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she published “Books at the Borders of Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*” in the journal *Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation*. That article and this essay relate to her ongoing attempt to reinterpret Picasso’s landmark 1907 painting, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*.

GENDER FLEXIBILITY IN PICASSO'S *DEMOISELLES*: THE CIPHER OF THE EQUIVOCATING EARS

In 1916, poet-critic André Salmon assigned the title *Les Femelles d'Avignon* to his friend Picasso's 1907 painting, which already was being regarded as a landmark among the avant garde artists and writers of Paris (fig. A).¹ After this declaration, the figures in the painting would be seen forever as *demoiselles*—that is, as female. This gender assignation has appeared throughout criticism on the painting; gender dynamics became an especially strong thematic concern after a still-influential 1972 essay in which Leo Steinberg analyzed the scene's psychosexual drama as an agonistic, heterosexual encounter.² Yet the figures' gender identity need not be so categorically singular; even Steinberg notices that in some of Picasso's preparatory studies, "[c]onventional sexual character traits seem reversed" and the "whores" seem "mannish."³

Many feminist critics have revisited Steinberg's politics, yet scholars continually tend to describe the figures unquestioningly as female. Anna Chave, in a classic 1994 article, compares the painted *demoiselles* to her own corporeal experience of performing "seductive femininity," and to the prostitutes (whom she presents as cisgender women) in her Manhattan neighborhood.⁴ Suzanne Preston Blier, in the most recent book on the painting, attempts to see the *demoiselles* as more than just prostitutes, yet intensifies their gendered identity, "broadening the identities of the female subjects to be lovers, mothers, sisters, and daughters."⁵ This new mythology for the figures abstracts and universalizes their female identity: "These women suggest simultaneously quite generic figures and temporally and spatially specific female prototypes, global references to a kind of 'every woman.'"⁶

Blier's phrasing of "generic figures" contains the seeds for the inquiry I wish to pursue here. If I interpret "generic" to refer not to undistinguished plainness, but rather to an expression of a genre, it becomes possible to locate in Picasso's *demoiselles* another "genre" of person altogether—an expansion, complication, and potential obviation of the category of femaleness. While an even more contemporary critic, Sylvia Loreti, sees in the figures' bodies the "ambiguity" of "androgynous silhouettes,"⁷ I do not mean to explore paradigms of gender neutrality, non-binary gender identity, or female masculinity.⁸ Rather, I see "gender flexibility" in the bodies of the two central *demoiselles*: Picasso's details make it possible for a spectator to "flex" these figures back and forth between "male" and "female" appearances.

While this proposition alone could prompt a reconsideration of the painting's portrayal of gender, I wish to approach it in terms of a seemingly minor detail in the painting which has not yet received close analysis: the strange-looking ears of these two central figures (figs. B and C). These parts of the painting structurally resemble human ears and can be regarded simply as abstractions of these physical forms, especially given Picasso's view of abstraction that "You must always start with something."⁹ Regarding these ears as formal abstractions fits neatly with the



A—Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*,
1935
96×92 in. (243.9×233.7 cm), oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
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Society (ARS), New York

pivotal role that this painting has been seen to play in the development of analytical Cubism and in the history of twentieth-century abstraction.

Still, the highly specific loops, lines, and bulges of these ears invite interpretation. In this essay, I build toward the proposition that the painted ears of the two central *demoiselles* can be regarded, and carefully deciphered, as a legend indicating their bodies' flexible gender.¹⁰ Finding significance in the details of the ears squares with Picasso's intense deliberation over the *Demoiselles*, beyond what he devoted to any other single work. He made studies at all stages, totaling 400–800 sketches and corollary works, a quantity “without parallel, for a single picture, in the entire history of art.”¹¹

Most of Picasso's sketches for heads in the *Demoiselles* do not include ears, so it is reasonable to scrutinize the ones that do appear. These often do not resemble the ears in the final painting directly. Some explore strategies for creating visual ambiguity which Picasso then applies, in different forms, in the final painting. This disjuncture between the sketched ears and the painted ears suggests that Picasso was arriving at decisions directly on the canvas. He later praised such a practice: “What counts is what is spontaneous, impulsive.”¹²

Impulsivity is not the same as pure randomness; it is abrupt action unconsciously informed by experience. If Picasso's decisions in the studio tend toward promoting gender flexibility, in the ears as in the bodies, these decisions can be seen to relate to his sketchbook studies of visual multivalence in ears, which he made with reference to Iberian sculpture.

Iberian Precedents

It is now commonly accepted that ears in the *Demoiselles* draw from the precedent of Iberian sculpture. This line of criticism emerged in the 1940s and promoted general comparisons between the ears and the Iberian artworks Picasso saw at the Louvre in the years leading up to the *Demoiselles*.¹³ (More recently, Christopher Green allows that “The Iberian impetus would take precedence in 1907 with the painting of the first phase of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*,” presumably to acknowledge that the later phase of work was informed by African materials.¹⁴) These theories were confirmed by Picasso's 1960 comment: “You remember that business in which I was mixed up, when Apollinaire stole the statuettes from the Louvre? They were Iberian statuettes...Well, if you look at the ears of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, you will recognize the ears of those pieces of sculpture!”¹⁵ Picasso was referring to two specific Iberian sculptures, described by the curators of the 2021 exhibition, *Picasso Ibero*, as “votive heads from Cerro de los Santos.”¹⁶ These heads—one male and one female—had been stolen from the Louvre, perhaps at Picasso's request, and were given or sold to Picasso so he could study them.¹⁷ Picasso's claim that the ears in the painting derive from the “ears” (plural) of the two sculpted heads sounds reasonable yet is impossible: only a single ear from these votive sculptures is visible, on the male head (fig. D).



