

“White Skin, Black Masks”¹: Fetishism and *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*

by IRENE CHENG. 1996

Handout on O’Grady’s “unmasking” as a response to the critical tradition of fetishizing the fetish. Written to accompany “Studies for *Flower of Evil and Good*” in *New Histories*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA. Oct 23, 1996–Jan 5, 1997.

The fetish of colonial discourse—what Fanon called the epidermal schema—is not, like the sexual fetish, a secret. Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as canon knowledge in a range of cultural, political, historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies.²

“Negro art? Never heard of it!” Picasso is said to have responded when asked about the influence of African art on *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*.³ Years later however, the artist confessed that his discovery of “tribal” sculpture at the Trocadero Museum in Paris produced in him a profoundly significant shock. It was then, he recounts, that “I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty mannequins. *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* must have come to me that very day...”.⁴

Picasso would later explain to André Malraux almost apologetically, “We all of us loved fetishes. Van Gogh once said, ‘Japanese art — we all had that in common.’ For us it’s the Negroes.”⁵ Picasso’s statement leaves us wondering whether he meant the tribal objects that were referred to by anthropologists as “fetishes,” the “Negroes” themselves, or his own affinity for African culture. Slippages such as these recur throughout Picasso’s statements on the role of the “primitive” in his work.

The artist's positions alternate between the poles of desire and disavowal.

As Anna Chave and others have observed, the critical response to *Les Demoiselles* has replicated Picasso's fetishization of African culture by fixating on the most visible signs of difference in the painting — the African masks donned by the two right-hand demoiselles. Art historians range in their positions from denying any African influence whatsoever (as in Zervos's statement, "The artist has categorically assured me that at the time when he painted the *Demoiselles* he did not know African art"⁶) to centering on the "animalistic" sexuality expressed through Picasso's use of "primitive" art. Scholars have written about the masks obsessively, electing to describe them as bestial and ugly. The critical fetishization of Picasso's primitivism has fossilized into yet another sediment in the multiple layers of "masking" already inscribed within the painting.

Against this critical tradition of fetishizing the fetish, Lorraine O'Grady's work begins the crucial task of "unmasking" through a re-framing and re-presentation of the "fetish" object. O'Grady employs a strategy of mimicry upon *Les Demoiselles* in order to expose the invisible and unconscious fears which motivate the artist's and critic's fixation upon the visible markers of difference. O'Grady's work prompts us to look behind the masks, to examine the very processes of masking and to consider in another light the "Other" who continues to threaten the order and stability of the western male ego.

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¹ Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin, Black Masks," *Recoding: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985)

² Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *Out There*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 82.

³ "L'art negre? Connais pas!" From an interview with Florent Fels published in *Action 3* (Paris: April 1920): 25; cited in William Rubin, "The Genesis of *Les Femmes d'Alger*," in *Studies in Modern Art, no. 3: Les Femmes d'Alger*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 139, note 253.

⁴ André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask*, trans. June Guicharnaud and Jacques Guicharnaud (New York: Reinhart & Winston, 1976), 10-11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Christian Zervos. *Pablo Picasso: Vol. II—Oeuvres de 1912 à 1917* (Paris: Cahiers d'Art. 1942), 10.