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WE ARE ROSES FROM OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS: BLACK FEMINIST VISUALITY IN  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ART

A Dissertation Presented

by

KELLI MORGAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2017

W.E.B. DuBois Department of Afro-American Studies

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WE ARE ROSES FROM OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS: BLACK FEMINIST VISUALITY IN  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ART

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KELLI MORGAN

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Amilcar Shabazz, Chair  
W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

## DEDICATION

For the women through whose gardens I learned to grow my own: My mother, Marlene Smith, sister Traci Steele, grandmother Emma McCarty, and my aunts Stella Lee McCarty and Jocey Morgan Major. For the men who encouraged me to fly: My father, Augustus Morgan and grandfather, Foy McCarty. And for my love, who told me to “hold my own hand,” my nephew, Argent Warren Steele, Jr.

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## ABSTRACT

### WE ARE ROSES FROM OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS: BLACK FEMINIST VISUALITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ART

SEPTEMBER 2017

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Directed by: Professor Manisha Sinha

*We Are Roses From Our Mothers' Gardens* posits that in differing historical periods African American women visual artists employed various media and create from individual political thoughts, intellectual views, and aesthetic interests to emphasize the innate unification of a Black woman's race, gender, sexuality, class, and selfhood and how this multifaceted dynamic of Black women's identity and material reality produces a unique, multilayered form of oppression experienced only by Black women. Their diverse expressions of multilayered, figurative works acknowledge and address how the synthesis of racism, sexism, and patriarchy has been both mercurial and fixed throughout Black women's existence in the United States. Thus, the dissertation argues that multilayered, figurative works of art by African American women artists are connected across time through *Black feminist visuality*, a creative imaging of Black women's self-making, autonomy, subjectivity, and personal empowerment that allows them to transcend the distorted, mythological constructions of Black female identity concretized within western visual culture as it reveals the functions of western culture's racist visuality and rejects its subjugation of Black women's identity formation. Its sub-theory of *visible-aggregation* illustrates how *Black feminist visuality* exists among African American women artists as a shared

self-defined standpoint of representing Black women's identity and material reality in western visual art. Through a close reading of works by Sojourner Truth, Edmonia Lewis, Elizabeth Catlett, and Kara Walker the project demonstrates how African American women artists utilize *visible-aggregation* to express *Black feminist visuality* through multilayered, figurative art forms that exist as optical illustrations of Black feminism in the western visual realm.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

“No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women’s lives.”

--- The Combahee River Collective, 1977

It is well known that the theoretical basis of Black feminism emphasizes the multilayered dynamic unique to Black women’s material reality and oppression. Throughout the nineteenth century Black women employed the novel, essay, short story, poem, quilt, podium and the photograph to stress that Black women have always “. . . shared [an] awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique.”<sup>1</sup>

This commitment to revealing the complexities of Black women’s existence continued into the twentieth century, advancing of course with the Black Feminist movement through the 1980’s and 1990’s. Again, a movement concentrated primarily on Black women’s writing, women such as Angela Davis, Deborah Gray White, Alice Walker, Audrey Lorde, Paula Giddings, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Toni Morrison were among the growing numbers of Black women intellectuals who were dedicating their professional lives to resurrecting and developing Black women’s historical and literary narratives. Beginning with a retrieval of African American women and their various experiences from the discarded annals of American history, Black feminist scholars in the late-twentieth century were recovering and echoing their nineteenth and early-twentieth century predecessors. Their analyses of literature, oral history, music, fiction, and poetry by Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, Anna Julia

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<sup>1</sup> Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, with a foreword by Barbara Smith, (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1986), 10.

Cooper, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCloud Bethune, Bessie Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, and many others demonstrated that an intellectual tradition among Black women in the United States did indeed exist and it centered notions of Black women's self-definition, self-valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, change, and personal empowerment,<sup>2</sup> which were also key components of Black women's culture. Their investigations and analyses of how both intellectual and working class African American women express these ideas established Black feminism as a legitimate epistemology and remain as the bedrocks of contemporary Black feminist thought.

