

Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy

Charmaine Nelson

Volume 22, Number 1-2, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072517ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072517ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Nelson, C. (1995). *Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy*. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 22(1-2), 97–107.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1072517ar>

Article abstract

Les représentations de femmes noires dans l'art occidental déflent toute classification facile. Les catégories traditionnelles du nu (« *nude/naked* ») en histoire de l'art, fondées sur un discours psychanalytique européocentrique et sur des normes colonialistes de beauté et de comportement sexuel sont inaptes à transiger avec la complexité de la représentation du corps de la femme noire. Cette représentation a connu historiquement une double fétichisation, fondée à la fois sur une perception d'un manque racial et sexuel. Le *Nu de couleur*, 1932, de Dorothy Stevens est symptomatique de cette fétichisation unique, état qui reste indicatif du positionnement de la « femme noire » comme l'autre de la féminité blanche idéalisée. Pendant que *Nu de couleur* situe la « femme noire » comme étant sexuellement agressive, exotique et hors norme, les nus féminins contemporains apparemment inoffensifs révèlent une tradition d'opposition délibérément fondée sur la race.

Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy

CHARMAINE NELSON, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY

Résumé

Les représentations de femmes noires dans l'art occidental déflent toute classification facile. Les catégories traditionnelles du nu («*nude/naked*») en histoire de l'art, fondées sur un discours psychanalytique européocentrique et sur des normes colonialistes de beauté et de comportement sexuel sont inaptes à transiger avec la complexité de la représentation du corps de la femme noire. Cette représentation a connu historiquement une double fétichisation, fondée à la fois sur une perception d'un manque racial et sexuel. Le *Nu*

de couleur, 1932, de Dorothy Stevens est symptomatique de cette fétichisation unique, état qui reste indicatif du positionnement de la «femme noire» comme l'autre de la féminité blanche idéalisée. Pendant que *Nu de couleur* situe la «femme noire» comme étant sexuellement agressive, exotique et hors norme, les nus féminins contemporains apparemment inoffensifs révèlent une tradition d'opposition délibérément fondée sur la race.

Constructed as the nude or the naked within art historical discourse,¹ the represented female body has been the historical manifestation of patriarchal and eurocentric ideals of woman, womanhood, beauty, femininity and female sexuality within western society. The nude has been the more conservative and palatable of the two categories and the naked, the more historically offensive. Although the nude and the naked have co-existed within a dichotomous relationship, it is only within the modern era that the naked has emerged from the arbitrary confines of pornography. Its historical association with pornography has situated the naked within the realm of the sublime within which obscenity and violence could be aesthetically enjoyed in art. Defined by a socio-historical specificity and “uncontained” sexuality, the naked disturbs socially sanctioned norms of sexual propriety.

Oppositionally, the female nude has evolved as a disguised generalization of a patriarchally and eurocentrically defined femininity and beauty: a fantasy constructed for the male heterosexual gaze. Disguise mediated the female body's extrication from reality and entrenchment within the realm of desire. Although disguise has taken several forms, the purpose has remained the removal or distancing of the represented female body from the “real” in an attempt to alleviate the danger associated with the male experience of the female body. The visual embodiment of idealized feminine beauty, the female nude functions, as Marcia Pointon has written,

...not as a category with clear parameters but as a form of rhetoric. It is the way the body functions in the grammar of representation, invoking ideologies of the body and its economy, that is significant rather than its erotic power as estimated by any particular viewer, or its pose, or the extent of its covering.²

In psychoanalytical terms the female nude is a fetishized

female body, disguising the Freudian lack of the phallus in order to placate the male sexual gaze. This fetishization is necessitated by the male subject's reaction of fear/desire to the sexual “otherness” of the female body. Woman's imagined sexual lack is perceived as a threat of castration – the splitting of the centred male subject.

The definitions of the nude within art historical discourse, based upon sexual fetishization, eurocentric norms of beauty and the construction of the man/woman, culture/nature dichotomy, have foreclosed discussions of race. Similarly, the naked, defined by the social contextualization of the white female body, privileges issues of class and gender above race and colour.³

The art historical discipline has a traditional disregard for the centrality of race within colonial systems of representation. Within western art practice, race has mediated the representation of male and female bodies, mapping oppositional territories and marking imaginary boundaries between black and white.⁴ While colonial discourse has linked blackness to animalism, sexual deviance and evolutionary inferiority, whiteness has been associated with humanity, civilization and an essential superiority. Accordingly then, the categories of the nude and the naked, defined solely in terms of the white female body, are vacuous in addressing the complexity of the black woman's experience as colonial subject.

