

SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 3

Article 8

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Recommended Citation

Oduro, Serena () "The Travail of the Freedmen's Daughters.," *SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol3/iss1/8>

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The Travail of the Freedmen's Daughters

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Abstract

This essay analyzes Robert Colescott's ability to visualize the emotional and psychological burden of racism using his rendition of Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*, *Les Femmes d'Alger: Vestidas*, a 96 x 92 in. acrylic on canvas painting. Created in 1985, but based in 1960s America, Colescott's satirical rendition of one of Picasso's most famed works, and a work in high regard in the art canon, illuminates racist attitudes perpetuated by Picasso's *d'Avignon*. This essay was also inspired by the Museum of Modern Art's wall text about *d'Avignon*, which failed to mention the racism embedded in primitivism. I focus on how Colescott's critical look at who is painting and being painted calls artists and institutions to wake up to the ideologies they perpetuate. I come to these conclusions through analyzing Colescott's use of satire, stereotyping, cartoonish coloring, symbolism, and spatial grotesque, and through comparison to Picasso's *d'Avignon*. During my research, I often paired Black artists' works with literary ones, particularly WEB Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. Inspired by the myriad of ways Black people produce works that push against the tides of racism, I conclude my essay and name inspired by a quote from Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The spiritual striving of the Freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity."



Figure 1 Robert Colescott's *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas*

Standing in the *Figuring History* exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum on April 6th, 2018, I could not help but be transfixed by Robert Colescott's *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas* (*d'Alabama*). A 96 x 92 in. acrylic on canvas painting created in 1985, the size and brightness of the colors in *d'Alabama* make it an imposing force. The Seattle Art Museum website describes Robert Colescott's painting as using "Picasso's appropriation of African art as an example of Europe's infatuation with exoticism and ideas of 'primitivism'" ("*Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas*"). African American painter Robert Colescott (1925–2009) takes a critical look at who is painting and who is painted. Creating paintings that blatantly show and satirically critique

racist representations, Colescott made reproductions of highly canonical paintings, such as Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (*d'Avignon*). Picasso's *d'Avignon* (1907) exemplifies the anti-classical movement occurring in the early 1900s and the use of African culture as a tool in that movement. A 96 x 92 in. oil on canvas painting, *d'Avignon*, too, is imposing. Disillusioned with the classical model of paintings, Picasso disrupts all former Western artistic notions. The presence of African masks, conjoining of the foreground and background, and portrayal of five prostitutes in a brothel shocked European viewers (Museum of Modern Art). Thus, using Picasso's "high art" to embrace, critique, and even make fun of the past, *d'Alabama* exemplifies that "*Figuring History*" involves not only *reFiguring History*, but critiquing past notions that have structured our present (Kramer). As I strolled through the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) on June 29th, 2018, I noticed that the curation notes for Picasso's *d'Avignon* demonstrated history's tendency to ignore racism and therefore perpetuate it. Picasso's past and the hard work that went into creating the painting were described, but other than the mention that "African tribal masks" added to the painting's "startling composition," the masks are ignored (Museum of Modern Art). This failure to mention racism as the root of Picasso's use of the African masks proves that many are still not critically analyzing who is painting and who is being painted. Robert Colescott's *d'Alabama* satirically exposes racist attitudes that were perpetuated by Picasso's *d'Avignon*.

Colescott is able to capture historical omissions through his figurative, narrative style. Miriam Roberts notes that what lures Colescott's viewers is that his encoded messages lead us to try to deduce meaning, but viewers instead "often end by finding themselves, along with the artist and the rest of humanity, personally implicated" (18). Colescott's work in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s received little attention because his critique of society through historical painting inherently critiqued the art world; it is the bravery of his critiques, though, that ensures that every viewer of his paintings, including Colescott, is scathingly implicated (Roberts 18). Huey Copeland further explains Colescott's boldness:

Colescott's insistence on painting meant he could sully and celebrate Western cultural hierarchy in its most gilded aesthetic tongue. Neither content with the confines by which artists of color are so often hemmed in, nor mindful of calls for "positive imagery," Colescott instead said yes: yes to history and its omissions, yes to figuration and its darkest blights, yes to painterly coherence and dadaist confusion, yes to multiculturalism and political incorrectness—all to affirm the fact of our collective tragedy and the small pleasures we might take in its farcical repetition. (60)

