art would exorcise, namely his declared "enemy," women, and his undeclared enemy, peoples of color—whom he erased or diminished in other ways, by denying the influence of their visual culture on his work. " 'L'art nègre?' Never heard of it," Picasso reportedly snapped at an interviewer interested in the impact of tribal art on his work. By World War II—that is, at the moment *Les Femmes d'Alger* first emerged into the limelight by entering the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York—Picasso was routinely denying that he had been affected by tribal art in composing *Les Femmes d'Alger*, claims that were until not long ago parroted by historians. In fact, he had seen "examples of art nègre here and there for at least six months before he absorbed it into the fabric of the *Demoiselles*," argued Rubin in 1983. It is now a commonplace of the art-historical literature, however, that " 'primitive' artefacts were invested with value at the same time as—or even after—similar technical innovations appeared within Western art practices" in a phenomenon of sheerly coincidental cultural convergence. Comments Michele Wallace sharply, "black artists and intellectuals widely assume that a white world is simply unable to admit that art from Africa and elsewhere in the third world had a direct and profound influence on Western art because of an absolutely uncontrollable racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism."

What is symptomatized by *Les Femmes d'Alger* and by its reception, and symptomatized (more abstractly and indirectly) by the shallowed space of the Cubist canvas, is a fear that spirals through Western society from the late nineteenth century

to the present: the fear of women and outsiders, including peoples of color, usurping masculine roles and Western prerogatives, assuming agency. In other words, a fear of the loss of male hegemony together with a fear of the loss of hegemony of the West are at issue in *Les Demoiselles*, so that the painting may be read as a gesture of “recognition and disavowal ... of the fact that the west—its patriarchal subject and socius—is threatened by loss, by lack, by others,” as Hal Foster astutely observes.

If *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* has functioned historiographically as the preeminent modern site where shifts in the dominant visual order took place, it has held that position not simply because it announced the advent of Cubism, or because it featured prostitutes, those allegorical figures of the modern, but because those prostitutes’ physiognomies are more or less foreign-looking, ranging (from left to right) from stylized Egyptian and Iberian to caricatured African types. The hidden shoal on which the ship of mimetic, Mediterranean, visual ideals is widely said to have foundered is not just the body of a debauched woman, but of an exotic and debauched woman. And the rhetoric critics used to describe that body (while trying to capture the spirit of Picasso’s visual rhetoric) at times seems to betray a fear of the decline of the West spelled by the breaching of Western borders by others—an irrational fear, of course, since Westerners had invaded other continents and not the reverse. A term such as “decivilizing,” for instance, applied to the demoiselles, resonates with an echo of the vocabulary of that colonialist discourse which underpinned sweeping and draconian policies wherein “the other is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other,” as Hélène Cixous phrases it.

Although the women in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* are all light-skinned, critics often differentiate the two with African-looking masks as distinctly ugly, bestial, and dirty or contagion-ridden—that is, with all the scathing stereotypes that have so long dogged dark-skinned peoples. To Western eyes, the African art that engaged Picasso appears “unbearably ugly,” pronounced Rosenblum. Rubin refers to “the monstrously distorted heads of the two whores on the right,” contrasting them with “the comparatively gracious ‘Iberian’ courtesans in the center.” And in the view of Rubin and Bernheimer both, *Les Demoiselles* effectively illustrates “the very process of atavistic regression, from the ‘normal’ heads of the two central figures through the dark metamorphosis of the woman on the left, to the Africanized masks and twisted, disordered anatomies of the two right-hand figures.” The painting thus betrays “a fantasy about the active presence in woman’s sexual nature of her dark, primitive, degenerate, perhaps diseased biological origins.” Frances Frascina actually compares African masks that bear some relation to those concocted by Picasso with medical photographs of figures horribly deformed by the effects of syphilis, claiming (quite unconvincingly, to my eye) that there are similarities between them. Observes Bhabha sagely: “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.” The subtext to all these texts on the relation of the more European-looking figures to the two figures in Africanesque masks is a narrative of regression: of normality regressing into deviancy, of well-being degenerating into disease, and of contained eroticism lapsing into raw animality. In this light, I must note that in numerous critics’ eyes, the two women whom I describe as wearing African-looking masks do not wear masks at all, but are hybrid creatures instead. (What might justify this reading is the striated, greenish