The core of twentieth-century Black feminist thought is fraught with discussions of African American women's resistance to racist mythologies regarding Black female corporeality communicated largely through western society's spurious iconography of Black female identity. Nevertheless, when discussing issues regarding imagery, representation, race, and gender, much of this scholarship hesitates to link African American women's intellectual and cultural traditions of self-definition, self-valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, change, and personal empowerment to the essential factors of vision, visibility, and figurative portrayals of Black womanhood by African American women visual artists. Though the existing body of literature that examines the history of African American women's art making and issues of representation is not vast, scholars and curators dedicated to this subject have deftly illustrated that from the nineteenth century to the present, African American women creating from various backgrounds and across a myriad of styles and mediums have

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 112-121.



consistently produced works to confront and reject stereotypical representations of Black women.<sup>3</sup> In relation to Black feminist ideology, this commitment among African American women artists to challenge oppression in western visual culture represents a form of what Patricia Hill Collins calls Black women's shared "self-defined standpoint" of resistance. Explaining how African American women's resistance to oppression in a broader sense exists as a collective decision, Collins argues "the long-term and widely shared resistance among African American women can only have been sustained by an enduring and shared standpoint among Black women about the meaning of oppression and the actions that Black women can take and should take to resist it."<sup>4</sup> Further illustrating the two "interlocking components" that describe Black women's "self-defined standpoint" of resistance, Collins states:

First, Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups. The unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationships they have with others suggest that African American women, as a group, experience a different world from those who are not Black and female. Second, these experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See the following examples: Michelle Cliff, "Object Into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Works of Black Women Artists." *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 3., Issue 15 (1982): 34-40; Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005); bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: The New Press, 1995); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Phyllis Jeanette Jackson, "Re-visioning and Re-viewing Women of African Descent in the American Visual Tradition." Ph.D. diss., (Northwestern University, 1996); Freida High Tesfagiorgis, "Afrofemcentrism and Its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold, in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York: Westview Press, 1992); Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Skin deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010) and *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (Summer 1989), 746.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, 747-8.

African American women artists' shared commitment to challenging western culture's degrading pictorial record of Black women is maintained through a collective understanding of the traumatic effects it has on Black women's identity formation. This is not to say that African American women artists' comprehension of Black women's identity formation or the methodologies used to address such processes are transhistorical, monolithic forms of thought. In fact, *We Are Roses From Our Mothers' Gardens* posits quite the opposite. It argues that in differing historical periods African American women visual artists have employed various mediums and have created from individual political positions, intellectual views, and aesthetic interests to emphasize the innate unification of a Black woman's race, gender, sexuality, class, and selfhood. And how this multifaceted dynamic of Black women's identity and material reality produces a unique, multilayered form of oppression experienced only by Black women. Their diverse expressions of multilayered, figurative works acknowledge and address how the synthesis of racism, sexism, and patriarchy has been both mercurial and fixed throughout Black women's existence in the United States. Thus, the dissertation argues that multilayered, figurative works of art by African American women artists are connected across time through *Black feminist visuality*, a creative imaging of Black women's self-making, autonomy, subjectivity, and personal empowerment that allows them to transcend the distorted, mythological constructions of Black female identity concretized within western visual culture as it reveals the functions of western culture's racist visuality and rejects its subjugation of Black women's identity formation. Its sub-theory of *visible-aggregation* illustrates how *Black feminist visuality* exists among African American women artists as a shared self-defined standpoint of representing Black

women's identity and material reality in western visual art. Through a close reading of Sojourner Truth's 1858 Indiana breast-baring incident and cartes-de-viste, Edmonia Lewis's self-portraits and neoclassical sculpture, Elizabeth Catlett's print and sculptural works, and Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* installation the study demonstrates how African American women artists utilize *visible-aggregation* to express *Black feminist visuality* through multilayered, figurative art forms that exist as optical illustrations of Black feminism in the western visual realm.