B—Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907
 detail, author photo
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 Society (ARS), New York
 C—Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907
 detail, author photo
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 Society (ARS), New York

D—Iberian sculpture, masculine head,
 3rd c. BCE, from Cerro de los Santos, Spain
 7⁷/₈ × 7 × 5¹/₈ in. (20 × 17.5 × 13 cm)
 Musée d'Archéologie nationale, Domaine
 national de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France
 Used by permission, inv. no. AM943, Art
 Resource, photo: Franck Raux

Traces of the long lower lobe of this ear can be perceived in all four ears of the central *demoiselles*. The shape and form of the sculpted ear, seen from the front, most closely resembles the painted left ear of the right central *demoiselle*.¹⁸ This is the only painted ear in which paint bulges out from the surface of the canvas. It therefore illustrates Christian Zervos's general connection between the *Demoiselles* and Iberian sculpture: he speaks of the resemblance "*de la forme d'oreilles*" or a volumetric modeling of the ears as opposed to "*du dessin des yeux*" which indicates two-dimensional drawing or—as one scholar translates it—"delineation" of the eyes.¹⁹

Connecting the painting to the stolen votive head does not immediately suggest anything about the ears' interpretation, aside from implying that Picasso was connecting with his personal and art historical heritage. The three more two-dimensional ears, especially, demand interpretation outside of Picasso's proclamation, as they do not substantially resemble the singular ear of the male head.

Genital Emblems

The votive head is not the only male Iberian figure whose ears find expression in the central two *demoiselles*, which are overwhelmingly assumed to be female, so the Iberian precedent introduces the matter of gender. Though ears themselves are not generally associated with specific gender identities, Picasso's deriving his female forms from these male precedents is consistent with the variety of genders seen in his sketches for the bodies that ultimately became the *demoiselles*. It also paves the way for interpreting the flatter ears as gender-related symbols.

James J. Sweeney, in 1941, notes in the painting an overall "similarity in the form of the ears to that of the Osuna bas-relief" of a man being attacked by a lion (fig. E) which was also on view at the Louvre.²⁰ While Sweeney, like Zervos, uses the word "form," here it does not seem to signal dimensionality: the elfin, leaf-shaped ear of this Iberian artifact does not resemble the thickly painted ear. Instead, it resembles the left, eye-shaped ear of the left central *demoiselle*.²¹ If Picasso imports this source, he also alters it: in the painting, the Osuna-like ear appears as a closed shape (fig. F).

The almond-shaped form of the left central *demoiselle*'s left ear can be interpreted as a yonic shape, in conjunction with the phallic shape of this figure's right ear. These two ears are clearly painted as a pair: they have no outlines, and their fleshy forms are articulated with brown lines. This brown color resembles the facial coloring of the leftmost *demoiselle* and thereby makes these abstracted ears look like their marks still connote body parts, while the black-lined ears of the right central *demoiselle*, as I will argue, suggest a more abstract, disembodied signification. Cartoons of female and male genitals can neatly symbolize the brothel scene that this painting has long been said to depict: a presumably male spectator—the painting's viewer²²—is evaluating five ostensibly female prostitutes for a bedroom encounter.

Calling the painted ears "genital cartoons" does not acknowledge the gender flip between the male Iberian precedents and the ostensibly female *demoiselles*. Nor does this scheme of signification yet include the ears of the right central *demoiselle*.



E—Iberian bas-relief, “Man Attacked by Lion,”
early 1st c. BCE, from Osuna, Spain
16 $\frac{1}{8}$ ×11 $\frac{3}{4}$ ×15 in. (41×30×38 cm)
Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid, Spain
Used by permission, inv. no. 38426, photo:
Fernando Velasco Mora



F—Author’s rendering of the shapes of ears
in Iberian bas-relief (left) and the left central
demoiselle (right)

Because these two central *demoiselles* function in the painting as a pair, interpreting their ears must consider the signs suggested in both figures.²³

Mathematical Ears

The right ear of the right central *demoiselle* initially looks like a figure eight; when rotated 90° this “8” is also the sign for infinity. The idea that Picasso abstracts these ears into mathematical symbols is supported by the writing of André Salmon, a close comrade and frequent studio visitor of Picasso. He wrote of the painting’s figures in 1912: “*Ce sont des problèmes nus, des chiffres blancs au tableau noir.*”²⁴ An authoritative translation—“They are naked problems: white ciphers on a blackboard”²⁵—gives weight to my inclination to treat the ears as ciphers to be decoded. Yet “*chiffres*” also simply means “numbers,” as if Picasso were a mathematician working out his “naked problems.”²⁶