shading on the breast of the figure at the upper right, which echoes the green stripes on her face or mask, though I would maintain that the disjunction between these figures' heads and their bodies is otherwise so marked as to invite us to see them as wearing masks.) That these white women might be metamorphosing into "jungle-nosed nudes" is a cause for terror (as parallel scenarios of humans turning into insects or monsters in later horror movies would be) because mongrels are viewed as impure, degenerate, and corrupting—the notion that indigenous populations are degenerate and savage having been indispensable, of course, to the rationale for colonizing them. What looms in *Les Demoiselles* also is what Mary Doane identifies as "a strong fear that white women are always on the verge of 'slipping back' into a blackness comparable to prostitution. The white woman would be the weak point in the system, the signifier of the always too tenuous hold of civilization." The identification of the European woman with the figure of the primitive, played out in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, is a familiar one, encapsulated by Freud's allusion to white women as the "dark continent." Freud associated white female sexuality with the sexuality of "races at a low level of civilization," where (as with children) sexuality is allowed "free rein" in a course held to account for the putative evidence of diminished cultural achievement among these populations. In colonialist fantasies, then, the notion of the dark continent "contains the submerged fear of falling out of the light, down the long coal chute of social and moral regression," as Patrick Brantlinger phrased it; and that fear of backsliding has a powerful sexual dimension... In European writings about Africa, [Dominique] Mannoni says, "the savage ... is identified in the unconscious with a certain image of the instincts. . . . And civilized man is painfully divided between the desire to 'correct' the 'errors' of the savages and the desire to identify himself with them in his search for some lost paradise (a desire which at once casts doubt upon the merit of the ver)' civilization he is trying to transmit to them)."

Like Gauguin, Matisse, and many other modernists, for a time Picasso hoped to pioneer a new vision by looking to a new place, far from Europe. While Matisse would contrive a safe, masculinist utopia or pornotopia set in a France magically refashioned as an Orientalist, white North Africa, however, Picasso composed a dangerous, masculinist dystopia set in a Paris abruptly invaded by elements of black Africa. "As the Orientalist dream dies, the surprise is to find Africa within the self," notes Miller, and that surprise was an unpleasant one, for "Africanist discourse is at the least an unhappy Orientalism, a discourse of desire unfulfilled and unfulfillable." From a certain perspective, both Matisse's paradise and Picasso's hell might qualify as regressive visions. But to some, the specter of affluent white men not getting what they wanted or, as it were, getting more than they bargained for from the women and dark-skinned peoples they exploited is at least more heartening than seeing those same men's desires indulged. Traditionally, art-historical narratives construe Picasso's and Matisse's projects both as progressive, of course, on the understanding that the artists' recourse to cultures their own society had deemed primitive implied a critique of that (parent) society's values. Had *Les Demoiselles* been prominently exhibited and discussed in the years after it was painted, it might conceivably have had that impact, so shocked was the reaction to the picture among the small audience it reached. But the painting was effectively suppressed until such time as the potential for critique represented by the "primitive" had been "contravened, absorbed within the body of modern art," so that,

from the moment it became the object of sustained attention, *Les Demoiselles* could be vaunted as the greatest achievement of the world's greatest modern artist. Surely *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* could never have enjoyed the phenomenal celebrity it has if it did not function in some ways to confirm prevailing social biases. By the time the great icon's retrogressive implications had at last begun to emerge to view, however, its pivotal standing was already subject to question. If the picture's great stature has ostensibly remained undiminished—witness the major homage organized by the Musée Picasso—its position has become increasingly, oddly isolated. As analyses of Cubist practice have recently (and for good reason) shifted to sémiologie models that better suit more abstract idioms than Picasso was yet prepared to deploy in 1907, the status of *Les Demoiselles* has become a somewhat separate matter. The move toward isolating the picture well anticipated this methodological shift, however. And I suspect a contributing, though doubtless subliminal factor in the severing of *Les Demoiselles* from that Cubist corpus it was once said to engender—namely, an impulse to, in a sense, quarantine the painting's notoriously “contagion”-ridden body.

