Perhaps they would recognize my smallpox Gods, my transsexual priests, my images of desirable Black men in states of sexual frenzy, or the tranquility of communion with the spirit world. Perhaps they have less fear of encountering the darkest of Africa’s dark secrets by which some of us seek to gain access to the soul (p. 256).

This powerful conclusion ignites a renewed attention to the unfinished project of grounding queer, contemporary, and diasporic work within the field of African art proper. Bourland names a series of powerful actors in the contemporary African and African diasporic art world. He narrates the international prominence of other contemporary African artists: Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, and Yinka Shonibare. For art world scholars, Bourland cites Huey Copeland, Julian Stallabrass, and Olu Oguibe’s weariness about the way in which racial capitalism and its reproduction of power imbalances persist, despite radical work by artists and curators to enact what Copeland calls the “longue durée of struggle for greater equity in the world and in the gallery” (p. 253). Perhaps this is the most cogent intervention in Bloodflowers. Fani-Kayode’s unapologetic queerness does not exclude him from being a contemporary Yoruban artist, just as his Africanness does not preclude him from having one of the most dynamic oeuvres in global contemporary art of the 1980s. Overall, Bourland offers a compelling reading of Fani-Kayode’s vast oeuvre through a commitment to interdisciplinarity. Bloodflowers ought to be read by scholars working within and across the fields of modern and contemporary art, gender and sexuality studies, African art history and Black cultural studies. A reader with a keen interest in considering sonic culture, urbanism, and art histories as interconnected phenomena is especially fitting. He takes seriously Fani-Kayode’s role as an African artist, along with his connections to Black diasporic art scenes, music of the 1980s, Western art histories, and the materiality and aesthetics of religion.

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book review

Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece

by Suzanne Preston Blier

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. 448 pages, 353 ill., 8-page color insert, chronology, references, index. $29.95/£24.99 paper, $109.95/£93.00 cloth

reviewed by Helena Cantone

Pablo Picasso’s painting Les Demoiselles d’Avignon of 1907 is often used in the discipline of African art history to represent and debate the influence of African art in the development of European twentieth century modern art movements. It is used to analyze the aesthetics of Primitivism inspired by the arts of Africa and Oceania and to examine the complex historical relationship between Europe and Africa during the period marked by colonialism. But how much do we actually know about the painting in question and how much is shrouded by myths derived from the artwork’s iconic status within the European art canon? While there exists a large body of literature surrounding the artwork, the predominant historical narrative has not fully acknowledged the importance of African art in Picasso’s work, and there still remain many unanswered questions linked to what the painting represents and what sources were used by the artist.

In Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece, the eminent African art professor Suzanne Preston Blier attempts to address the gaps in the literature by presenting new insights into the significance of African art in the painting. As stated in the introduction to the book, Blier proposes to move the analysis away from dominant ideas about the work representing five prostitutes and instead suggests we consider le bordel to refer to the French expression for “a mess” or “a complex situation,” recalling the mess that the world itself represents, particularly vis-à-vis issues of race, evolution, migration, and generational identity” (p. 5). With this assertion, the reader is promised a fresh critical analysis of the painting set within overlapping historical, sociopolitical contexts.

Structured in seven chapters, the book traces the period in which Picasso worked on the idea for the large-scale canvas (roughly between October 1906 and March 1907), describing in detail the artist’s first encounter with African art objects owned by Henri Matisse (1868–1954), among them Vili figures from Congo. A large part of the book is dedicated to interpreting the painting in the light of new sources of evidence, such as the illustrated books by the German ethnologist and archaeologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) and the photographic medical books by Carl Heinrich Stratz (1858–1924), despite Blier repeating throughout the book that, “we have no direct evidence that Picasso saw or studied these books” (p. 16).

This would not have been an issue if Blier had shifted the focus from trying to convince the readers that Picasso used specific illustrations and photographs as references for his composition, providing us instead with greater analysis of the colonial history in which these constructed images of Africa were produced and circulated in Europe. Set in a wider context, she could have developed a stronger argument for interpreting Picasso’s painting in view of how he engaged or rejected dominant European ideas of Africa operating at that time in order to understanding what Africa represented to the artist. The overemphasis on matching and comparing Les Demoiselles with individual illustrations in Frobenius and Stratz’s books results in more of a distraction than an aid to understanding le bordel.