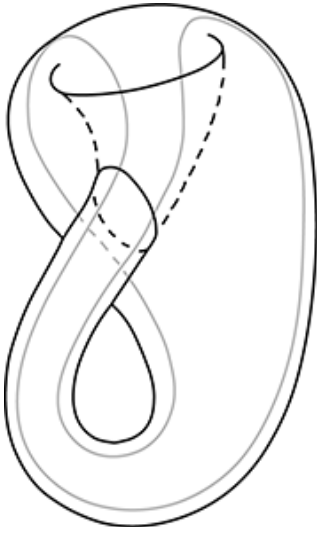
The mathematical framework becomes more complex when the left ear of this *demoiselle* is taken into account. The rounded glob of paint protruding from the canvas in the lower lobe of this ear makes the left ear look like a 3D version of the right ear’s 2D sign. A way to make sense of this is to see the left ear as the mathematical form of a Klein bottle (fig. G), that is, as a higher-dimensional version of the right ear’s “8” when this is interpreted as a Möbius strip (fig. H).

During the phase of the *Demoiselles*, Picasso had access to a diagram of a Klein bottle (fig. I) in the 1906 book *Mélanges de géométrie à quatre dimensions* by Esprit Jouffret.²⁷ He likely knew of this book through an actuary, Maurice Princet, who entertained Picasso and his friends with mathematical ideas.²⁸ Though Picasso’s French was still rough, he could look at Jouffret’s pictures. This anomalous, perplexing diagram could have occasioned a conversation with Princet, who could have offered a simple explanation—again without much French—by making a Möbius strip.

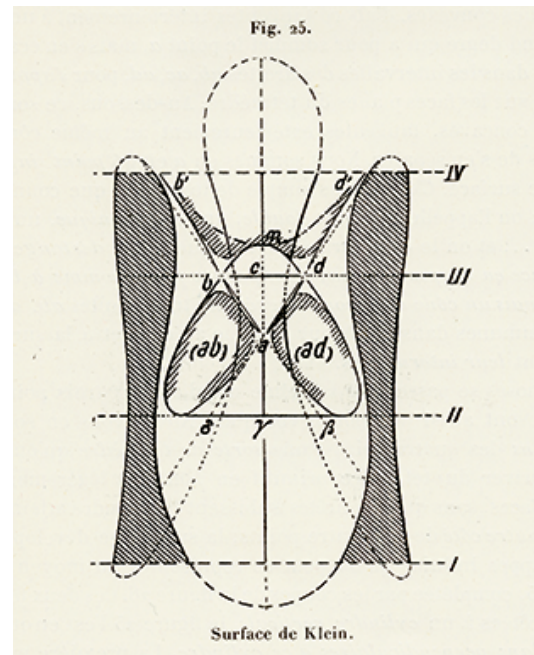
In the Möbius strip, a length of paper is looped by attaching its two ends after twisting the paper once. The front of the paper then becomes continuous with the back, so that the two-sided piece of material functionally has one neverending surface. With the “*Surface de Klein*,” the same idea gets played out volumetrically: the inside of the form becomes the outside and vice versa. Both mathematical tricks subvert conventional ideas about space and objects; their chief intrigue is that opposites turn into each other. Their mathematical name—“non-orienting manifolds”—relates to the principle of indeterminacy I am exploring. All of this could have appealed to Picasso as he was endeavoring, in the *Demoiselles*, to dismantle traditional systems of visual perspective, especially if his subversions included multivalence of forms and even of gender.

A Möbius Logic of Gender

The mind-bender of opposites becoming each other can be applied to contexts outside of pure mathematics. At the fin-de-siècle, Paul Möbius, the grandson of the



G—Diagram of Klein bottle
 Author's rendering derived from an image at
 pngwing.com
 H—Diagram of Möbius strip
 Author's rendering derived from an image
 uploaded by Mirek Dymitrow



I—Diagram of “Surface de Klein,” 1906 Esprit
 Jouffret, *Mélanges de géométrie à quatre
 dimensions* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars), p. 75
 Public domain, scan by Karen Bouchard, Brown
 University Library

