

The modernist costume: masks as "mediators" in the works of Picasso, Stein, and Toomer (TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship). Katy Hynes

ABSTRACT

Issues of race and gender are uniquely resolved in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, through the invocation of African, Oceanic, and Iberian masks. Applying Daniel Singal's macroscopic argument that the Modernist agenda has been to "reconnect all that the Victorian moral dichotomy tore asunder" [1] to the world of art and literature, I analyze and explore the ways in which the masks engage and realize this project of synthesis.

Ironically, one must don a costume in order to undo the clasps of too-restrictive cultural notions which divide society (black/white, male/female). The masks become symbolic of black double-consciousness in a white-dominated world, and challenge heteronormativity by presenting "androgynous" figures. Both race and gender are constructed in Picasso's paintings, and the masks — as costumes — are part of this construction.

Jean Toomer and Gertrude Stein were exploring similar reconnections in literature. Ultimately, these writers' works—just as Picasso's —communicate a denial of Victorian-era dualisms and underscore the constructed quality of both gender and race.

The masks are hard, angular, grooved. Pressed tightly to the women's faces, they at first obscure and confound, eerily conform to the natural jaw and neckline while maintaining a marked separateness. Hooded, uneven eye slits, bold-lined edges, and a wooden stiffness all evince their artificiality; however, the masks connect to the wearers' necks as though natural extensions of the bodies. Worn by the subjects of Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) and *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (1906), these masks are ultimately meant not to conceal, but to reveal. Grafted onto the women's visages with an artist's paintbrush, the African, Iberian, and Oceanic-inspired pieces complicate and expand the figures' identities, though initially they appear to limit and hide them.

Picasso's decision to dress his subjects in this costume is rooted in the broader concerns of his time. As the late nineteenth century transitioned into the early twentieth, an explosion of innovation in the arts corresponded with remarkable changes in cultural attitudes towards such issues as race and gender. While many critics have established important connections between the Victorian and Modernist eras, Daniel Singal argues for a particularly exciting relationship. "The quintessential aim of Modernists," he asserts, "has been to reconnect all that the Victorian moral dichotomy tore asunder" [2]. While Victorians fastidiously separated black from white and masculine from feminine. Modernists shattered these neat divisions and glued the pieces back together to form unified wholes. In this paper, I intend to show how Singal's macroscopic argument about the general Modernist agenda can be applied specifically to the world of art and literature, in which artists such as Picasso and writers such as Gertrude Stein and Jean Toomer manipulate paint and language to engage in this project of synthesizing binaries.

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* deconstruct the dualisms of race and gender.

Demoiselles, a work which Glen Macleod considers the first of the Cubist movement, is one of Picasso's most revolutionary pieces, featuring five nude prostitutes stretching their frightening, fragmented bodies across the canvas [3]. *Portrait* captures Stein's seated likeness and is emblematic of the two artists' close relationship and reciprocal exchange of creative insights and theories. The subjects of both paintings wear masks inspired by native artifacts — masks that ultimately expose race and gender as social constructions [4]. The masks symbolize and effect this reconnection, this unifying of black and white, masculine and feminine, which Picasso and his fellow Modernists sought.

Picasso's career is appropriately positioned amidst the tumult of the opposed Victorian and Modernist periods. Framed by Post-Impressionism and Neo-Expressionism, Picasso's ninety-two-year life (1881-1973) spans countless intervening artistic movements, the leap from Realism and Naturalism to Modernism, and the exciting, turbulent transition from the late-Victorian era to the twentieth century. While cultural norms and values were shifting, Picasso was experimenting with new painting techniques and revolutionizing the visual arts. His innovations alternately embraced and challenged cultural trends as Picasso worked to refine his vision and shape modern ideas about race and gender.

Indeed, when Picasso stood before each blank canvas, he confronted problems not merely of his medium but of an entire age; he aimed to paint new ways of seeing and understanding contemporary concerns. As Picasso's friend and fellow Modernist Stein observed, "One must never forget that the reality of the twentieth century is not the reality of the nineteenth [. . .] and Picasso was the only one in painting who felt it, the only one" [5]. Picasso's significance stems from his perception and expression of the new attitudes and beliefs that defined Modernist culture — a culture that challenged the strict dualisms endorsed by both Victorian rigidity and bourgeois rationality.