There is a further problem with the overall reading of the book which is connected to the author ascribing a racial and cultural identity to each of the demoiselles. Blier writes:

Early on I accorded each of the demoiselles a name for easy identification purposes. From left to right these female subjects include the Egyptian/Asian: the half-standing Caucasian: the central Caucasian/central figure; the standing African; and the crouching African/crouching figure. The identities help inform our understanding of the canvas (p. xii).

While this statement seems initially to be justified for practical reasons and provides the reader with a point of interest as to where this will take them next, what ensues is instead a dangerously uncritical analysis of the painting using racial categories that are not substantially analyzed from a sociohistorical perspective and therefore leave the reader unclear as to what the author is actually trying to say. Once again, too much detail is given to reading into the racial and cultural differences of the demoiselles and differentiating between their body shapes, poses, degree of nakedness, hair styles, facial features and skin color while providing no substantially persuasive evidence to back this up.

Not enough critical (i.e., historical and sociopolitical) analysis is given to the racial
and cultural terminology used. Why, for example, is the “Egyptian” demoiselle “Asian” and not “African”? This was indeed an important debate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Egyptian ancient civilization was “discovered” by European archaeologists, but the author misses this out. Similarly, when the Europeans encountered the Nok and Djenne terracottas, Ife and Benin bronzes, their technologies and styles were thought to be too “classical” and “advanced” to be African. African art in this racialized colonial context was categorized as “primitive” and “tribal” by a process of careful curatorial selection.

More to the point, why is it that the two masked demoiselles are represented as “African,” when a mask signifies a double, layered, ambiguous, or complex cultural identity? What makes the poses of the “African” demoiselles more sexualized than their Caucasian, Iberian, and European female counterparts, who are instead described as more “modest,” when all of the figures display a degree of nudity? Indeed the central Caucasian figure is the only demoiselle who has both her breasts and sex on full display.

And why, if indeed Picasso wanted to represent a panacea of womanhood representing grandmothers, daughters, and wives, from different races and ages within a “primordial vaginal birthing core” (the backdrop), as Blier suggests, are all the bodies painted in a Caucasian “fleshy” and “youthful” pink, a color that was developed over centuries to represent Western ideals of beauty and virginity? Above all, we are left none the wiser about Picasso’s ideas and representation of Africa as the cultural “Other” than further meets the eye.

What is missing from Blier’s research is the analysis of the social network Picasso formed in the late 1930s and 1940s with key figures in the cultural and literary movement of Négritude, including the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (1902–1982). Picasso met the poet Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), one of the founders of the literary movement, at the Communist-led World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in Wroclaw, Poland, in 1948. As a result of this meeting, the artist illustrated Césaire’s volume Corps Perdu, published in 1950 with a portrait of the poet entitled Negro, negro, negro ... which subsequently featured on the poster design for the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists held at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1956. Organized by Alioune Diop (1910–1980), the founder of the Paris-based publishing house Présence Africaine, this conference (alongside the second conference, which would take place in Rome in 1959), became key moments in African modern history for articulating and affirming political and cultural independence from European colonial power and control. Likewise, Picasso’s artworks would also feature at the First Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966, led by the poet and statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001), demonstrating once again Picasso’s political and cultural engagement with newly emerging independent Africa.

From a personal perspective, I recall how, back in the 1990s, when I was an undergraduate at SOAS University of London, John Picton used Les Demoiselles d’Avignon in his lectures to unravel and critique the Western myth of European modern artists “discovering” African art and the lack of acknowledgment of the importance African art styles, forms, ideas, and technologies had in injecting new ideas and a new aesthetic into European modern art. But at the same time, he introduced the African artists who were contemporary to Picasso, such as the painter Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) and sculptor Olowe of Ise (1873–1938) from Nigeria, who, in different ways to each other and to European artists, were forging new artistic movements both independently and connected to their European counterparts. These are in my view the untold histories of modernism that need to be researched and highlighted in order to challenge and demystify the dominating narratives within the Western art discipline.

This wider historical perspective would have added an important political dimension to understanding Picasso’s relationship with Africa that in my view was lacking in Blier’s analysis. Focusing solely on ethnographic and pseudoscientific imagery which Picasso may or may not have directly used in his studies for Les Demoiselles makes interesting reading for the novice, but it is more problematic to the critical scholar of African art history. Having said this, the amount of research and evidence Blier presents in this book is commendable and important in as much as it demands the wider discipline of art history to take African art history seriously. Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece will become no doubt an important reference book for art lovers, connoisseurs and cross-disciplinary scholars alike.

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