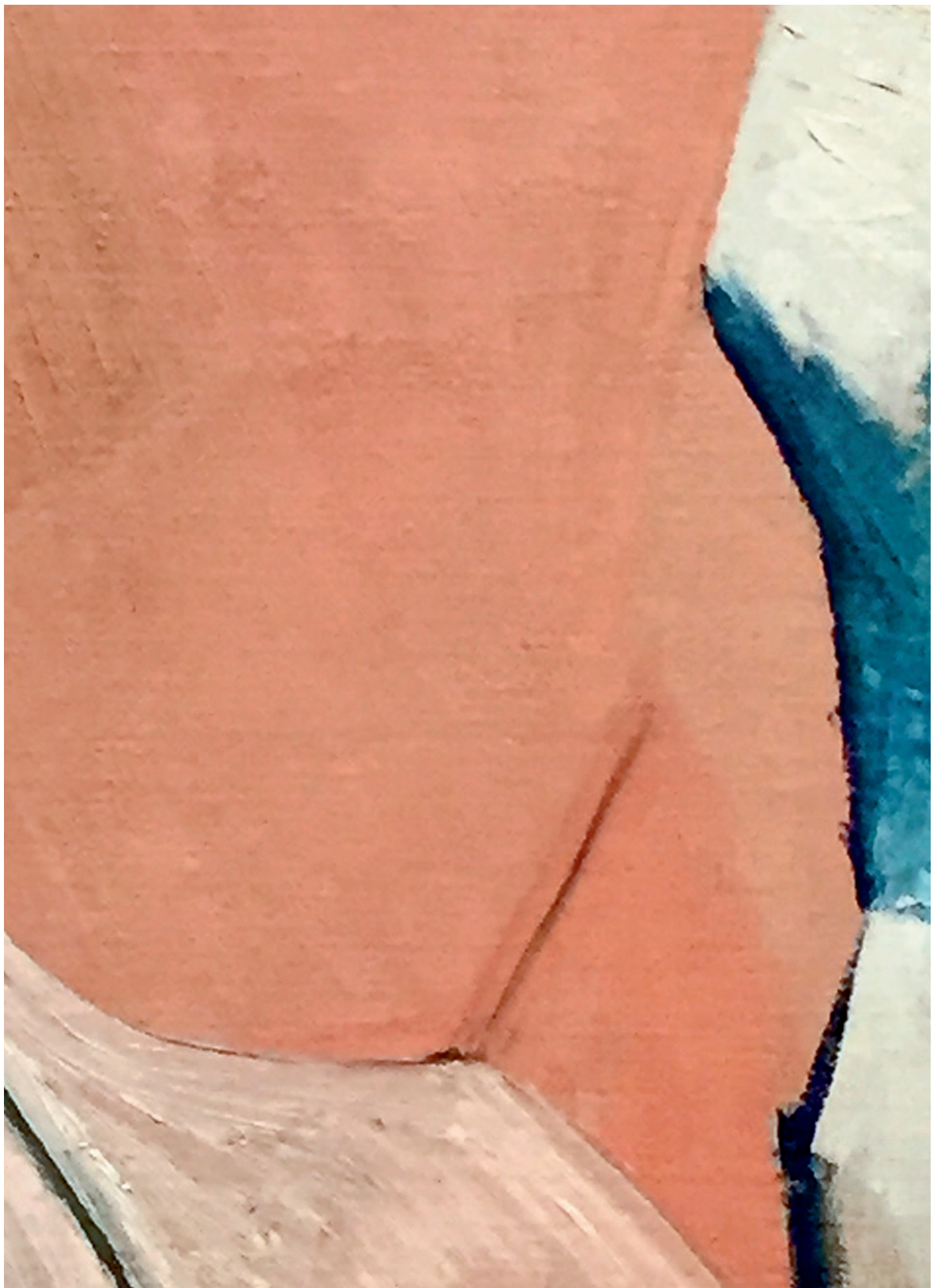
inventor of the Möbius strip, was a neuropsychiatrist thinking about the mind-body problem: just as one side of a Möbius strip leads to the other, “study of mind inevitably leads to pursuit of body, and vice versa.”²⁹ Möbius’s own comment about this, in an 1894 article on migraines, concludes with a phrase that prefigures Picasso’s Cubist interest in plural viewing perspectives: “I do not take the mental and physical to be different things but manifestations of one and the same: the difference depends on the point from which the observation is made.”³⁰

This mental/physical interrelation can be applied to the ears of the central *demoiselles*: the mathematical, “mental” symbols of non-orienting manifolds, in the right figure’s ears, can be used as glosses for the “physical” genital cartoons in the left figure’s ears. In this reading, the “two sides”—i.e., the “opposite” genitals—could be represented on a single head to suggest that male could become female, and vice versa. Gender functions like a Möbius strip. And the bodies of the two central *demoiselles* indeed can be switched back and forth between “male” and “female” appearances.

In the left central *demoiselle*, the dark hair holds the key to this gender flexing. It looks at first as if the hair is long, in a stereotypically feminine style. (Of course, men also wear long hair, then as now, including Picasso in 1900.) Though the hair appears to extend below the shoulder, it actually changes color at that point: it is painted in brown instead of black, so it need not be interpreted as a continuation of the hair. In the black lines on the scalp, there is a curious gap to the left of center. It becomes possible to regard the black lines not as hair but as outlines of a bald scalp and/or shadows behind the head. The black line to the left of the gap looks shadowy when its left edge softens as it descends; this darkness continues behind and below the left ear, where it even more reliably reads as shadow. The black line to the right of the gap could be seen as a shadow because, when viewed as a separate line, it appears to recede in pictorial space, behind both the right ear and the upraised elbow which is tucked behind the head. When both of these lines are interpreted as shadows delineating the contour of a scalp, this figure’s head suddenly looks bald and male-identified. In the blink of an eye, however, it is possible to slip back into perceiving that the head has female-identified long hair.

The gender flexibility of the right central *demoiselle* is most visible in the torso. Picasso has painted a vertical shape in a slightly browner tone in the right hip (fig. J). If this area is interpreted as negative space, the roundedness of the hip gets shaved off, so the pelvis appears to have a male bone structure instead of a female one. Again, in the blink of an eye, it is possible to restore this figure’s female-identified curving hip.