Before I examine the ways in which the masks operate within Picasso's works, it is important first to trace their original connection with, and early effect on, the artist. Although Picasso famously denied the influence of *Art nègre* on his work from this period, scoffing in a 1920's interview, "Art nègre? Connais pas!" or, "African art? Don't know it!" both Picasso's own testimony and that of his peers contradict this assertion [6]. Picasso later recounted his summer 1907 visit to Le Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, firmly establishing the experience as a highly influential one. Amidst the horrific sights and smells of what he called the "old Trocadéro," Picasso remembered desperately wanting to flee, but nonetheless remaining and studying the repulsive artifacts [7]. "The Negro pieces were intercesseurs, mediators," Picasso recalled, "against unknown, threatening spirits." Because the artifacts opposed convention, Picasso understood and identified with them, for he saw himself similarly positioned.

Calling them "weapons" and "tools" for helping people realize their autonomy, Picasso expressed his amazement at the masks' magical powers. He marveled that while alone "with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins," his work-in-progress, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, "must have come to me that very day" [8]. That the masks in Picasso's works possess reconnective powers is unsurprising considering their Trocadéro origins. Though Picasso did not readily credit his debt to these artifacts, his

eventual retelling of the museum visit underscores the import of their inclusion in his art.

Picasso's familiarity with ancient artifacts goes beyond a single experience at the Trocadéro. As early as 1901, he attended a showing of Paul Gauguin's paintings, which were heavily influenced by Tahitian culture. In 1902, Picasso received a copy of *Noa-Noa*, Gauguin's Tahitian journal, which he filled with inspired sketches. Between 1905 and 1906, Picasso attended an Iberian sculpture exhibit at the Louvre. Within the next few years, he assembled a collection of various African and Oceanic pieces [9]. Indeed, Sieglinde Lemke rightly asserts that Picasso's self-proclaimed ignorance of *Vart nègre* was "an out-right distortion of the truth" [10]. The reasons behind this distortion are less important than Picasso's choice to invoke the intercessors in the first place. Picasso felt strongly connected to the native masks he saw in the first decade of the twentieth century, so much so that he used them in his *Demoiselles* masterpiece as well as other paintings. These uncanny objects inspired Picasso, accomplished something within his art that could not have been realized otherwise.

The Trocadéro masks drew their unique power chiefly from convenient timing. For an age caught in the spinning wheel of modernization — defined by Singal as "a process of social and economic development, involving the rise of industry, technology, urbanization, and bureaucratic institutions, — anything that opposed rationality, predictability, and order was especially intriguing [11]. Modernist artists came to see the industrious bourgeoisie and their careful taxonomy as symptomatic of Western "over-refinement and overcivilization" and sought to challenge this condition by invoking the art of supposedly less civilized, "primitive" peoples, such as the tribal Africans and ancient Iberians that captivated Picasso [12]. This act of cultural "rediscovery," according to James Small, is primitivism, which assumes a certain innocent simplicity in the art of native people, an inherent "spontaneity," sincerity, and power, that contrasts sharply with bourgeois conventionality [13]. While modernization brought with it advances in science, technology, and industry, it also upheld certain unsatisfying dichotomies, divisive vestiges of the Victorian era. Picasso rebelled against popular conceptions of divided race and gender in *Demoiselles* and *Portrait* by painting over the faces with confident, dangerous, "primal" masks. As intercessors, the masks create a new "continuous flux," a complex spectrum of untethered binaries in both paintings [14]. De-raced and de-gendered, the figures are, according to Modernist sensibilities, more accurate and honest creations than the subjects of Realist paintings.