*Visible-aggregation* connotes the ways in which African American women artists express *Black feminist visuality* through visual representations that expose a collection of particulars that constitute Black female identity. It is a systematic artistic practice that strategically layers material, construction, theme, design, and space to form figurative works that express the myriad personal characteristics, political thoughts, and physical features that exemplify Black women as autonomous subjects with integrated, multidimensional identities who are also personally empowered. It is equally self-making as it allows the artist to empower herself by performing a physical act that visualizes the diversity of Black women's experiences through visual forms that express *Black feminist visuality*. In this way, the concept of self-making operates within the artwork itself, as well as for the artist. Specifically, *self-making* connotes the ways in which African American women artists assert the multidimensionality of Black women's identities by infusing Black women's material realities and cultural histories within their mediums through *visible-aggregation* – the creation of multilayered, figurative works that actualize *Black feminist visuality*. Thus, African American women artists employ *visible-aggregation* as a form of self-making, which functions as an artistic resistance allowing

Black women to heal while conquering the traumas of what author Ntosake Shange calls the *metaphysical dilemma of Black female selfhood* – being denied recognition as a being that is at once human, artist, Black, and woman.<sup>6</sup>

In her 1975 choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, Shange's lyrical and theatrical articulations emphasize how racism, sexism, and patriarchy impact not only the ways that Black women are seen in twentieth century America, but ultimately how from childhood to adulthood each system is undeniably destructive to Black women's subjectivity, causing a *metaphysical dilemma* of Black female selfhood. Celebrated as one of the most influential Black feminist literary works, *for colored girls* illustrates Black female selfhood as an integrated identity that fuses crucial aspects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity within the Black female body, something women of color cannot escape and should not be required to. The groundbreaking element of Shange's work is its assertion that while racism, sexism, and patriarchy are each individually damaging to Black women's subjectivity, the true catastrophe results from how they reinforce each other through an oppressive refusal, carried out by racist visibility, to recognize or "see" the inherent unification of a Black woman's identity.

By *racist visibility*, I mean the ways in which modes of vision in western culture are structured by historical mythologies that have come to be understood as visual truths. Visual culture scholarship has attended to defining this concept for decades, most notably with Hal Foster's 1988 edited volume *Vision and Visibility*. In his preface, Foster explains the dialectical relationship between vision and visibility as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> Ntosake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997) 45.

Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to culture: vision is social and historical, too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche. Yet, neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual – between mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations – a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.<sup>7</sup>

Foster's definition offers a framework for understanding how western visual history has consistently represented the Black female body as an excessive body, existing beyond the proper boundaries of white femininity. Commenting upon the omnipresence of representations that image Black women as the complete and utter antithesis to white femaleness, artist Lorraine O'Grady states:

The female body in the west is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be.<sup>8</sup>

With such a bifurcated philosophy surrounding the female body in western culture, the Euro-American idea and consequent visual depiction of Black women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was extraordinarily perverse.<sup>9</sup>

Euro-American intellectuals, scientists, and artists shared an ardent fascination with the Black female body. Their debasing and erroneous accounts of Black women's supposed pathological, physical attributes, aberrant sexuality, and exotic otherness

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster *Vision and Visuality*, (New York: New Press, 1988), ix. See also Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, Blackness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 15-17. and Nicholas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1(2006): 53-79.

<sup>8</sup> Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage* 20:1 (summer 1992), 14.

<sup>9</sup> My use of the term "Euro-American" references the cultural investments of both European and North American nations to the ideologies of white supremacy and "whiteness." Thus, separating African American women from the dominant culture as they assert representations of Black women in resistance to these notions.

doubled as a scientific quest and a historical practice that informed western visuality.<sup>10</sup>

Art historian Nicholas Mirzoeff acknowledges the racist underpinnings of visuality in its original conceptualization by the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle. He explains how Carlyle coined the term and its meaning as “a spiritual antidote to modernity that was nonetheless strongly supportive of imperialism.”<sup>11</sup> Since Carlyle’s conceptualization of visuality was originally articulated as a critique of modernity, it is also directly related to notions of subjectivity. Mirzoeff writes,

Carlyle argued that only the hero [insert white privileged male] had the vision to see history as it happened, a viewpoint that was obscured from the ordinary person [insert poor white man in certain instances, white woman, Black man, or Black woman] by the specter and phantasmagorias of emancipation . . . It was not visible to the ordinary person whose simple observations of events did not constitute visuality.”<sup>12</sup>