Games with gender are consistent with other artworks that Picasso was making, leading up to the *Demoiselles*.³¹ Many sketches and paintings feature figures in a “thorn-puller” pose, in which a bent leg obscures the genital area. Guillaume Apollinaire writes in 1913 about Picasso’s Rose Period paintings: “Harlequins accompany the glorious women and resemble them, neither male nor female. ...[A]nimals are human and genders undefined.”³² Picasso scholar Margaret Werth notices that, over time, “The gender ambiguities of Picasso’s figuration seem to have undergone



J—Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, 1907
detail, author photo
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a reversal, from the feminized male figures of the Rose Period to the masculinized female figures of 1906.”³³ Werth particularly observes of *Two Nudes*, a painting of 1906 which directly prefigures the *Demoiselles*, “The painting equivocates between... masculinity and femininity.”³⁴

Gender “equivocation” locates gender indeterminacy wholly in the artwork, while gender “flexibility” encompasses the viewer’s interaction with the artwork in the act of “flexing” the representation of gender toward male or female categories. Both terms convey the conceptual paradigm of flipping back and forth between seeming opposites. In the sketchbooks for the *Demoiselles*, Picasso can be seen to be exploring visual strategies for this flipping action, using ears as pivotal lynchpins.

Sketching Flexibility

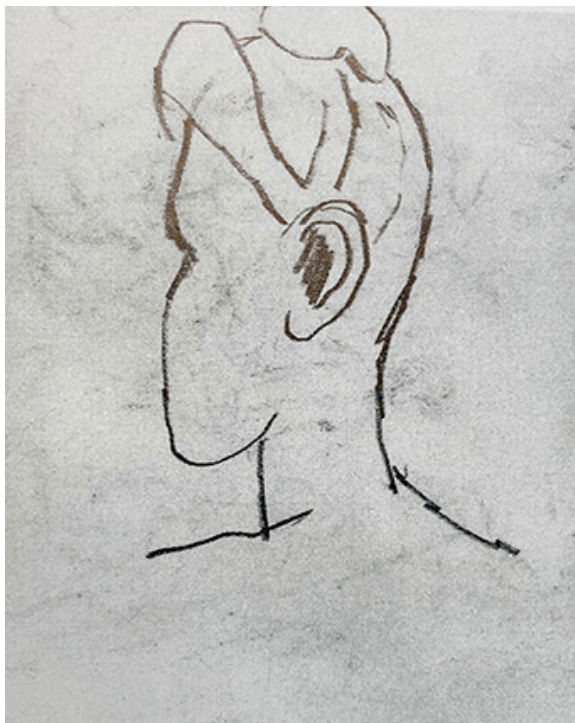
Many of Picasso’s sketches for the *Demoiselles* use ears as sites for experimenting with multivalence.³⁵ The ear in one sketch especially resembles a classic optical illusion (fig. K).³⁶ While today’s most familiar version of this illusion derives from a 1915 cartoon, the image dates back at least to an 1888 German postcard (figs. L1 and L2). In Picasso’s sketch, as in the original illustrations, the illusion hinges on the viewer’s perception of a single facial feature which can function as an eye (of the old woman) or an ear (of the young woman). Picasso’s sketch also goes further. It uses the ear to create ambiguity about whether the head and gaze are directing backward or forward in space: the dip in the face’s contour could be at the left eye or the right eye.

Several sketches for the *Demoiselles* locate multivalence in the ears themselves, by drawing concentric rings in which spatial depth cues can be read in opposite ways (fig. M). Though the outer ring appears to be continuous with the flesh of the head, the middle and inner rings could be protruding or receding in pictorial space. The viewer can “flex” the spatial orientation so that the rings move one way in space, then another. This is prefigured in a signature Picasso used in the late 1890s consisting of his three initials surrounded by three rings (fig. N). These rings call attention to Pablo Ruiz Picasso as the creator of the drawings, as would the lights blinking on and off in a marquee.³⁷

For Picasso, just when he was on the cusp of developing Cubist multiperspectivalism, it makes sense that he would have been exploring ways to keep an image from getting “stuck” in academic conventions of static representation. Cunning ambiguities keep the visual interpretation of an image constantly in play. Though these precise visual strategies do not recur in the ears of the two central *demoiselles*, those ears together can spell a scheme of flexibility about gender.

Flexibility As Indeterminacy

Before André Salmon titled Picasso’s painting as *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, the figures’ gender could remain abstract, indeterminate. Salmon and other friends



K—Pablo Picasso, Sketch of a woman with a bun, in profile, Winter 1906–07
Carnet 2, folio 31v
5¾×4⅞ in. (14.7×10.6 cm), black pencil on paper
Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris
© 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
L1—German postcard, Young Woman/Old Woman illusion, 1888
Public domain, Wikimedia Commons
N.B.: This version of the famous illusion may have been accessible to Picasso before his work on the *Demaiselles*. Versions that are more familiar today, such as the one in fig. L2, were circulated later.
L2—W. E. Hill, “My Wife and My Mother-In-Law,” 1915
From *Puck* 78, no. 2018 (November 6, 1915), 11
Public domain, Wikimedia Commons

M—Pablo Picasso, Sketch of head of a woman with long hair, in profile (Z. XXVI, 33), March 1907
Carnet 3, folio 47v
9½×7⅝ (24.2×19.3 cm), black pencil on paper
Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris
© 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
N—Pablo Picasso, signature initials on sketch of Painter Holding a Palette, detail, 1898–99
9¼×6¼ (23.5×15.7 cm), Conté crayon on paper
Museu Picasso Barcelona, Spain, inv. no. MPB111579
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of Picasso had nicknamed the painting “The Philosophical Brothel”—this phrase lays the conceptual groundwork for thinking of the highly gender-ritualized brothel scenario as an ideal space within which to reimagine gender. Also, if Picasso was engaging in creative gender analysis, this poses an intriguingly unexpected foil to his notorious and stereotypical misogyny.