Completed in 1907, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is Picasso's proto-cubist masterpiece, his five-figured tribute to artistic innovation, native art, and Modernism's tenets. Patricia Leighton asserts that the painting "formally and thematically [...] was the most outrageous artistic act conceivable at that time" [15]. The painting distinguishes itself with certain strikingly Modernist features, including its anti-classical style; fragmentation and consequent inherent instability; unrefined lines; shocking content (nudity, sexuality) and subject matter (brothel, prostitutes); violence; ugliness; anti-realism; mythical, exotic elements; and, self-reflexivity. Illuminating *Demoiselles'* ingenuity and singularity, this brief catalogue attests that nothing like it had ever been painted. Most unusual and intriguing of all, however, are the masks.

All five women in the painting wear masks, prompting many critics to note their effect on the viewer. Leighton identifies the two central figures as Iberian and the two rightmost as African, arguing that Picasso identifies a Western class of slaves with native ones. Both are traded, both are the potential objects of a hypothetical male viewer [16]. However, because of the tribal dress, instead of appearing as commodities or victims, the central demoiselles are frightening, their gazes "anything but alluring," the outermost ones simply "horrific." These are not traditional renderings of brothel-dwellers, but challenges to the male-dominated system of buying and selling bodies. Leighton argues that the figures "mock sexual display," and are not submissive; they refuse to participate in this exchange [17]. Lemke likewise states that the "masklike faces are mysterious and gloomy" and "sexually indeterminate" [18]. With the application of the masks, Picasso has united these races. He has connected Western women and African and Iberian natives, civilization and savagery, the classical and the primitive. The five figures are thus liminal, inhabiting a geometric limbo of multiple identities and possibilities.

Relationships between the works of artists and writers are often complementary, as Macleod observes that Modernist authors "often patterned their literary experiments on parallels drawn from the visual arts" [19]. Thus, it is no surprise that Stein understood Picasso's project. Pierre Daix recalls that Stein was the first to recognize that the *Demoiselles* was really about its own composition, about "the shift of vision that composition imposed," and Stein herself attributes this understanding to her own parallel experiments in literature [20]. Instead of suggesting or alluding to space not actually present within the canvas, Picasso flattens foreground and background. Neither the subjects of the painting nor the background within which they are enmeshed assumes a higher importance; there is an egalitarian leveling of the pictorial space. Because of this strategy, limbs appear to emerge from heads, as in the leftmost figure, and the women appear to wear and emerge from the backdrop. Macleod explains that instead of faithfully reproducing the subject, the painter "break[s] apart the object and distribute^ its pieces about the canvas as the composition requires" [21]. The *Demoiselles* are not meant to be true depictions of human forms; instead, Picasso intended them to be optical translations "in two dimensions" of "effects attainable in three" [22].

The mask-wearing figures in *Demoiselles* also unite masculinity and femininity. As previously noted, Lemke describes the masked faces as "sexually indeterminate" [23]. The Iberian and African masks are wooden, angled, inexpressive objects that hide the presumed feminine features of their respective wearers. Exaggerated noses, misaligned eye slits, dark shading, painted warrior-lines on upper cheekbones, and small mouth-holes do not permit the slightest nuance of expression or feature to escape from behind the mask. Coupled with the cut, angular bodies of the women, the masks make the demoiselles androgynous. Margaret Werth's apt assessment of the slightly earlier *Two Nudes* can be applied to *Demoiselles*: "What is at work [. . .] is less the elimination of one set of sexual signifiers than the conjunction of several. Multiple genders and sexualities are offered, and both sexual difference and indifference structure this representation of the body" [24]. Picasso is not removing the possibility of femininity, but rather adding to it the possibility of masculinity. Breasts alternately appear rounded, as in the left-central figure, and square, as in the left, middle, and

rightmost figures. In the latter instances, they suggest male pectoral muscles. Similarly, torsos are alternately depicted in smoother, more suggestive styles, as in the central figure, and in highly geometric shapes, as in the left-central figure, whose triangular midsection suggests a masculine body shape.