As Copeland explains, Colescott's brazen portrayals of society did not lead to the "positive imagery" African American artists felt they needed to portray. As African American artist David Hammons states: "Robert Colescott's the force. Through his paintings [...] I found a way of bringing humor to the seriousness of my work" (qtd. In Roberts 18). Colescott's critical look at who is painting and who is painted frees Black artists from painting what is expected of them; instead, Black artists control their portrayals, and with the use of satire, such as in *d'Alabama*, Colescott portrays the West with an unabashed gaze.

The placement of the women in *d'Alabama* draws on the racial history of America and gestures to racism's effects on social standing and experience. The inclusion of Black women in a historical painting, in a "high art" form, appears to indicate their inclusion in society (Kramer). The Black women are elevated according to Western artistic conventions, but the blonde woman's presence in the bottom right corner highlights the standards of beauty to which Black women are being compared. The Seattle Art Museum notes that "the voluptuous blonde is a recurring figure in Colescott's paintings. She represents an object of desire that is a stereotype in its own right [...] The blonde-haired, blue-eyed Eurocentric ideal of beauty" (Seattle Art Museum). In examining the role of the blonde woman in *d'Alabama*, it is also interesting to compare her to the woman in her position in *d'Avignon*. The woman donning a mask and squatting in Picasso's *d'Avignon* is replaced by the blonde sitting on a bench in *d'Alabama*. Though the blonde woman is in the same degrading position as the woman in the African mask in *d'Avignon*, her squatting position does not greatly affect her status as the epitome of beauty. In *d'Avignon*, though, the squatting position of the woman wearing the African mask reflects her lower social position in comparison to the unmasked women. To the women in the African masks, the viewer applies preexisting assumptions of African culture. For the blonde woman, that process does not occur because she is not an Other; she is the norm by which all other figures are judged. The Black women in Colescott's painting are within the frame, but since Blackness is societally Othered, they are still compared to stereotypes, ideals, and ideologies outside of their control.

Colescott's satirical methods make the viewer recognize their consumption and propagation of beauty standards. Art historian and curator Mitchell Kahan expands on the use of satire through the example of Colescott's painting, *Jus' Folks by Vermeer*, stating:

Having been raised by a bosomy Black woman, I was guiltily reminded that, for me, Aunt Jemima will remain a potent myth despite efforts by artists and sociologists to deconstruct the image [...] By illustrating the legacy of racist stereotyping, Colescott painfully points out to [Black people] their status as outsiders. (Manchanda et al. 40)

The viewer of *d'Alabama* is reminded of the woman in the upper-right corner through the placement of her fabric in the lower foreground, upon which a slice of watermelon rests. Black people's "status as outsiders," as Kahan describes, is perfectly exemplified by this placement because, while her presence in the painting signals social inclusion, her fabric is pinned by a symbol historically used to belittle Black Americans' intelligence and worth. The placement of the fabric also makes the viewer remember the woman's setting; *d'Alabama*, like *d'Avignon*, is presumably set in a brothel (Museum of Modern Art), and the women are therefore prostitutes. The viewer, then, is most likely someone procuring their services, and someone primarily pursuing Black women. Though Black women do not conform to Western beauty ideals like the blonde woman, there is no doubt that they are often objects of sexual desire. The leopard print of the woman's fabric suggests the same kitschy and stereotypical views of "exoticism" that Picasso and others were obsessed with when they first encountered African masks. Upon closer examination of the leopard print fabric, we see peppers sprinkled next to the watermelon slice, hinting further at the exotic nature of Black women. As Kahan notes, the viewer is implicated; we notice the women's tight and scant clothing, we see them as sexual beings, but that does not mean we see them as human. In the viewer's lustful gaze, our racism and biases stare back.