The intersection of race and sex in the black female body is the juncture where renewed discussions of the nude and the naked must begin. Black women are neither simply women nor are they simply black, rather their sex and race are inextricably bound together, combining to situate them as the ultimate “other” to the centred white male heterosexual subject within colonial discourse. Black feminisms are necessary to a revisiting of these eurocentric concepts, since, as Valerie Smith articulates, they

Figure 1. Dorothy Stevens, *Coloured Nude*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 86.4 x 76.2 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

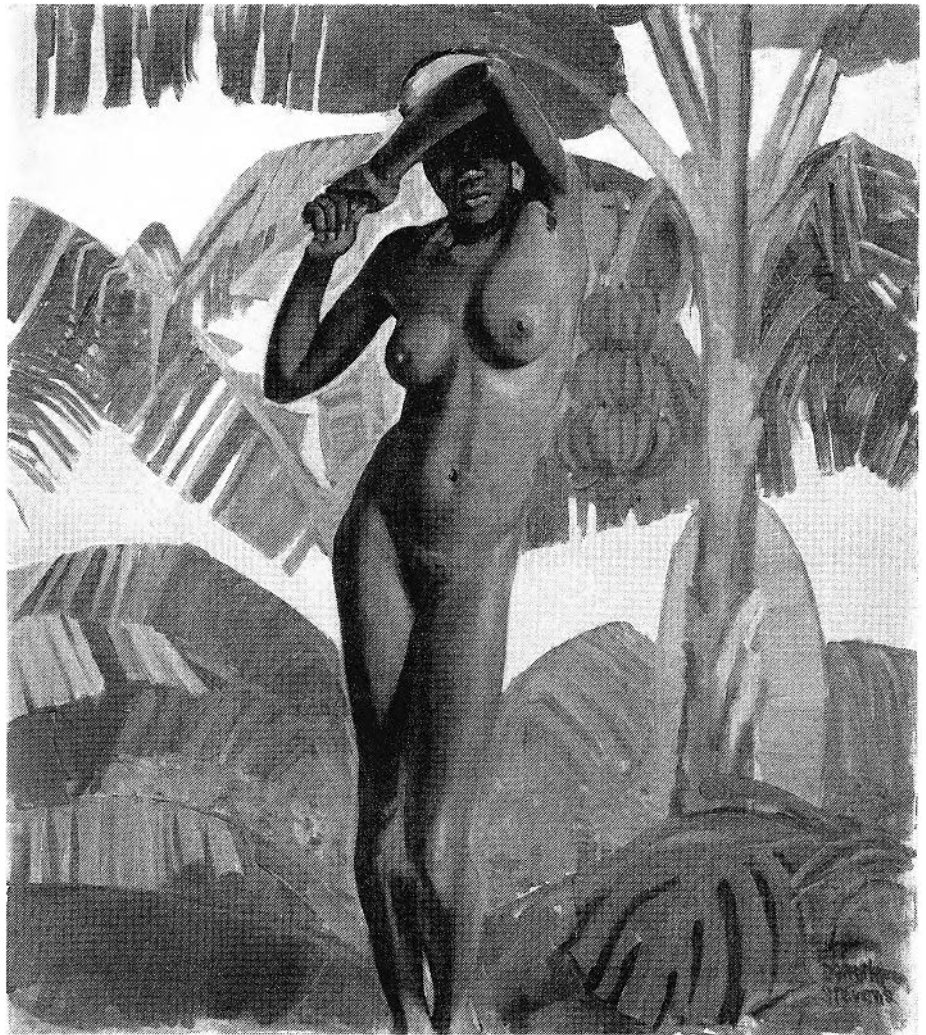
...proceed from the assumption that black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and nondiscursive practices alike because they are victims at once of sexism, racism and by extension classism, [to attempt a separation of race from sex]...erases the specificity of the black woman's experience, constituting her as the point of intersection between black men's and white women's experience.⁵

Homi K. Bhabha similarly locates the importance of race and sex within a eurocentric dynamic of colonial power. According to Bhabha, "...the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse demands an articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual."⁶

The Freudian concept of the fetish is projected into post-colonial discourse through Bhabha's theorization of the colonial stereotype as fetish. He posits that the anxiety associated with the male subject's fear/desire of the female's perceived sexual lack is replicated in the white subject by a lack of similarity in skin/race/culture. Mediated by a white lens, "Black Woman" is the result of a double fetishization which seeks a reformulation of sexual and racial otherness. Bhabha has written,

The fetish or stereotype gives access to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it.⁷

This paper seeks to address the represented black female body as doubly fetishized and historically removed from paternalistic cultural practices which protected white female sexuality. It is my position that black women, situated as both racial and sexual "other" within colonial discourse, have undergone a unique cultural re-presentation which has positioned them within a dialectical relationship with white women. The nexus of blackness and female sex



within the black female body has resulted in a complex identity which cannot be contained by the narrow eurocentric definitions of the nude and the naked within art historical discourse. Beyond the scope of either category, representations of "Black Woman" produce a slippage which reveals a simultaneity of the nude and the naked within the same body.⁸

The dialectical construction of "Black Woman" is apparent within modern Canadian art practice as a continuation of the western colonial legacy. Toronto-based artist Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude*, 1932, (fig. 1), is an example of the simultaneous presence of the nude and the naked within the represented black female body: a presence which locates the conflation of blackness and sexual pathology.