Completed about a year before *Demoiselles*, Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* initially appears fairly classic and unremarkable; its muted earth tones and shaded background blend and surround Stein. On closer inspection, however, one can see many broad, harsh brush strokes in various shades of brown and maroon along the back wall and on Stein's clothing, and there is a messiness to the shading above Stein's head. Interestingly, while in the midst of the eightieth or ninetieth portrait-sitting, a frustrated Picasso exclaimed to Stein, "I can't see you any longer," and erased what work had been done on Stein's face to date [25]. After a summer filled with painting nudes and bathers in Gósol, Spain, Picasso finally returned to Paris and finished the *Portrait*, covering Stein's face with a carefully painted mask. Just as the masks made the *demoiselles* liminal figures, the mask painted on Stein allows for the representation and embodiment of multiple races and genders in one central figure.

Werth notes the "imposing presence and indeterminate gendering" of the aforementioned *Two Nudes* and connects these qualities to *Portrait* [26], arguing that the "mask in *Gertrude Stein* elicits [...] obscurity, remoteness, obdurateness, implacability." Indeed, the thin-lipped mouthpiece and Stein's averted gaze certainly suggest a sense of solemnity in the figure, perhaps reminiscent of the *Trocadero* pieces. As Werth describes, the mask's shadowed edges suggest carved indentations along the side of the mouth and nose and a "precise outline" along the right outer edge sets the piece off from the background; moreover, Stein's "hooded eyes are arrayed at different heights," further emphasizing the stylization and anti-realism Picasso sought to capture in the piece [27]. Stein's hairline is extremely precise and her ear smoothed out to suggest the simple surface of a mask, rather than the realistic anatomy of a human face. The eye-area's shading suggests a gap between the actual, visible eye-ball and the edge of Stein's mask, most clearly in Stein's left eye. Werth argues that the focus of the painting is the "dissembling power of the mask: the 'real' eyes lie behind the mask, unreadable, a property of the 'true' self in distinction to the 'false' mask that both shields and blocks" [284]. Thus, the mask both allows Stein to embody both genders and underscores the falseness of modern society's either/or, duality-based methods of identification. The mask symbolizes the social constructs one must "wear," while simultaneously challenging the very nature of these constructs.

Robert Rosenblum explains that Picasso, "in a witty manner more relevant to the physique and sexual persuasion of the sitter," painted Stein as the Neoclassical artist Jean Ingres' "hulking Monsieur Bertin." Rosenblum remarks on the "slippery sexual boundaries" inherent in this reinterpretation [29]. Indeed, the broad-shouldered Stein closely approximates Bertin's pose—hand on knee, slight lean, deliberate, solemn gaze. Her large, open jacket, high-buttoned white shirt, and pinned up hair all contribute to the likeness. This interesting historical correspondence complements the *Portrait*'s liminality; Stein, donning a mask, successfully redefines traditional concepts of femininity, challenges heteronormativity, and adopts an androgyny like that of the *demoiselles*.

While issues of race are more directly addressed in *Demoiselles*, they are nonetheless present in *Portrait*. Just as the African and Iberian masks connect the white, Europe-an prostitutes with the cultural "other," Stein's mask connects her with these civiliza-tions, and reflects Picasso's preoccupation with primitivism. As a magical interces-seur, the mask unites once-divided ethnicities.

Stein asserted that she understood what Picasso was doing in *Demoiselles*; that she herself was expressing the same thing in literature [30]. Indeed, in works like "Melanctha" and *The Making of Americans*, Stein attempted Cubist style using words as her medium. Marianne DeKoven explains that Stein went further "in rein-venting literary language and form, undoing conventional, hierarchical, sense-making modes of signification—modes that privilege the signified over the signifier" in a way that is "patriarchal." [31]. This "antipatriarchal prose" appears in the fol-lowing passage of Stein's "Melanctha," in which Jeff Campbell ruminates about Melanctha Herbert:

He watched all the birds that flew high above him, and all the time Jeff knew he must tell to Melanctha what it was he knew now, that which Jane Harden, just a week ago, had told him. He knew very well that for him it was certain that he had to say it. It was hard, but for Jeff Campbell the only way to lose it was to say it. It was hard, but for Jeff Campbell the only way to lose it was to say it, the only way to know Melanctha realty, was to tell her all the struggle he had made to know her, to tell her so she could help him to understand his trouble better, to help him so that never again he could have any/- way to doubt her [32].