Reimagining Picasso's *d'Avignon*, Colescott's use of cartoonish depictions and bright colors shocked contemporary viewers just as Picasso's use of African masks and flattening planes shocked early twentieth-century viewers. Picasso's use of African masks is an example of primitivism. Primitivism is built on racism; as Paul Wood explains, primitivism "allow[s] some radical thinkers to entertain the idea that the progress of civilization [has] not been uniformly for the best, that much of the artificiality and even decadence which attended the growth of 'polite' society might represent the loss of a kind of freedom, a kind of naturalness, which obtained in the original 'state of nature'" (82). Frances S. Connelly further explores how Picasso's primitivism in *d'Avignon* marked a break from the classical model: "Picasso's primitivism fully established the anti-classical role that 'primitive' art came to play in modern art [...] the grotesque was the most radical form of irrational expression because it represented the near opposite of the classical ideal, both in its bizarre inventions and its willful ugliness" (109). Connelly describes the lack of spatial dimension as "Picasso [creating] a spatial grotesque [...] intersecting the figures with their surrounding space and conjoining foreground to background" (107). In the twentieth century, the "grotesque" that Connelly discusses is often associated with African and Oceanic, or primitive, art. Hilton Kramer also discusses the meaning of the grotesque with reference to the imagination:

What especially appealed to the modern eye in primitive art was its genius for bold, simplified forms, and its frank and even ferocious statements of feeling. In its grotesque but highly imaginative distortions and its emotive symbolism, primitive art offered the modern artist a vivid alternative to what was perceived to be the worn-out conventions of the Western classical tradition. (Kramer)

Connelly discusses Picasso's obsession with the grotesque, and states that the African masks in *d'Avignon* were meant to emulate their "affective, magical force" (106). The grotesque was horrific yet "magical," due to its simplicity and difference from traditional academic paintings. This "affective, magical force" also emulates Picasso's own "irrational emotions" that he claimed to feel when he first interacted with African masks (Connelly 108). The emotive nature of Picasso's work is present in Colescott's, and Colescott's modern rendition of *d'Avignon* brings about contemporary "irrational emotions" (Connelly 108).

Colescott creates a modern grotesque through his cartoonish depictions and use of bright colors. In the Seattle Art Museum's exhibition catalogue for *Figuring History*, Colescott's use of color is described: "By the mid-1980s, his brushwork became lush and gestural, and his palette increasingly paired acidic colors—with azure blues and hot pinks sidling up to intense yellows and greens—in a way that heightens the painful subject matter" (Manchanda et al. 15). Pairing bright colors, such as the extremely rosy cheeks of the blonde woman, with the cartoonish depiction of the characters, the viewer is left feeling uncomfortable; this discomfort is due to the tools Colescott uses to implicate the viewer (irony, humor, icons of stereotypes, historical paintings' "high form," and the indictment of Picasso) which are different from the normal color scheme and depiction in figurative art. Cartoons are associated with books, television, and movies that help the viewer escape from reality, while Colescott uses them to painfully bring reality to light. As Roberts writes, Colescott's narratives "[unfold] within a cartoon bubble, providing a framework that brings all the disparate elements into improbable harmony" (12). Just as Picasso strayed from tradition through the use of the spatial grotesque, African masks, and a taboo topic, Robert Colescott also chooses a set of tools to upset the viewer; however, instead of being shocked only by the garishness of the painting, Colescott's viewers are shocked because they finally see themselves.

Colescott's *d'Alabama* implicates the viewer in an honest rendering of our biases. The satiric and blatant way Colescott lays out the racist ideologies that impact us all, especially Black people, is painful. Living the experience, I have to admit that I do not always want to visually witness racist discourse, even in critique, but that weight must be shown. As I read the description of *d'Avignon* at MOMA, I felt the familiar pain that arises when your story is ignored; I felt the weight that Black people carry due to racism. I was reminded of a quote from WEB Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* that I read around the time I visited the Seattle Art

Museum and encountered *d'Alabama*: "The spiritual striving of the Freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity" (321). Despite carrying a burden "almost beyond the measure of their strength," African American artists such as Robert Colescott do not let that weight crush them, but instead let it embolden them to create with an unabashed gaze (Du Bois 321). Though it was emotionally difficult, I felt exalted while seeing Colescott's works at the Seattle Art Museum as my people's history was being figured by our own hands. The weight of oppression can only be released when its causes are destroyed and liberation prospers.

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