Here, he demonstrates Carlyle’s belief that only persons recognized as modern subjects could create visuality, making the term and its meaning fundamentally racist and sexist in that it purposefully excludes Black women from claims of subjectivity. Therefore, harrowing displays of real women such as Saartje Baartman functioned as visual justification for subjugating Black women in western society and equally congealed both the sexual and physical objectification of innumerable enslaved women as a visual act. These sexualized visualizations of Black women similarly triggered the construction of the popular jezebel stereotype – the extremely eroticized character that presents Black women as naturally licentious. As a result, Black women’s nude bodies become the quintessential visual representations of erotic, sexual pleasure, unable to be visually

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<sup>10</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, 55. He explains how Carlyle formulated the term, its concepts, and different iterations in a series of writings composed between 1837 and 1841.

<sup>12</sup> Mirzoeff, 57.

conceptualized in any other way in the western visual field. Conversely, their clothed bodies are most often visualized through a pantheon of caricatured distortions of Black womanhood, the two most popular being mammy – an asexual character who is the perfect caregiver, domestic expert, and pillar of strength; and the superwoman – also an androgynous character who embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics such as tremendous physical and emotional strength.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these prevalent caricatures of Black women consumed the American imagination and continue to dominate its' fine art and popular culture today. Therefore, the western concept of visibility does not simply work to sanction these myths; rather it functions as the optical instrument of systematic racism in that it is specifically constructed to enable viewers' to see Black women in these ways. As a result, the innate unification of a Black woman's identity is considered peculiar and ignored by western society simply because it exists outside of this racist visibility that visualizes Black womanhood as stereotype and the Black woman as an anomaly who is conjointly asexual and licentious, and always-already for sexual consumption and intercourse. Moreover, with such inaccurate conceptualizations driving western culture's visualizations of Black women these one-dimensional portrayals materialize as visual truth.

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<sup>13</sup> For more detailed analysis on the Mammy caricature see Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Females in the Plantation South*, (New York: Norton), 1985; and Kimberly Wallace Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 2008. Also see Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, (New York: Dial Press), 1978. Still the quintessential Black feminist text on the "superwoman" mythology, Wallace delineates the gross marginalization of Black women within the Black Nationalist movements of the sixties. And how this intracultural subordination of Black women was and still is sustained by traditional mythologies of Black womanhood, particularly that of the Black "superwoman" – the invincible Black woman who made [black men's] penises shrivel up into their bellies, who reminded them they had no power to control their own destinies, much less hers, who made them loathe and want to destroy that woman."

Consequently, Black women's abilities to equally and freely express themselves, their skills, and the inseparability of their identities are stifled by a unique, multilayered oppression that fundamentally rejects the image and idea of an empowered, autonomous, multidimensional Black woman. This engenders the polarized state of invisibility and hypervisibility for Black women in the western visual field and is another major aspect of the *metaphysical dilemma*. Hence, Shange's lady in yellow declares:

I've lost it  
touch with reality/ i don't know who's doin it  
I thot I waz but I waz so stupid I waz able to be hurt  
& that's not real/ not anymore/ I shd be immune/ if I'm  
still alive & that's what I waz discussin/ how i am still  
alive & my dependency on other livin beins for love  
I survive on intimacy & tomorrow/ that's all i've got goin  
& the music waz like smack & you knew abt that  
& still refused my dance waz not enuf/ & it waz all i had  
but bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a *metaphysical  
dilemma* i havent conquered yet/ do you see the point  
my spirit is too ancient *to understand the separation of  
soul & gender*/ my love is too delicate to have thrown  
back on my face<sup>14</sup> (emphasis mine)

Shange's character explains how the multilayered amalgam of racism, sexism, and patriarchy generates the metaphysical dilemma of Black female selfhood, producing oppression so uniquely limited to Black women that it prompts a break from reality. This disruption then causes the lady in yellow to feel that despite offering her complete subjectivity to the world and passionately giving all she has – her love, her intimacy, and her art of dance – the world brutally informs her, through a racist visuality that “refused” to acknowledge her gifts, that neither she nor any of her talents will ever be enough to garner her recognition in American society as an autonomous, multidimensional human being deserving of equal opportunity, freedom, respect, and love. Here, Shange

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<sup>14</sup> Shange, 45.



enlightens audiences to the struggles Black women endure, wondering how they are even still alive, as a result of the multilayered oppression and racist visuality that prevents their multidimensional identities to exist in their natural unified states. Thus, the lady in yellow does not and will never grasp the idea of a fragmented existence because it is so innately divergent and opposing to how she understands her being.