In just four sentences, the word *it* is repeated nine times and the action does not progress beyond the simple, expository statement, "Jeff must say it to Melanctha." In the first sentence, the additional "to" following the word "tell" disrupts traditional syn-tax, as does the added clause "that which." As DeKoven explains, Stein "uses a flat-tened, reduced, simplified vocabulary/-, much the way Picasso and the cubists [...] use a palette reduced to a few tones of gray/ and brown, in order to intensify the nuance and effect of slight variations of color" [33]. Her "palette" of he's, to's, knew's, it's, and fell's allows her to "paint" a highly nuanced emotional landscape, capturing Jeff's inner turmoil. This "unprecedented stylization of the prose surface" also allows Stein's repeated words to "acquire an open-ended richness of accumulated meaning, that shifts and grows as the narrative develops" [34]. In important ways, this con-nects Stein's writing to *Demoiselles* and *Portrait*: just as the masks allow for multiple genders and races in the painted figures, Stein's antipatriarchal prose allows for "ac-cumulated meaning." This gathering, this pulling together, this accumulation and synthesis of masculine, feminine, black, white — acts as an antidote for, and unifier of, the tired divisions of the previous century.

Interestingly, Natasha Staller observes that "Cubism itself bristles as an anti-language," perhaps a painter's pidginized version of Stein's antipatriarchal prose (or vice versa), a parallel way of subverting tradition, the patriarchy, and by extension the bourgeois hierarchy of races, classes, and genders [35]. While Picasso flattened foreground and background, painted crudely stylized figures, and invoked the Afri-can and Iberian mask to unify multiple races and genders, Stein also concerned her-self with surfaces, with aestheticized passages that subverted language- hierarchies and challenged heteronormativity and the patriarchy.

Donald Sutherland notes the use of the "continuous present" in Stein's *The Making of Americans*, which he calls a "flat plane of reference, without concern for depth" [36]. Stein's "continuous present" is similar to Picasso's flat, two-dimensional painting surface. L.T. Fitz explains, "Like cubism, Stein's fiction lacks a focal point of action; it lacks a climax. Her stories have a sameness throughout them that makes them more portraits than stories." Fitz argues that, in "Melanctha," "every page is literally as important to the work as every other page, just as every part of a cubist painting is as important as every other part" [37]. As in the above excerpt from "Melanctha," the repetition is an accumulation of slightly altered sentences and phrases, so that when all are considered together the sentences and paragraphs achieve an emotional nuance unparalleled in modern literature. When the interlocking lines and repeated shapes of Picasso's *Demoiselles* are considered together, each piece — whether a section of curtain, a face, or a body— assumes equal importance. This stylization allows both artists to unify gender and race dualisms.

Stein concerns herself only with what is apparent to the senses. In *The Making of Americans*, Stein writes, "There are many that I know and they know it. They are all of them repeating and I hear it. I love it and I tell it, I love it and now I will write it. This is now the history of the way some of them are it" [38]. Fitz observes that "both Picasso and Stein delineate objects and character according to surfaces" and depict only what they can see [39]. Thus, Stein does not offer any insight about the inner thoughts of the people she sees and is instead content to observe, hear, speak, and write "it" — she herself "repeating" as she writes about the repeating "they." This self-reflexivity, this self-conscious construction, further enforces the strong emphasis on surface that Fitz identifies. With her words stripped of their symbolic power, Stein is able to avoid the suggestion of anything beyond the surface of her prose [40].

Like Picasso and Stein, Toomer invokes techniques of Cubism in *Cane* in order to unify problematic race-dualisms. The masks in both *Demoiselles* and *Portrait* can be read as symbols of the black "double-consciousness" that W.E.B. Du Bois identified and defined in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This double-consciousness, or the experience of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," captures the struggle of African Americans, a struggle at whose heart rests yet another duality, another division, another gap in need of unification [41].

Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" describes the frightening, repulsive face of an unidentified woman in seven brief lines, each one a phrase, a fragment:

Hair —braided chestnut.

Coiled like a lyncher's rope Eyes — fagots.

Lips — old scars, or the first red blisters.

Breath —the last sweet scent of cane.

And her slim body, white as the ash Of black flesh after flame. [42]

The reader is forced to see each feature in isolation, and thus none of the features assume an importance above the rest. Like *Demoiselles*, "Portrait in Georgia" creates the image of a not- quite-human subject—here a collage of lyncher's rope, sticks, old scars, cane, and white ash — meant to terrify and challenge the reader to see and

experience the essence of the flat thing depicted. Anne Marie Bush explains that Toomer, "like every cubist, strives to imprint the essence and the totality of his subject on the mind of the audience" [43]. Here, Toomer fashions a lynching victim into accumulated fragments, sentence fragments assembled at once out of found objects and real wounds, so that the final, complete "picture" calls attention to its own construction. Toomer, like Stein, does not go beyond the surface, does not describe what he cannot see. The hyphens and enjambment break up the words on the page, so that the "Portrait" echoes the fragmented, cracked geometry of *Demoiselles*.

The double-consciousness that African Americans grappled with stemmed from the Victorian, nineteenth-century need to separate white and black, to forbid a more complex and nuanced appreciation of ethnicity. The symbolic "mask" here is similar to Stein's in *Portrait*— one's true eyes, true identity exist somewhere behind the artifice of race and gender. When Picasso painted the primitive mask on Stein's face, he challenged society's black-white, male- female binaries and deconstructed them by exposing them as cultural constructions. One can wear a mask and "perform" whiteness and blackness, masculinity and femininity, but these "identities" are ultimately fictions. "Portrait in Georgia" participates in this project of "unmasking" by focusing on the surface, the face, and crafting a scarred, rope-lined mask for the lynching victim. This mask is clearly a consequence of society's failure to unify its destructive binaries.

Werth explains that Picasso "represented the body as an unstable entity, its mass, volume, materiality, integrity, unity, sex, and gender affirmed in one way only to be negated in another" [44]. I have identified this instability as the Modernist recognition of the fluidity of race and gender and of the cultural fictions of blackness, whiteness, masculinity and femininity.

In both *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, Picasso enthusiastically underscores this instability by invoking the primitive masks of Iberian, African, and Oceanic tribes. The intercesseurs that so captivated Picasso in his early career served as effective mediators between the Victorian-era separation and the Modernist-era unification of once-divided races and genders. As Singal writes of the broad Modernist project of synthesizing all that the Victorians divided, I illuminate the ways in which these binaries are challenged in the early twentieth century artistic community. The highly geometric, interlocked fragments that define *Demoiselles* and subsequent Cubist works further enforce the inherent instability of black/ white, male/ female dichotomies. Both Stein and Toomer continued this project of unification in literature, focusing on the surface in their prose and poetry, and consciously aestheticizing their work through repetition, collage, and imagery. All three artists' works prove that the dualities of the nineteenth century did not and would not satisfy twentieth-century Modernists.

[1] 12

[2] 12

[3] 198

[4] Daix 82-83

[5] qtd. in Burns 30

- [6] Lemke 33
- [7] Malraux 10
- [8] qtd. in Malraux 11
- [9] Daix 82-83
- [10] 33-34
- [11] 7
- [12] Small 60
- [13] 59-60
- [14] Singal 11
- [15] 250
- [16] 249, 253
- [17] 249
- [18] 31
- [19] 194
- [20] 75
- [21] 200
- [22] Daix 99
- [23] 31
- [24] 282
- [25] Werth 283
- [26] 281
- [27] 284
- [28] 284
- [29] 264
- [30] Daix 79
- [31] 185
- [32] Three Lives 94
- [33] 184
- [34] 184
- [35] 79
- [36] 59
- [37] 231
- [38] Selected Writings 262
- [39] 232
- [40] Fitz 234

[41] 8

[42] 29

[43] 107

[44] 285