Salmon’s reflections on the painting, in 1912, caution viewers against thinking of the figures as either male or female; he refers to them as “*personnages*” and “*figures*.” He writes, “these characters are neither gods, Titans, nor heroes;”—male-coded categories—and continues, “they are not even allegorical or symbolic figures.”³⁸ Allegorical depictions are often female, as in the symbol of Liberty, but Salmon desexualizes these mythological embodiments. The closest he comes to a gender identification is to call the figures “*grands nus féminins*” or “large feminine nudes,” where all of his French words are gendered masculine, and the gender-specific word “*féminins*” is a contingent adjective rather than a definitive noun. His language suggests that the *demoiselles* negate gender rather than perform it.

Picasso also dissembled about the gender of his creations. Though Blier has perhaps taken seriously Picasso’s story that he represented in the *Demoiselles* women that he and his friends knew—girlfriends next to a grandmother—he reported this as a joke: “We used to make a lot of fun of this painting.”³⁹ He did not like Salmon’s official title,⁴⁰ and he earnestly insisted that the figures in this painting did not correspond to embodied women. “I worked completely outside of all models,”⁴¹ he maintained, and he insisted to his biographer, “My characters are imaginary characters.”⁴² His jokes about the *demoiselles* as women contradict his more sober statements which accommodate less constrained gender identities for the figures.

Yet Picasso did not negate gender like Salmon; he celebrated it. When Picasso spoke about “the genesis of Cubism” and the *Demoiselles*, he created a carnival of gender flexibility: “The Spaniards have a popular saying, ‘If he goes out with a beard, it’s Saint Anthony; if he hasn’t a beard, it’s the Madonna!’ It is like when you do crystal-gazing; first it’s Napoleon who materialises, then Joan of Arc! Well, the image appears to the artist at the end of his work.”⁴³ Gender registers strongly here, and figures flip genders instantly and often. And the “end” of the work need not mean that the image stays fixed: Picasso said at another time, “when [a picture] is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it.”⁴⁴ This general theory can be applied to the gender of the central *demoiselles*: this aspect of the picture can be flexed by the spectator so that “it still goes on changing.”

Picasso is not the only one to philosophize about the viewer’s personal interaction with the canvas. This was also the strategy of Leo Steinberg in his canonical essay, also called “The Philosophical Brothel.” Steinberg analyzed the spectator’s role in the painting, and vividly reported on his own viewing experience. His approach, like Picasso’s, was Nietzschean—both Apollonian/intellectual and Dionysian/visceral.⁴⁵ Steinberg unearthed erotic intensity in the *Demoiselles*, finding there an “immediacy...unprecedented in the history of painting.”⁴⁶ His view of

gender, however, reveals an unfortunate rigidity: he sees in the final painting of the *Demoiselles* a stereotypical battle of the sexes, where the figures “assault” the spectator in a “tidal wave of female aggression.”⁴⁷

For a Dionysian phenomenology of sex that is more congruent with gender flexibility, I dare to turn to a Picasso critic whose writing has been largely rejected for being derivative, sensationalistic, and overwrought with personal projections. This is Norman Mailer, who starts to philosophize about sex because of the ambiguous gender cues in Picasso’s figural work leading up to the *Demoiselles*.⁴⁸ I use Mailer’s text for its theoretical potential, not its historical accuracy. He imagines Picasso’s experience with his first longtime lover: “With Fernande [Olivier], he had entered the essential ambiguity of deep sex, where one’s masculinity or femininity is forever turning into its opposite, so that a phallus, once emplaced within a vagina, can become more aware of the vagina than [of] its own phallitude.”⁴⁹ If we can get beyond Mailer’s tortured final neologism, which may be the least of what caused his reviewer Francine du Plessix Gray to characterize this passage as a “howler,”⁵⁰ we might appreciate the gender play that he locates in even the most conventional coupling. If “one’s masculinity or femininity is forever turning into its opposite,” this is an embodied experience of the gender flexibility Picasso represents visually in the *Demoiselles*. There is no gender fixity, even for the most gendered body parts. Further, Mailer’s scenario suggests that gender flexing happens when people engage with each other, which is like what happens when the viewer of the *Demoiselles* activates the figures’ gender flip by engaging (now visually) with the painting.

By suggesting that a social exchange activates gender, Mailer sounds surprisingly like contemporary gender theorist Judith Butler, who recently said, “Gender... becomes a negotiation.”⁵¹ This is not only to say that the definition of “woman” is ripe for continual redefinition, but also crucially that an individual’s ongoing enactment of gender happens in conversation with external social contexts and interactions. Both Mailer and Butler perceive a dialectical quality in gender, and I am seeing in this dialectic the structural basis for an alternation between two gender positions.