In the penultimate scene of *for colored girls*, Shange also explains the criticality of self-making processes. Altogether her characters discuss becoming one with themselves, asserting:

I waz missin something/ something so important/ something promised/  
*a layin on of hands*/ fingers near my forehead/ strong/ cool/ movin/  
*makin me whole*/ sense/ pure/ all the gods comin into me/  
layin me open to myself/ I waz missin something/ somethin promised/  
somethin free/ *a layin on of hands* . . . / *a layin on of hands*/ not a man/  
layin on/ not my mama/ holdin me tight/ sayin  
i'm always gonna be her girl/ not a layin on of bosom & womb  
*a laying on of hands*/ the holiness of myself released<sup>15</sup> (emphasis mine)

She describes Black women's self-making as "a layin on of hands" – the various ways Black women physically touch their bodies or the body of another woman of color as a means to release themselves from trauma and gain full realization of their own sanctity. She emphasizes, as the works of Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker also underscore, that it is through self-making acts, like *visible-aggregation*, that Black women become whole and empowered enough to surmount the metaphysical dilemma. Accordingly Shange conveys, like the African American women artists discussed in this project, that despite the uniquely multilayered characteristic of Black women's oppression and material reality, expressions that communicate their natural subjectivity and integrated, multidimensional identities stimulate the processes of self-making and transcending the

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<sup>15</sup> Shange, 60-62.

metaphysical dilemma.

From Sojourner Truth's self-portraits and Edmonia Lewis's depiction of Black women as subjects who fought for and secured freedom for themselves as well as those around them, to Elizabeth Catlett's magnificent renderings of Black female laborers and Black female nudes, and Kara Walker's controversial representations of Black women's sexual exploitation, African American women artists have historically portrayed Black female forms as visual musings and Black feminist, artistic interventions on western notions of womanhood, subjectivity, femininity, political agency, motherhood, intimacy and relationships, beauty standards, body image, and art history. Demonstrating Collins's assertion that "African American women have . . . developed distinctive interpretations of Black women's oppression . . . by using alternate ways of producing and validating knowledge itself,"<sup>16</sup> figurative works by these three artists re-present western concepts from Black women's perspectives. They visibly challenge how western culture visualizes Black women in regards to each idea, while simultaneously exhibiting how Black women see themselves and come to know themselves in their own lives. Discussing the significance of representations such as these to the preservation of Black women's bodies and identities in western culture, Daphne Brooks states:

there are ways to read for viability of black women making use of their own materiality within narratives in which they are the subjects. Such women might put their own figures to work for their own aesthetic and political uses and "image their own bodies" . . . such figures invent ways to maintain the integrity of black female bodies as sites of intellectual knowledge, philosophical vision, and aesthetic worth.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Collins, 746.

<sup>17</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies In Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850 – 1910*. (Duke University Press: Durham, 2006), 8.

Though Brooks is speaking specifically about Black female performance artists, her statement confirms the ideas of Black feminist visibility, which acknowledge how Black women image their own bodies or those of other Black women to assert ideas of Black women's self-making, autonomy, subjectivity, and personal empowerment. Visualizing these specific ideas were crucial to Black women's cultural work, specifically in the political, performance, and artistic realm and are unquestionably demonstrated throughout the oeuvres of Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker.

This multilayered play with the body, both actual and representational, links Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker through various figurative works that historically shape and determine *Black feminist visibility* as both an alternative and challenge to a prevailing racist visibility that negatively defined Black women's identities in each of their contemporary moments. Accordingly, Chapter 2 – “Authentic Imaginations: Representations of Black Womanhood in Western Visual Culture” delineates the iconography of the Black female body and ideas of authenticity. Beginning with illustrations found in seventeenth-century European travel narratives, the chapter examines depictions of Black women by white male artists from the early 1600's to the mid 1860's, demonstrating how the Hottentot – the pejorative appellation given to Khoisan men and women in South Africa by early European travelers – emerged in Euro-American visual culture as the quintessential representation of authentic Black womanhood. Its subsequent analysis of Georges Cuvier's representations of Saartje Baartman, Lewis Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes, and abolitionist representations of Black women reveal the historical lineage of Euro-American artists and scientists who worked to visually define the Black woman as physically aberrant and sexually deviant.