*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was hailed as the first Cubist painting during a period when its subject matter was scarcely mentioned. Until the picture's theme became an explicit focus of interest—owing to Steinberg's groundbreaking essay of 1972—the “young ladies” of Avignon enjoyed an exalted status as the virtual mothers of modernist painting. But once they were openly fingered as whores who merely hid behind the flimsy curtain of a euphemistic title, the demoiselles would be sternly and painstakingly stripped of their maternal status.' Not only are prostitutes conventionally thought to be barren, but what children they do bear must be of uncertain parentage; and Cubism could not be tainted as an illegitimate production. Worse yet that Cubism should be exposed as a black bastard; yet of the five demoiselles, critics had pinpointed above all the Africanized nudes as the site of Cubism's birth. Steinberg referred to “the intruding savage, deeply recessed, trapped in the cleft of a curtain whose collapsing pleats simulate an impenetrable solidification of space—the famous birthplace of Cubism,” while Kahnweiler isolated the figure at the lower right, with her legs spread wide as they would be in giving birth, as “the beginning of Cubism, the first upsurge.” No doubt the right-hand side of the painting, which Picasso finished last, is the more innovative part; but that these specific figures should have been isolated as the crucial site on the crucial site of origin for modernist painting also betrays a Western habit of symbolically pressing Africa into service as the originary realm, together with the habit of leveling the image of Africa into that of an ever penetrable, yet ever unknowable, feminine body.

When we first spy the crouching woman at the lower right of *Les Demoiselles*, our attention is arrested by the frontally poised, vividly drawn, Africanesque mask that serves as her face and, as our gaze travels downward, we expect to find that her whole body faces us with the genitals lewdly exposed between her boldly spread legs (a vision the artist initially considered, as sketches show). But Picasso elected instead to tease us, turning the woman's back to us so that her sexual organs are suppressed, while her mask might be seen (on second thought) as covering the back of her head. Picasso's gesture, of withdrawing what he had seemed to promise—a graphic view of the tabooed area of the labia and vagina—must be viewed in light of the subsequent sealing-off of pictorial space that Cubism effected. On the one hand, we could construe

that shallow Cubist space as implementing metaphorically a wishful recovery of the hymen so as to render the feminine body of the canvas intact, in a sense presexual, and so unthreatening. But sealed female genitalia may also connote what has been regarded as deviant feminine sexuality, that is, lesbianism or barrenness, both of which were associated with the prostitutes' subculture (as virginity, needless to say, was not). Numerous critics discern a masculine quality to some or all of the women in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, pointing to their sometimes flattened breasts—which might evoke the virilized form of the New Woman, as well as certain stereotypes about the lesbian body. To other critics, however, the femmes' bodies suggest the hypersexualized figure of the femme fatale. Significantly at issue in both these disparate interpretations is a nonprocreative feminine type.

The figures with African-looking masks, once universally accepted as Cubism's mothers, began to be accorded more complicated and more sinister roles in the early 1970s, then, at a moment when African Americans and women generally in the United States were assuming more aggressive roles including, for women of every color, that of winning and exercising the right to refuse maternity. No longer cast as the harbingers of a great birth, the figures in Africanesque masks became instead the avatars of a ghastly death. To Rubin, the "'African' faces express more . . . than just the 'barbaric' character of pure sexuality . . . their violence alludes to Woman as Destroyer—vestiges of the Symbolist femme fatale."

The figure of the femme fatale articulates "fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the 'I,' the ego. These anxieties appear quite explicitly in the process of her representation as castration anxiety," argues Doane. Owing to what were imagined as the devouring mouths and fathomless depths of their vaginas and uteruses, women have been poetically associated with the vertiginous terrors of the abyss; and in many critics' eyes the femmes have spelled precisely the threat of that abyss. Though he did not leave gaping holes in the painting's structure, and though he kept the women's mouths drawn closed and their vaginas occluded from view, there remained a nagging doubt: "What secret reserves of space does that jungle-nosed nude, looking in from backstage, leave behind?" as Steinberg anxiously expressed it.

Just as the female body enfolds certain distinct and vital holes or spaces (which are not, of course, generally scary or fully unknowable to women themselves), women have been associated symbolically with the holes or gaps in the epistemological fabric of the culture—and not women alone. Black Africa has had a parallel status in the Western imagination: the very word, Africa, "is practically synonymous with absence in Western discourse." Because the experience of women and peoples of color has historically been discounted under patriarchy, once the paternal order's epistemological fabric began to shred, those missing threads became the subject of increasing anxiety and interrogation.