The *Evening Telegram* of Toronto was among several newspapers to give glowing praise to Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude*, "Dorothy Stevens has a certain perfection of

style which makes her work interesting ... the artist has taken the exquisitely lithe, graceful figure of a coloured girl – nude.”⁹ But while Dorothy Stevens’ overtly sexualized representation of “Black Woman” in *Coloured Nude* was being praised as an outstanding achievement in figure painting, the most innocuous contemporary white female nudes were being censored from exhibitions across Canada. This oppositional behaviour turned on the race of the female subject. Dorothy Stevens’ *Coloured Nude* is a noteworthy example of western artists’ deliberate construction of black women outside of carefully delineated social and cultural codes. Although *Coloured Nude* is a modern Canadian painting, its roots can be traced to the ancestry of slavery and colonial perceptions of blackness. An examination of *Coloured Nude* will reveal the sexual and racial displacement of black women within colonial systems of representation, the marginalization of black women as dichotomous to the paradigm of an idealized white womanhood and the inevitable inadequacy and inequity of eurocentrically defined categories of representation.

Early twentieth-century Canadian figure painters emulated established European models to validate their art within the youthful art community. This strict adherence to nineteenth-century western prototypes created a regressive artistic climate, often described as prudish.¹⁰ Throughout the twentieth century, female nudes were targeted for censorship across Canada. But this protective action was directed solely towards representations of white female bodies. As female nudes participated in the construction of notions of gender and sexuality, paintings of white women were cautiously monitored, a policing of the arbitrary divide between art and pornography to protect idealized white womanhood.

Displayed at the Art Gallery of Toronto during the 53rd annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (4-30 November 1932), *Coloured Nude* was widely praised as an outstanding achievement in figure painting. It was largely agreed that,

The skilful handling of the pose, the high quality of draughtsmanship, the rich chocolate color and its varying tones in light and shadow, combine to elevate this work to a position of first importance.¹¹

Receiving wide acclaim, Dorothy Stevens was proclaimed “fairly wicked in her coloured nude,”¹² while the painting itself was lauded as “excellently done”¹³ and “a brilliant thing, infinitely pleasing in color synthesis and composition.”¹⁴ That this overtly sexualized representation of the female body was praised rather than censored was due to the nude’s blackness.

The historical dichotomization of black and white women has positioned white woman as object/nature and black woman as animal/Nature to the centrality of the white male subject.¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins writes,

As objects, white women become creations of culture – in this case, the mind of white men – using the materials of nature – in this case, uncontrolled female sexuality. In contrast as animals Black women receive no such redeeming dose of culture and remain open to the type of exploitation visited on nature overall. Race becomes the distinguishing feature in determining the type of objectification women will encounter. Whiteness as symbolic of civilization and culture is used to separate objects from animals.¹⁶

The white female body, once submitted to the “civilizing” effects of culture, became a visualization of idealized white womanhood. Black female bodies required no such mediation; black skin, as the ultimate sign of sexual deviance, allowed overtly sexualized images to remain in the realm of art.

Accordingly, the represented black female body stands at the border between art and pornography, breaching the arbitrary boundaries of socio-sexual propriety. Within colonial discourse, blackness has afforded artists the license to invest an overdetermined sexuality in the represented body, what is offensive or pornographic for the white body being deemed natural and essential to the black.

If a painting is recognized to be an organization of signs which not merely reflect but produce meanings when read by a viewer,¹⁷ then the represented black female body in western art is a construction whose goal has been to de-womanize, and de-humanize, the black woman in order to facilitate her violation within imperialist regimes of power.

The use of allegory, nature and other forms of disguise have been central to the construction of the white female body within western artistic traditions. The absence of disguise from the black female body points to the colonial conflation of blackness and sexual pathology. The notion of disguise enters this discussion in more than one way: through the manipulation of the represented female body, as well as the presence of the imagined artist as “self” which constructs and positions the representation of the “other.” According to Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock,

Woman is present as an image but with the specific connotations of body and nature, that is passive, available, possessable, powerless. Man is absent from the image but it is his speech, his view, his position of dominance which the images signify.¹⁸

White male artists have traditionally situated themselves within their representations of woman as "other." But this practice has not been exclusive to white men. In the same way that artists like Paul Gauguin had projected an active, masculine artistic and sexual identity onto his depictions of Tahitian women, Dorothy Stevens projected an idealized white womanhood onto her representation of the black woman in *Coloured Nude*. Inasmuch as *Coloured Nude* locates a stereotypical black female identity, it also points to an idealized white womanhood, since ultimately, representations of the "other" always seek to locate the self.

Historically, men have represented "Woman" in terms of her difference, her not-man, not-phallus, located within the perception of lack and otherness.¹⁹ However, the represented black female body not only suffers a not-man and not-phallus construction, but also a not-woman and not-white displacement.

Although, white women have been represented as sexual objects for the male heterosexual gaze within western art, this construction traditionally strove to contain the white body within the realm of the beautiful. The beauty of the nude was measured by the artist's control over the female body. Lynda Nead writes that,

... one of the principle goals ... has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body ... to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other.²⁰

Thus, the white female nude, securely positioned within the realm of the beautiful, was defined by the control and limitedness of the woman as contained matter, civilized nature and restricted sexuality. The female body became the female nude through the power of the artist to discipline the eye of the viewer.

Oppositionally, representations of black women's sexuality, perceived as pathological, existed within the realm of the sublime. The Kantian notion of the sublime is characterized by the unbound, uncontrolled and limitless nature of the represented subject. Within western artistic traditions, obscenity and violence, otherwise defined as pornographic or unaesthetic, were made palatable and could be enjoyed as a valid form of cultural expression within the realm of the sublime. In this way, the sublime was marked by a powerful and violent kinetic viewing experience. Positioned within this realm, the representations of the black female body as beyond containment and limitless resulted in deliberately exoticized, sexualized and animalized images.