We have come far from the equivocating ears of the central *demoiselles*. Yet by ending in a bedroom encounter, we have actually returned to the libidinal motivation for the crime that made this entire argument possible: the thief of Picasso’s Iberian sculpted heads said that the remarkable ear of the male votive was “the detail that seduced me”⁵² to steal that particular object. This original seduction pointed us toward the central *demoiselles*’ ears—small yet highly deliberate-looking details—with which I constructed a semiotics of genitals and gender flexing. While all of the variables I discussed, including mathematical diagrams and Picasso’s sketches, may not have been interrelated for Picasso, they create a conceptual context for my primary point: that the painting’s central pair of bodies, which viewers of the *Demoiselles* have long regarded as female, can be flexed into maleness and back, using the visual mechanisms that Picasso installed. While we may regard these two figures as having an “expanded” female identity, we can also see them as embodying the negotiable, irresolvable cipher of gender.

1—The occasion was the painting's first public display, in an international group exhibition Salmon was curating at the Salon d'Antin in Paris, called *L'Art Moderne en France*.

2—Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," *Art News* 71, no. 5 (September 1972) and no. 6 (October 1972); the essay was republished, with a long "Retrospect," in October 44 (Spring 1988), as well as in the French and Spanish catalogues for a comprehensive exhibition in Paris and Barcelona, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, also in 1988.

3—Steinberg 1988, 37, 36.

4—Anna Chave, "New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism," *The Art Bulletin* 76, No. 4 (December 1994): 598.

5—Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), xiv.

6—Ibid., 24.

7—Sylvia Loreti, "Dealing With Difference: The Iberian–African Connection in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*," in *Of Modernism: Essays in Honour of Christopher Green*, ed. Grace Brockington and C.F.B. Miller (London: Paul Holberton, 2020), 233.

8—For the latter category, see Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Discourses of transgender identity and intersexuality relate more closely to the concerns I raise, and a thorough consideration and historicization of this relation would require another essay.

9—Qtd. in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 273.

10—My approach has echoes of the "deductive" way of seeing that critic Roger Rothman associates with Cubism (Roger Rothman, "The Cubist Detective, or the Eclipse of the Flâneur," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 10, no. 4 [December 2006]: 504–06), and which resonates with Picasso's favoring of Sherlock Holmes novels: "The detective's method...begins with a profound suspicion of appearances and follows with an extraordinary attention to certain details that would otherwise be seen as trivial" (ibid., 505). I do not aim to follow the "conjectural method" outlined by Carlo Ginzburg, however, in which small details—especially related to the shapes of ears—lead to intuitive leaps in diagnosing larger, positivistic truths ("Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 [Spring, 1980]). Instead, I aim to weave as many details as possible into a plausible interpretation.

11—William Rubin, "The Genesis of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*" [1987], in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, ed. William Rubin, Hélène Seckels, and Judith Cousins (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 119.

12—Qtd. in Jaume Sabartés, *Picasso: An Intimate Portrait*, trans. Ángel Flores (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), 146.

13—Picasso confessed this acquaintance to Christian Zervos in 1939; see John Golding, "The 'Demoiselles d'Avignon,'" *The Burlington*

Magazine 100, no. 662 (May, 1958): 159. Already in 1931, "The Italian painter-critic Ardengo Soffici recalled him pacing the galleries where the Iberian pieces were located 'like a hound in search of game'" (in his *Ricordi di vita artistica e letteraria*, qtd. in Christopher Green, "Pablo Picasso: More Than Pastische, 1906–36," in *Modern Antiquity: Picasso, de Chirico, Léger, Picabia*, ed. Christopher Green and Jens M. Daehner [Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011], 126). For an overview of the Louvres exhibition history of Iberian artifacts, see James Johnson Sweeney, "Picasso and Iberian Sculpture," *The Art Bulletin* 23, no. 3 (September 1941): 191–93, esp. note 5. For archival confirmation of details, see John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1991), 517, note 24 and Rubin, Seckels, and Cousins 1994, 219, note 10.

14—Green, ibid., 126.

15—Qtd. in Romuald Dor de la Souchère, *Picasso in Antibes* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), 14. In the scholarship, this comment sometimes has been cited as if it speaks for itself, and as if it supersedes the more thorough considerations of the relation between Iberian sculpture and the *Demoiselles* which began with the earlier scholars.

16—Website for *Picasso Ibero* exhibition, Centro Botín, Santander, Spain, May 1–September 12, 2021, <https://www.centrobotin.org/en/exposicion/picasso-ibero/>.

17—Detailed histories of this escapade appear in John Golding, *Cubism: A History and An Analysis, 1907–1914* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 53, note 1, and Rubin, Seckel, and Cousins 1994, 219, note 135. Apollinaire's testimony is qtd. in Noah Charney, "Pablo Picasso, art thief: the 'affaire des statuettes' and its role in the foundation of modernist painting," *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* 26, no. 2 (2014): 193. Sylvia Loreti concludes that the extent of Picasso's involvement is ultimately "unclear" (Loreti 2020, 234).

18—Picasso painted a striking study, *Head of the Medical Student* (1906), which clearly features this sculpted ear as it appears when viewed directly from the side; this study developed into the handle-like ear of the leftmost *demoiselle*.

19—Christian Zervos, *Pablo Picasso*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions Cahiers d'Art, 1942), 10; the translation of "delineation" appears in Rubin, Seckel, and Cousins 1994, 216.

20—Sweeney 1941, 195.

21—The tubelike contour of this ear also finds expression in the ear of the leftmost *demoiselle*.