The crisis of legitimation associated with the advent of modernity entailed a kind of dethroning of the sovereign white male subject. And "discussion of loss of authority inevitably comes around to women," Alice Jardine aptly notes; " 'Woman,' 'the feminine,' and so on have come to signify those processes that disrupt symbolic structures in the West." Not only women but also dark-skinned peoples "have

traditionally been perceived as figures of disorder, 'potential disrupters of [European] masculine boundary systems of all sorts.' " From the dominant perspective, as Elaine Showalter writes (though with a view only to women), these populations' "social or cultural marginality seems to place them on the borderlines of the symbolic order, both the 'frontier between [white] men and chaos' and dangerously part of chaos itself, inhabitants of a mysterious and frightening wild zone outside of patriarchal culture."

To the majority of critics, in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 119) Picasso conjured an exceedingly compelling vision of just such a wild zone. But on finishing that picture, the artist would soon proceed to calmer territory—by moving for a time toward resisting or suppressing the feminine, the bodily, and the foreign. Thus the analytic Cubist paintings to follow feature tamely banal motifs: still lifes, landscapes, portraits, and (fewest of all) rather chastely abstract nudes. Museum visitors traversing the galleries of the comprehensive "Pioneering Cubism" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1989—after having been greeted at the show's entrance by the always galvanizing presence of the *femmes*—might well have wondered: What happened to that flagrant, raw nudity as Cubism developed? What happened to those baldly African elements?

Numerous historians would answer that Picasso "purged himself of these barbaric impulses." Subdued by "the disciplining influence of the French tradition," represented by Cézanne and Braque, he turned away from these profound sources of inspiration—African art and Spanish art—and succumbed to "the classicizing influence of Braque." The result was that the African sources of "high" Cubist art would remain comparatively inevident, and scholars would tend to diminish them in any case, the better to qualify Cubism as a classic art. What has been neglected also is that, in retreating from the jarring content of *Les Femmes*, Picasso equally retreated from his own heritage, since he had specifically conceived two of the women as Iberian, and southern Spain—his birthplace—lies closer to Africa than any place else in Europe. Later in his life, Picasso liked to say that "cubism is Spanish in origin" and that "it was I who invented cubism." But Braque invented it with him in the wake of the storm caused by *Les Femmes*, and Braque had no penchant for the dark, bold, sensual, and tragic dramas of Spanish art or for the aspects of tribal art that so gripped Picasso. Braque "was never at all afraid of [the 'Negro pieces']," marveled Picasso, "because he wasn't affected by what I called 'the whole of it,' . . . everything that surrounds us, everything that is not us—he didn't find all of that hostile."

Another answer to the question: what happened to those big-as-life, bawdy women in the aftermath of *Les Femmes* is that they got dissected—first by Picasso and, much later, by a legion of art historians who would probe the painting's innards, examining its gestational process in microscopic, and admittedly intriguing, detail. Such was the impetus behind the sedulous and scrupulous scholarship assembled to accompany the Paris exhibition commemorating the painting, a show praised for having "brilliantly . . . dissected such a point of origin"—or, in a manner of speaking, for performing a successful autopsy on the former prostitute-mothers of modernist painting. (Historically, prostitutes had been the object of dissection in literal ways as well, "for the corpses of destitute prostitutes often served for anatomical dissection, thereby

fulfilling the explicit fantasy of numerous nineteenth-century' writers to examine female physiology by literally cutting women up.”)

As Doane and others have diagnosed it, the urge to plumb the depths of feminine sexuality stemmed from the sense that women harbor a threatening “secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered.” In this light, the shallow, sealed-off space of analytic Cubism might be understood to function defensively as a space where almost everything lies on the surface, revealed to view. In its hiddenness, women’s interiority was, like “the invisibility of nature’s interiority... threatening precisely because it threatens the balance of power between man and nature, and between men and women,” observes the historian of science, Evelyn Fox Keller. “To this problem, the culture of modern science has found a truly effective solution... Instead of banishing the Furies underground, out of sight, as did the Greeks, modern science has sought to expose female interiority, to bring it into the light, and thus to dissolve its threat entirely.”