This is not to say that representations of white women as naked were not also experienced as the sublime. Manet's

Olympia (1863) is a fitting example of the white female naked and its negative reception. *Olympia's* notoriously negative reception was in part due to the public perception of her social specificity as offensive. The woman represented was to be read as an individual, her class and context positioned her as a "real" woman. Her contextualization, then, is what made her naked and thus unpalatable. She was seen as uncontrollable, pushing beyond her bodily boundaries. To the viewing public of nineteenth-century Paris, she was not beautiful. A courtesan removed from her allegorical disguise, she walked the tightrope between art and pornography.

Adding to the unsettling nature of *Olympia* was the presence of the black female servant. Within western art, the representation of black and white women in the same frame has historically denoted the transference of a sinister "black" sexuality onto the purity of the white woman. Manet's black maid is a marker of the carnality and filth of the white prostitute with which she is juxtaposed. As such, *Olympia* spoke to the racist belief in the sexual deviance of all black women.²¹

But the rigorous objections to *Olympia* were also an acknowledgement of "her unashamed awareness of the spectator's desire."²² Quite simply, *Olympia's* gaze thwarted the tradition of the voyeuristic male viewer. Equally disruptive was Manet's representation of a woman as actively aware of, and in control of (hand over vagina), her own sexuality.

Olympia re-directs the viewers' gaze outward; at once the watcher and the watched. Revealing a knowledge of her sexuality, *Olympia* was a prostitute consciously controlling the economic value of her sexuality. Although her body is for sale, she would decide when and if the exchange took place. By controlling this knowledge and by extension her body, *Olympia* shatters the elaborately constructed artifice of the courtesan as Desire.²³

Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude* displays the unbound quality of the sublime, but not in the same way as *Olympia*. While *Olympia* was sublime in her ugliness – her "look was a provocation and her body [was] laid out for inspection at the morgue"²⁴ – the represented black female body in *Coloured Nude* was sublime as it embodied a limitless sense of Nature through an overt sexualization. It is in this way that the represented black female body, experienced as the sublime, is equated with pornography. According to Patricia Hill Collins,

The treatment of Black women's bodies ... may be the foundation upon which contemporary pornography as the representation of women's objectification, domination, and control is based.²⁵

The female body within western art has traditionally been constructed through an orchestration of historically bound signs which arbitrarily position that body as art or pornography. It is this careful play of presence and absence which has located the female body as beautiful or sublime. Western artists have used several tropes to re-present the female body, among them: 1) the manipulation of body hair, 2) the positioning of the body within its environment, and 3) the construction and activity of the body, face and gaze. But in all cases these tropes have been applied oppositionally to black and white female bodies.

The selective presence and absence of hair in *Coloured Nude* is a reflection of the black woman's positioning within the realm of the sublime in western art, as it is in direct opposition to the traditional representation of white female bodies. The exclusion of pubic hair from representations of white female bodies, though relinquished by many European artists in the modern era, was still consistently practiced by Canadian artists well into the twentieth century. However, while the black woman in *Coloured Nude* is represented with pubic hair, contemporary white female nudes were depicted without, or carefully positioned to delete this presence.²⁶ According to Charles Bernheimer,

The convention of omitting female body hair from the painted image ... contributes to the representation of female submission by eliminating the hint of animal passion and physical desire suggested by hairy growth.²⁷

In this way the presence of body hair on the black woman signifies an animal sexuality and carnal desire. The hair also serves to disqualify black women from the eurocentric category of Woman since, "pubic hair ... may hide the lack of the phallus but is somehow too close to being that lack, which is why it cannot be shown."²⁸ Fittingly, the type of hair that has been historically present for its compliance with the fetishizing gaze is absent from *Coloured Nude*: the hair of the head, conspicuously bound within a red scarf. White female nudes have traditionally been painted with a profusion of tresses which envelope the body. This phallic device has been used to calm the male fear of castration invoked by the perception of female sexual lack. Absent from the black woman, this lack declares her "otherness" through a concealment of black woman's difference to the idealized state of white woman's beauty.

Furthermore, the phallic nature of the white woman's hair is something that cannot be naturally duplicated by many black women. The tight, curly, kinky texture of black hair is not conducive to free-flowing movement. The racism of this fetishistic site is revealed as it maps the boundaries of eurocentric beauty which, outside of artistic license

(or the science of modern hair salons), remains unattainable to the black woman.²⁹

In *Coloured Nude* the black woman's positioning *on*, as opposed to *within*, the landscape is also indicative of her uncontrolled, sublime nature. White female nudes have been historically represented harmoniously *within* the landscape as Woman *in* nature. Constructed as metaphors for nature, white women were often modelled by the artist with the same stylistic method as the rocks or trees that surrounded them. This practice emphasized the patriarchal notion of women as natural beings, matter to be formed by male cultural activity.

Historically, western thought has feminized nature, constituting it as dichotomous to a masculinized culture. According to Nicholas Green, "In the process, both masculinity and femininity were worked up and fixed through a series of parallel identifications and oppositions."³⁰ White women were believed to be physiologically closer to nature, the implication being that they were pure, instinctive and irrational. White men, on the other hand, were perceived as rational and intellectual.

