

# **Lorraine O'Grady's "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity"**

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Seminar paper on a need for subjectivity and agency to restore critical judgement in the face of knowledge acquisition and production that are compromised forms of power relations. Studio Art, UC Irvine, 2005.

It is no overstatement to say that the greatest barrier I/we face in winning back the questioning subject position is the West's continuing tradition of binary, either/or logic, a philosophic system that defines the body in opposition to the mind. Binaristic thought persists even in those contemporary disciplines to which black artists and theoreticians must look for allies.

One of the things Lorraine O'Grady's "Olympia's Maid" brought home was the almost infinite applicability of the categorical splits that are and have been nearly determinative of the roles played by knowledge and judgment in the constitution of the West. Within Western dialectics the goal seems to be to both unify and differentiate through dichotomy: mind/body, nature/culture, man/women, etc. Of course, the position of the categories can be switched to in turn constitute a new power formation such as feminism (for binarism is undeniably a codification of power that seems to have mythological roots). But feminism can in turn be modified and further divided by other categories like class and race. In relation to feminism, for example, racial signifiers can take on either a privileged or slighted position. To the extent that the modified structure becomes inclusive of further differentiation, new categories are apt to become routinized through institutionalization. Figuring the ratio of rationality becomes synonymous with the process of professing knowledge and, indeed, another dichotomy comes into play—

professional/amateur—that in turn establishes another power relationship.

It is an understatement to call this Western form of knowledge production and profession insidious since it is considered to be the coherent way to map the world. And yet, as O'Grady's article abundantly points out, the map, despite the ontological grammar that either/or thinking implies, is not the world; the relation of the two, though overlapping, is not a form of binarism. Even when knowledge is represented as the exercise of rationality "in an allegedly postmodern world," in a statement such as O'Grady's "white woman is what woman is: not-white is what she had better not be," we see that assumed knowledge of "IS" becomes something more than a cultural projection that reduces judgment to a form of stereotypical rehearsal. It is a rhetorical form of prejudice or prejudgment that, in actuality, forecloses on the power to perform self-critical awareness.

What strikes me as extraordinarily important about O'Grady's article is that it acts self-critically in terms of the contemporary standards of critique itself, namely, postmodernism. However filtered through variations such as feminism or postcolonialism, the theoretical standards of critique designed to cast ironic light on, for example, the nature of culture, are themselves always already loaded with binarisms (such as theory/practice) that are set up to divide and conquer. Even Gayatri Spivak is uncomfortably close to invoking a kind of ideal/real dichotomy as a form of reasoning which partakes of essentialist dichotomies "from time to time" precisely because they inform her (an avowed deconstructionist theorist and critic) of the limits of the coherence of categorical logic: "There is, for example, the strategic choice of a genitalist essentialism in antisexist work today. How this relates to all the other work I'm talking about, I don't know, but my search is not a search for coherence."

The contradictions of the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of critical reason cannot be avoided. Therefore, it becomes all the more imperative for active and proactive judgment to regard its own basis in knowledge with suspicion, and this suspicion carries over from the relation of knowledge

and judgment to notions of rationality and justice (ethics). The exercise of such suspicion leads to "inherent dilemmas" and inconsistencies. From the viewpoint of binary power relations such inconsistencies can be viewed as a sign of weakness. Yet, weakness in terms of binary dialectics is the correlate of power. So, if rationality is evaluated from a position of weakness it is also evaluated from a strategic (not purely rational) stance; it cannot be shielded from the purpose and use of rationality as a form of provisional negotiation of the very relation of knowledge and power that inherently references irresolvable contradiction which, in this article, is primarily signified through gender and racial difference.

And, contrary to repetition of rationality brought to its limits through irony (an academic diversion), the article suggests the reclamation of agency to restore critical judgment in relation to knowledge as received. Awareness of the constitution of the subjective position through the acquisition of knowledge calls for what might be termed a double consciousness, one which takes into account the divisions that [the] structure of knowledge brings to judgment, but uses these divisions as distinctions that relate in both an abstract and concrete way beyond (political) power struggle. The beyond is potentially realized as a function of art. The asymmetrical power relations of the dichotomies that knowledge brings to the fore are heightened in art for the very reason that power relations are multiplied. There is then the perception that subjectivity is just as much a vehicle of politicalization as power relations are a vehicle for testing the limits of the unconscious, both the lyrical and social. ("The most interesting social flashpoint is always the one that triggers the most unexpected and suggestive psychic response.")

What is suggested is that art is a kind of unknowing. When agency has "broken" theory and becomes indebted to the derivation and performance of making and reshaping one's own social and cultural constructs, the art of unknowing can be significantly aligned with an extension of rationality conceived as an imaginative construct that seeks to come to terms with the complexity of "lived realities" which cannot be neatly mapped through binary categories. In relation to such lived realities, logical inconsistency or even apparent incoherence is not a sign

of lack of understanding but rather a provocation to the imagination to attempt to come to grips with terms and contexts that exceed the stereotypical reframing of phenomenon that cut across personal and social categories.

Far from relinquishing the role of the imagination to either Romantic notions of isolated subjectivity or Classical notions of mimetic representation, the role that art plays is one of reinstating the histories of power relations as they unfold in all their complexity, before those who recognize their own complicity in the constitution of those power relations and the potential reshaping of their own asymmetries, in a way that profoundly envisions inherent injustices. Open to provisional remedies that are in constant need of revision, the contemporary artist is obliged to take hold of that double consciousness, of difference and incommensurability, thereby reformulating the image of knowledge as a dynamic un-position, a paradoxical position in which hope is vested in the un-power of the unexpected relevance of more robust renderings of premonitions of the present.