Protracted efforts at exposing the hidden, inner workings of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* have not noticeably assuaged the critics’ uneasiness, however. The discourse on the picture over the past two decades—since Steinberg substantially redirected the course of discussion—might be said to prove instead its sustained ability to move men to reexperience their deepest anxieties about questions of origins (about the unequaled powers of the mother and the invisibility of the father), to the point where they have hoped to exorcise the “exorcism-painting,” to expel it from Cubism’s cherished body. Thus, *Les Demoiselles* has gradually assumed the form of a detached preface to a new, improved version of the Greatest Story Ever Told, which now centers on the relatively de-ethnicized and disembodied corpus of “high” Cubism; for now we are offered a Cubism that commences at ever later dates: in 1908, according to Rubin, and as late as 1912 by Bois’s account. Though Rubin and Bois continue to insist on the momentousness of *Les Demoiselles*, such claims plainly lose some freight once the case is made that the painting did not, in fact, inaugurate Cubism.

Viewers of *Les Demoiselles* have mostly reacted in extreme ways from the very' first. An exception was the critic Félix Fénéon, who mildly advised the artist that he really ought to take up caricature. And maybe Fénéon got it right; for *Les Demoiselles* might almost be read as a giant cartoon. What is comical to me are those two mischief-makers in outlandish masks galling their prospective johns as their co-workers coolly take the measure of the (now unnerved) men who dawdle and gawk before them—men as interchangeable as the currency in their wallets which surely forms their only true appeal. What amuses me no less, however, is the nervous response to this spectacle of feminine effrontery' by my fellow historians; for no other modern picture has elicited such widespread and visceral discomfort, mounting at times to a hysterical pitch. For decades, the line of women in *Les Demoiselles* has functioned for many critics like a dreaded dream that will not fade. And the nightmare in question— which these critics think (with reason) is the same bad dream that impelled Picasso to paint the picture—features a file of sturdy, experienced, working women of ambiguous heritage and humble descent; women apparently unimpressed and unbowed by the men who approach them; “women whose independence was clearly menacing,” as Pierre Daix describes them. What is humorous, then, is the notion that this dream



should rightly petrify us all, while to some of us, of course, such figures—however summarily, distortedly, or abstractly drawn—do not evince aliens, much less monsters: to the contrary, they bear a passing resemblance to ourselves.

Prostitutes and femme fatales admittedly make less than perfect feminist heroines. And white prostitutes sporting goofy, pseudo-African masks no doubt make poor heroines for people of African descent: plainly it w'ould be farfetched to construct the demoiselles in heroic terms pure and simple. Doane points out that far from being “the subject of feminism,” the femme fatale is rather “a symptom of male fears about feminism”; yet “because she seems to confound power, subjectivity, and agency with the very lack of these attributes, her relevance to feminist discourse is critical.” If the demoiselles can never function successfully as models of empowerment, they have, nonetheless, already functioned effectively as lightning rods for fear of the empowerment of women and peoples of color. One story *Les Demoiselles* and its reception teaches is how “a crisis in phallogocentric culture was turned into one of its great monuments,” as Foster aptly puts it. The sense of crisis or panic that has animated the literature on *Les Demoiselles* and the ongoing efforts to encapsulate the picture in an isolated discursive space prove that it has had some destabilizing or decentering effects on the viewers for whom it was intended. It may, by the same token, be capable of having some more centering effects on the rest of us.

Writing from the position of the so-called exotic woman, perennially subject to the perorations of that “vague entity” Man, who has presumed to speak for all humanity, Trinh T. Minh-ha protests:

I am profoundly indifferent to his old way of theorizing—of piercing, as he often claims, through the sediments of psychological and epistemological “depths.”... Seeking to perforate meaning by forcing my entry or breaking it open to dissipate what is thought to be its secrets seems to me as crippled an act as verifying the sex of an unborn child by ripping open the mother’s womb.

In light of the violence and phallicism of these Western epistemological ideals—of penetrating and dissecting as supreme forms of learning, knowing, and so possessing—the received reading of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* as the most apotropaic of all modern images takes on another valence; for here is a paradoxical case of those most penetrable of all women, prostitutes, arrayed across that reputedly penetrable fine-arts vehicle, the canvas, yet being apprehended widely as the fiercest of warnings not to penetrate, but to stay at a safe, respectful remove.

Those feminists who are leery of further inflating Picasso’s already outsized stature may yet find some purpose, then, in protecting the iconic status of his most brazen and motley picture. After all, the viewers this painting specifically addresses—men mostly used to deriving at the least some basic form of acknowledgment and so reassurance from works of art—have often found themselves deeply troubled by *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. What jars them is a glimpse it seems to afford of a time and circumstance when the continued primacy, or even viability, of their habitual modes of perceiving and knowing appears not merely doubtful, but also distinctly unwelcome.