Within this discourse, culture, as the masculine realm, controlled nature, the feminine realm. Just as men were capable of civilizing and regulating nature, women were perceived as yet another natural bastion for men to conquer, mould and govern. The artistic motif of the white woman in nature locates Woman as a sexualized extension of the natural world, situating white female sexuality as natural, pure and, above all, within the control of the civilizing influence of white men. In this way, nature or Woman is inscribed and defined by the masculine "genius" operating within the cultural realm.

The tradition of white woman's depiction as harmonious with nature is continued in Canadian painting by artists like Edwin Holgate. In his *Nude in a Landscape*, ca. 1930, (fig. 2) the represented white woman becomes a metaphor for the land, symbolizing male dominance over the natural realm. Modelled with the same technique as the landscape, the inscription of her body echoes the delineation of the land she inhabits. She is represented as peaceful and comfortable within her environment.

Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude* participates in the oppositional positioning of black female sexuality as uncontained Nature. In contrast to the tradition of white female nudes, the body in Stevens' *Coloured Nude* is sharply foregrounded as woman *beyond* nature. The represented black female body is not within the landscape and does not act as a complimentary extension of the landscape. Rather, the stage-like placement of the black woman's body on this "faked tropical landscape," plays up the colonial perception

Figure 2. Edwin Holgate, *Nude in a Landscape*, ca. 1930. Oil on canvas, 73.1 x 92.3 cm, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



of black female sexuality as beyond “natural” limits. The represented black body is not within nature but separated from it. “Black Woman” is constructed as sexual spectacle for the white viewer.

In terms of its construction, the body of the represented black woman in *Coloured Nude* also deviates from artistic tradition. In pose, the black woman in *Coloured Nude* opens up her body to the sexual gaze by lifting her clasped hands above her head, an act which reveals her breasts as it simultaneously creates the seductive contour which runs from head to ankle. This gesture defies gravity in order that, paradoxically, the viewer may “feel” the weight of the enlarged, pendant breasts.

Deliberately sexual, the pose highlights the rounded contours of the female form. Similar to Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *Slave Sale at Rome*, ca.1884, and the reverse of his *Roman Slave Market*, ca.1884, this pose has been handed down

through western artistic discourse within the realm of the female nude as a symbol of the availability of saleable flesh.³¹ In this way the body positioning of the black woman invites the sexual gaze as it simultaneously evokes the historical power dynamics of master/slave, owner/commodity within European and North American slave practice. This gaze transcends mere vision, registering a physicality as the viewer is positioned to sample and handle the represented body as though provided with tactile evidence of the black female body.³² This pose also creates a centred, safe, distant and privileged space for the viewer from which to observe the “other.” Kenneth Little explains that,

Having an experience of the exotic other ... is a matter of controlling the otherwise heterogeneous world “out there” by gaining a vantage point and forming a perspective in order to make sense of what one sees. It ... is a matter of “standing back” to take a look and to extend

and control the length of the gaze that today produces a technical kind of certainty as reliable already-made spectacle.³³

This authoritative vantage point is also constructed through a manipulation of the gaze and face of the represented black woman. The black woman in *Coloured Nude* invites a voyeuristic gaze, her closed eyes, cast in shadow, allow the viewer the freedom to examine her body without fear of confrontation. Unlike Manet's *Olympia*, she is only the watched, not the watcher. Because the black female is depicted in a standing pose, the closed eyes do not connote sleep as a state of unconsciousness and thus guiltlessness. Rather this deliberate self-blinding yields the privilege of undisturbed sexual pleasure to the viewer. In this way the black female is made culpable in her solicitation of the sexual gaze both through sexualized pose and a self-inflicted "blinding."

The shadow cast across the face of the woman in *Coloured Nude* dismisses the possibility of specificity. The woman depicted is not an individual but stands for "Black Woman." In this way, the generality of the face connotes a nude since, "In art, the face...determines whether the body portrayed is perceived in universal terms, or as that of a specific individual."³⁴ The black female body in art was nude because she was constructed as a generalized vision to represent all black women in a way that "transcends historical and social existence, and is a kind of cultural disguise."³⁵

The construction of "Black Woman" situates the iconic potential of visual representation through which, according to Sander Gilman, individuality is dissolved by, "the use of a model which synthesizes our perception of the uniformity of the groups into a convincing homogenous image."³⁶ The represented black woman in *Coloured Nude* is an icon, the individual realities of black women being overridden by an incessant mythologization through the negative associations with gender, sex and race. She represents "Black Woman" as she is, according to Gilman, "composed of fragments of the real world, perceived through the ideological bias of the observer [artist]."³⁷

Contrary to the construction of the black female body, the western tradition of the white female nude has historically developed many devices to locate the source of the sexual gaze within the male viewer. In this way, the white female, though read as sexual object, is released from all responsibility for the origination of the sexual gaze. In particular, there are three deliberate devices which have been employed to depict the white female nude as sexually innocent: 1) sleep/death, 2) environmental distraction, and 3) allegory.