22—Picasso removed the two male figures—a "sailor" and a "medical student"—who had appeared in preparatory sketches and had played the role of presenting and/or assessing the prostitutes.

23—Within the Saussurean linguistic system, a sign's interpretation is predicated upon the perception of significant differences between signs; "value concerns the opposition of signs to each other" (Yve-Alain Bois and Katharine Streip, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," *Representations* 18

[Spring 1987]: 52). The presentation of these demoiselles' ears in pairs suggests that they all be evaluated in "opposition" to each other.

24—"Pour la première fois, chez Picasso, l'expression des visages n'est ni tragique ni passionnée. Il s'agit de masques à peu près délivré de toute humanité. Pourtant, ces personnages ne sont pas des dieux, non plus des Titans ou des héros; pas même des figures allégoriques ou symboliques. Ce sont des problèmes nus, des chiffres blancs au tableau noir" (André Salmon, "Histoire Anecdotique du Cubisme," in *La Jeune Peinture Française* [Paris: Société des Trente, Albert Messein, 1912], 43).

25—André Salmon, "An Anecdotal History of Cubism," in *André Salmon on French Modern Art*, trans. and annotated by Beth S. Gersh-Nesic (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51.

26—Salmon uses more mathematical language as he continues, "The sober principle of the painting equation was laid down." Ibid.

27—Esprit Jouffret, *Mélanges de géométrie à quatre dimensions* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars), 75.

28—See Marc Décimo, *Maurice Princet: Le Mathématicien du Cubism* (Paris: L'Échoppe, 2006). While Linda Dalrymple Henderson admits that "It remains difficult to determine the degree to which Picasso was influenced by Princet," she maintains that "Princet...introduced the Cubists to the work of Jouffret" (*The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983], 59, 265). Scholars have debated Picasso's familiarity with the fourth dimension and a few have traced some of the visual innovations of cubism to aspects of Jouffret's diagrams. They tend to focus on Jouffret's related earlier book, *Traité élémentaire de géométrie à quatre dimensions* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars 1903), but Princet likely knew of both volumes.

29—Francis Schiller, *A Möbius Strip: Fin-de-siècle Neuropsychiatry and Paul Möbius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 2.

30—P. J. Möbius, "Die Migräne," in H. Nothnagel, *Handbuch der speciellen Pathologie und Therapie* XII, 2 (1894): 95–96; qtd. in Schiller 1982, 11.

31—Christine Poggi finds gender play in Picasso's layered imagery of this time. As I revise this essay, I will engage with her "Double Exposures: Picasso, Drawing, and the Masking of Gender, 1900–1906" (in *Cubism: The Leonard Lauder Collection*, ed. Emily Braun and Rebecca Rabinow [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014]), and with related ideas by Yve-Alain Bois ("Painting As Trauma," in *Picasso's 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon'*, ed. Christopher Green [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001]) and other writers.

32—Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, trans. Peter Read (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 34.

33—Margaret Werth, "Representing the Body in 1906," in *Picasso: The Early Years, 1892–1906*, exh. cat. ed. Marilyn McCully (Washington: National Gallery of Art with

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997): 287, note 40.

34—Ibid., 282.

35—Some of these sketches are studies for the ear of the leftmost *demoiselle*.

36—Picasso adapted this image into the right figure's head in *Two Nudes* (1906). Traces from the sketch, in mirror image, can also be seen in studies for (and in the final image of) the crouching figure in the *Demoiselles*.

37—The rings also create a yonic opening into which the artist inserts himself.

38—Op. cit., see notes 24 and 25.

39—To Daniel Kahnweiler in December 1933; originally published by Kahnweiler in "Huit Entretiens," *Le Point* (October 1952); qtd. in Steinberg 1988, 43, note 32.

40—Ibid. "*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, how this title irritates me."

41—To Pierre Daix, qtd. in Anne Baldassari, *Le miroir noir: Picasso, sources photographiques, 1900–1928*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997), 72, note 167.

42—John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1996), 19.

43—Dor de la Souchère 1960, 15, 16.

44—To Zervos, qtd. in Barr 1946, 272.

45—"Picasso was certainly aware of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in Barcelona by the early 1900s, and Karen Kleinfelder has argued convincingly he never forgot that polemic" (Christopher Green, "There Is No Antiquity: Modern Antiquity in the Work of Pablo Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico, Fernand Léger, and Francis Picabia [1906–36]," in Green and Daehner 2011, 7). The scholarship Green refers to is Karen L. Kleinfelder, "Monstrous Oppositions," *Picasso and the Mediterranean*, exh. cat., ed. Humlebæk (Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1996).

46—Christopher Green, "An Introduction to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*," in Picasso's 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,' op.cit., 9.

47—Steinberg 1988, 15 and 73; 15.

48—In addition to citing some paintings such as the ones Werth discussed, he notes several sketches from early 1907 in which Picasso "added a phallus" to "a nude of a woman" (Norman Mailer, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* [New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995], 207); the sketches are reproduced on 208.

49—Ibid., 207.

50—"Stud Wars," *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1995, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-10-15-bk-57038-story.html>.

51—Jules Gleeson, "Judith Butler: 'We need to rethink the category of woman,'" *The Guardian*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender>.

52—Golding 1959, 54, note 1.