Within early modernism, woman has been historically constructed as passive, an act which invites voyeurism by allowing an unimpeded access to the female body. Gill Saunders notes that,

Consequently a common device in representations of the nude female is to show her sleeping ... Alternatively, she may avert her gaze or hide her eyes or turn away from the viewer so that her face is not seen.³⁸

This device preserves the "innocence" of the female by externalizing the origin of the sexual gaze. Randolph Hewton's *Sleeping Woman*, ca. 1929 (fig. 3), is representative of the modern Canadian figure painter's attachment to these traditional devices. A sleeping woman, unaware of her bodily appearance and the viewer's presence, cannot be purposefully seductive or flirtatious. She is not controlling an active sexuality and is therefore not guilty of immorality.

This motif is linked to the late nineteenth-century romanticized vision of woman as invalid within bourgeois culture. A sickly woman was fashionable, as she epitomized feminine passivity and inactivity. But she also represented virtuous sacrifice for love, since according to Bram Dijkstra, a woman's death served as "a validation of the warm life of masculine achievement."³⁹ Since women who displayed healthy vigour or activity were deemed improper and masculine, many women deliberately cultivated an appropriately sickly and "feminine" appearance. Upper-class white women shunned the outdoors to avoid activity and sunshine, refraining from participating in athletic events or exhibiting attributes that were coded as masculine. Meanwhile, starvation was employed to achieve the appropriately frail disposition.

This "cult of invalidism" positioned frailty and sickness as signs of femininity, delicacy and breeding. It is not surprising that the fairy-tale of *Sleeping Beauty* was popular within this climate as it represents woman, preserved in a virginal state within a prison of a sleep/death. Socially, a man with an invalid wife was recognized as being able to support "helpless elegance." According to Dijkstra,

... death as the ideal state of submissive womanhood had become such a staple of the later nineteenth-century imagination that many males could barely look upon a sleeping woman without imagining her to be virtuously dead.⁴⁰

The proliferation of paintings of sick, dead and sleeping white women locate an economic and racial privilege. In the nineteenth century, only women of a certain class and race had the luxury of choosing not to eat or labour for purely aesthetic purposes. This indulgence was not ex-

Figure 3. Randolph Hewton, *Sleeping Woman*, ca. 1929. Oil on canvas, 102.0 x 153.0 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



tended to black women, still trapped within slavery or the slave reality. Thus, white bourgeois women represented passive sensuality that enabled the male gaze as it preserved female virtue and innocence for the white woman.

The meanings produced served to perpetuate stereotypes of women as submissive and inactive in order to enforce control over women's sexuality and thereby her value within kinship exchange and as reproducer. As Gill Saunders writes,

[u]ncontrolled female sexuality is seen as bad because it threatens the foundation of male dominance (male ownership of women is even now enshrined in many of our laws and judicial attitudes), and so women have been consistently presented, in words and images, as innately passive.⁴¹

But at the same time, women's passivity makes them susceptible to the male displacement of sexual guilt back onto female bodies since "their nakedness is regarded as a culpable incitement to male lust ... 'the woman tempted me'."⁴² Thus, the sleeping motif serves three main purposes: the enabling of the voyeuristic male gaze, the preservation of

white female sexuality as "innocent" and the displacement of male sexual guilt to the female source.

Edgar Degas is famous for his use of environmental distractions frequently used to frame his images of women within the domestic sphere. Degas' women, busy at their toilette with bent heads and hair in face, are not responsible for the viewer's gaze, as they are unaware of its existence. This aversion, minimization or exclusion of the female face makes individuality impossible and thereby creates a generality which protects white female identity. It is in this way that the white woman could appear chaste, pure and devoid of sexual knowledge and intention while still allowing the male viewer the sexual enjoyment of her body.

Though Degas' nudes depart from the traditional construction of contrived sexuality, debunking the academic nude, they actually reinforce the tradition of voyeurism. According to Saunders, Degas' nudes

... resist display, turn their backs, seem unaware of the possibility of observation, unlike the traditional nude who may close her eyes or turn her head but yet manage to display her body to advantage for the viewer to enjoy.⁴³

The poses seem unposed, active and imperfect, often deleting breasts and genitalia as the traditional focus of the female nude. But this absorbed activity enables the voyeuristic gaze, making the viewer a spy privy to a woman's private acts.

This elimination of traditional sites of female sexuality creates a feeling of detachment and invasiveness. The gaze is that of a viewer who cannot quite gain total enjoyment from what is being seen. After all, a voyeur does not get the best seat in the house. The limited and distorting perspectives, created by the abridged access, performs an erasure or minimization of the white female sexuality represented. The traditional signs of female sexual availability are deleted, thereby preserving the sanctity and autonomy of the represented figure.

The practice of depicting the white female nude as asleep or unaware has historically been coupled with allegory. The white female nude's *raison d'être* within the realm of the beautiful was allegorical or mythological. Parker and Pollock demonstrate how

[i]n nineteenth-century Salon art the *white* female nude appeared in many guises, as nymph asleep in woodland glades, as Venus raised upon the waves, as shipwrecked and unconscious queen⁴⁴ [italics mine]

These disguises kept representations of white women contained within the realm of art, releasing them from all sexual responsibility for the scopophilic gaze of the male viewer. For it was not the specificity of a "real" woman which allowed the sexual gaze but Venus, a sea-nymph, or another other-worldly creature deliberately removed from reality.

Historically, women have been perceived as empty vessels to be filled up with male thought and fantasy in order to create "iconic representations for veneration or emulation."⁴⁵ The female body, perceived as malleable, was to be invested with male desires. Because these images were iconic, their investment with sexually charged attributes was not problematic, since an allegory is not a real woman but the embodiment of male fantasy.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, as one of the pioneers of the sexualized white female nude, used allegory to provide the male viewer of the early nineteenth century with the opportunity to indulge in the voyeuristic pleasure of the uncontested male sexual gaze. This was a carefully constructed imagery which, according to Beatrice Farwell, remained strictly within the boundaries of propriety since

... Ingres' nude seems somehow to have submitted, in her defenseless nudity, to a superior will. The sin involved is not that of the maiden, but rather that of the fantasizing mind that stripped her.⁴⁶

The black woman, already deemed sexually insatiable

and pathologically deviant, needed no disguise to mediate her sexualization within the realm of the nude. Her disguise was the colour of her skin. "Blackness" as a marker of difference and inferiority released western artists from all obligations to contain the sexuality, the Nature, of the black female in representation. Since black women were positioned within colonial discourse as the source of sexual pathology,⁴⁷ it was not improper for the western artist to portray the undisguised black female body as soliciting the sexual gaze of the male viewer. Contrarily, any such image of the white female would have crossed out of fine arts and into the realm of pornography.⁴⁸ The social contextualization of the subject determined what was considered obscene and for whom. For the black woman, highly sexualized representations in art were accepted as "truthful" depictions of an essential inferiority.

The black female body in art has been represented with a fetishizing vision. If the fetishized nude is "an extreme example of the female body distorted for male fantasy and gratification,"⁴⁹ then the black female body in art is the ultimate example. The black female body defies the white male subject's desire for a singular subject of "pure" origin in two ways: firstly, through a sexual "otherness" as woman, and secondly through a racial and colour "otherness" as black. It is the combined power of these two markers of social location which has enabled western artists to represent black women at the margins of societal boundaries of propriety.

Thus, Canadian artist Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude* is indicative of the historical representation of black women as both nude and the naked: nude in its stereotypical generalization and naked in its unbound sublime sexualization. As has been demonstrated, there are some central differences in the construction of Dorothy Stevens' *Coloured Nude* which would, in the white female body, have been unacceptable.

The entire body of the black woman has become a fetish; the represented black female body is not merely fetishized but fetish. In her double lack of male sex and white skin, the black woman is the quintessential "other." Irremediably removed from the paradigm of white manhood or even the secondary categories of white womanhood or black manhood, her entire bodily presence is a constant reminder of her perceived lack and as such was manipulated to remove the threat of her difference.

It is in this way that the fetish can be perceived in the traditional Freudian sense as a lack of the phallus but also in the sense of a lack of similar skin/race/culture, within the concept of the colonial stereotype as fetish proposed by Homi K. Bhabha. The black woman in *Coloured Nude* is a fetish, in that

[t]he fetish or stereotype gives access to an "identity" which is predicated ... on mastery and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it ... The scene of fetishism is also the scene of reaction and repetition of primal fantasy – the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division.⁵⁰

Representations of the black women's bodies in western art have produced and perpetuated the colonial ideals historically embodying the dichotomous standards created for white and black women. Though colonial stereotypes were developed simultaneously across all disciplinary boundaries in western thought and culture, it is art that has left what is perhaps the most naturalized evidence of the west's deliberate construction of black people as essentially inferior. This naturalization has been effected through the "silence" of visual language, which within western art-historical discourse has been romanticized as objective and universal.

The nude and the naked, posited as universal art-historical categories, are specific to class, race, sex, gender, age, sexual orientation and all other markers of social specificity. The black woman's identity, deliberately represented as inferior within racist paradigms by white artists, cannot simply be read within the confines of an exclusive language developed by white scholars for the white female body. Rather the legacy of the oppression and violation of black women due to the intersection of race and sex must be central in our reading. It is in this way that Homi K. Bhabha believes that

... the point of intervention [will] shift from the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible [and plausible] through stereotypical discourse.⁵¹

Art is a powerful social tool that conditions our vision of ourselves and each other. Historically, western artists have used oppositional representations of black and white people to establish boundaries, mapping out territories for the self and the "other." This article is an attempt to situate the manifestation of colonial discourse within visual processes as they were, and are to this day, active in the representation of black women.

Notes

- 1 These concepts, first made popular by Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York, 1957), have subsequently been extensively developed within art historical discourse.
- 2 Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting*

1830-1908 (Cambridge, 1990), 14.

- 3 T.J. Clark's discussion of the female body as nude and naked in the text "Olympia's Choice," *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London, 1985) is based primarily on issues of class. Clark reads Olympia's nakedness as a result of her social specificity as a prostitute, failing to connect the presence of the black maid with Olympia's sexualization. While Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, XII (1985), 204-42, proposes that the western tradition of depicting black and white women in the same frame was enacted to produce a projection of the black woman's deviant sexuality onto the "pure" white body, Clark reads the presence of the black woman as a marker of Olympia's class within the social hierarchy of prostitution.
- 4 I shall not expand this discussion in terms of the construction of black male bodies. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the importance and "inter-connectedness" of this project to my study. A recent American exhibition and publication pursues this very case. See Thelma Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, 1994).
- 5 Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'," *Changing Our Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (London, 1989), 47.
- 6 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (New York, 1990), 72.
- 7 Bhabha, "The Other Question," 80.
- 8 Charmaine Nelson "Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1995.
- 9 "New Names on Roster of Artists whose Work Academy has Accepted" *The Evening Telegram*, Toronto, 5 November 1932, 14.
- 10 See Bertram Brooker, "Nudes and Prudes," *Open House*, ed. William Arthur Deacon and Wilfred Reeves (Ottawa, 1931), 93-106; Louis Muhlstock, "An Excess of Prudery," *Canadian Art*, V, no. 2 (Christmas-New Year, 1947-48), 75-79.
- 11 "The Royal Canadian Academy," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (December 1932), 23.
- 12 Augustus Bridle, "Variety and Ability Mark R.C.A. Display," *Toronto Star*, 4 November 1932, 3.
- 13 "Horrors and Experiments Deck Halls of R.C.A. Show," *The Telegram*, Toronto, 4 November 1932, 5.
- 14 Pearl McCarthy, "Royal Academy Exhibition is Broadly Representative," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 4 November 1932, 3.
- 15 This "object" and "animal" distinction is proposed by Alice Walker in "Coming Apart," *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (New York, 1982), 52.
- 16 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Con-*

- sciousness and the Politics of Empowerment (New York, 1991), 170.
- 17 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London, 1981), 119.
 - 18 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 116.
 - 19 Liam Hudson, *Bodies of Knowledge: The Psychological Significance of the Nude in Art* (London, 1982), 17.
 - 20 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London, 1991), 6.
 - 21 This was made obvious in the newspaper caricatures that were published of *Olympia*. Several offensive depictions represented the black maid as a "Mammy," emphasizing her size and burlesquing her features. In a 1901 pencil sketch, Pablo Picasso went even further, reconstituting *Olympia* as an unclothed black woman with an exaggerated Hottentot physiognomy, reclining on a bed between two naked white males.
 - 22 Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (Cambridge, 1989), 25.
 - 23 The Courtesan as Desire was a disguise meant to facilitate male participation within the sex trade. Seductive, submissive and controlled, traditional images of white female nudes sought to conceal the social, moral and physical dangers of prostitution. *Olympia* openly declared her status and purpose within the Parisian demi-monde. She did not participate in the fantasy. Therefore, she could not be passively consumed as complacent object by the viewing public.
 - 24 Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 133.
 - 25 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 168.
 - 26 See Edwin Holgate's *Nude in a Landscape*, ca. 1930, National Gallery of Canada (fig. 2), and Randolph Hewton's *Sleeping Woman*, ca. 1929, National Gallery of Canada (fig. 3).
 - 27 Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute* (Cambridge, 1989), 105.
 - 28 Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 136.
 - 29 The universalizing discourse of psychoanalysis reveals a eurocentric and patriarchal ideological framework. While this bias makes psychoanalysis problematic, it remains a useful tool in the study of colonial perceptions of identity and identity construction.
 - 30 Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester, 1990), 147.
 - 31 See, for example, Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York, 1989) 44-45.
 - 32 This pose evokes memories of the violation suffered by black women within the practice of slave auctions. Displayed naked in public spaces, black women's sexuality warranted no proprietary concern. What was private and sacred for the white woman was deemed public and profane for the black. The burden of sustaining the slave population firmly on their shoulders, black women were regarded and handled like breeding animals. Publicly stripped and examined for markers of sexual fertility, they often suffered horrendous sexual violation during forced gynecological examinations attended by male "medical professionals" and potential buyers.
 - 33 Kenneth Little, "On Safari: The Visual Politics of a Tourist Representation," *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Toronto, 1991) 157.
 - 34 Hudson, *Bodies of Knowledge*, 13.
 - 35 Nead, *The Female Nude*, 16.
 - 36 Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 204.
 - 37 Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 204.
 - 38 Saunders, *The Nude*, 24.
 - 39 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siecle Culture* (Oxford, 1986), 28.
 - 40 Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 60.
 - 41 Saunders, *The Nude*, 22.
 - 42 Saunders, *The Nude*, 23.
 - 43 Saunders, *The Nude*, 25.
 - 44 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 116.
 - 45 Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens* (New York, 1985), 82.
 - 46 Beatrice Farwell, *Manet and the Nude: A Study in Iconography in the Second Empire* (New York, 1981), 37.
 - 47 Human sciences in the west have historically sought to locate black women as a source of sexual pathology. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, countless "scientific" studies were performed on black women's bodies. Autopsies compared sexual organs and body structures to the uncontested paradigm of white women in a effort to position black people as inferior and their sexuality as biologically inferior and animalistic.
 - 48 Here, for example, I propose that, if Manet had placed a look of invitation rather than confrontation on the face of *Olympia*, the painting would have been utterly dismissed as pornographic. It was *Olympia's* ambivalent expression which saved the painting from this fate.
 - 49 Saunders, *The Nude*, 72.
 - 50 Bhabha, "The Other Question," 80.
 - 51 Bhabha, "The Other Question," 71.