As western visual determinations of Black womanhood developed through both two-dimensional – 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century illustrations in European travel narratives, commissioned paintings of Baartman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as anti-slavery lithographs and anthropological slave photography – and three dimensional means (public display of Black women’s bodies in circus sideshows as well as the slave auction block), Chapter 3 – “Picturing Authenticity: Sojourner Truth, Edmonia Lewis, and the Development of Black Feminist Visuality” analyzes Lewis and Truth as contemporaries to illuminate how African American women artists developed *Black feminist visuality* in both 2D and 3D forms to reshape the ways in which Black women’s identity and material reality are scopically understood. Specifically, it places Lewis’s *Forever Free*, 1867 and photographic self-portraits in conversation with Truth’s 1858 Indiana breast baring and cartes-de-visite to explore how African American women artists utilize *visible-aggregation* to assert *Black feminist visuality* as a recourse for understanding Black women’s lives. In analyzing both women together, the chapter demonstrates how *Black feminist visuality* developed as a shared self-defined standpoint among African American women artists.

For example, in *Forever Free*, 1867, Lewis presents a figure who is literally “white faced” in rendering and material, but who is unequivocally Black because she is a newly freed woman. Like Truth, Lewis’s figure is an autonomous subject, crucial to the processes of freedom, full citizenship, and community building necessary for African Americans following the end of the Civil War and ratification of the thirteenth amendment. By layering themes such as, Black female subjectivity, respectability, and family stability, Lewis introduces neoclassical sculpture to a formidable imagery that

refutes the popular representations of enslaved women, particularly that of the tragic mulatta whose racial mixture often leaves her helpless, lost, or deceased. She then, creates art that forces the viewer to recognize mixed-raced Black women in the nineteenth century outside of the fictitious tragic mulatta trope. Thus, Lewis transforms white marble, a medium historically used by the Greeks for its ability to exalt its subject matter, into a political material that elevates the Black woman to her naturally deserved state of independence and selfhood.

*We Are Roses from Our Mothers' Gardens* illustrates another crucial aspect of Shange's work: its avowal that no other person's acts or "hands" can accomplish self-making. Shange emphasizes that Black women can only self-make or become whole and assert their subjectivity and the inherent unification of their identities once they place their hands onto their own bodies, "movin" into other mediums once this part of the process is complete. Chapter three discusses the various ways in which both Truth and Lewis work from their own image, shaping their assertions of Black feminist visuality from personal ideas of self. Chapter 4 – "I Am Beautiful in My Own Eyes: Elizabeth Catlett's Black Feminist Visuality" then delineates how Catlett continues this tradition, visualizing Black women's subjectivity, autonomy, and multidimensionality in her 1946-47 print series the *Negro (Black) Woman* and sculptural female figures: *Negro Mother and Child*, 1940; *Figura*, 1962; *Homage To My Young Black Sisters*, 1969; and *Homage To My Black Women Poets*, 1984, works that developed through her own personal experiences. It examines both Catlett's print work and sculpture to further demonstrate how her employment of *visible-aggregation* and *Black feminist visuality* illuminated the political conditions of women of color in both the United States. and Mexico, and how

these circumstances greatly informed Black women's identity during the latter half of the twentieth century. Her sculptures exhibit *visible-aggregation* as they layer themes of sexuality, body image, motherhood, beauty, and self-acceptance with material and design to illustrate how Black women come to know themselves through personal acceptance and love for their physical shapes despite the indignity surrounding Black female physicality and sexuality in modern art and popular culture. For example, in *Figura*, 1962, Catlett confirms the beauty of Black women's voluptuousness, linking Black women's sexuality with the natural hue of her medium to construct a figure with proportions based on the reality of a mature, Black woman who is in control of her own body.

The dissertation uncovers the complex ways in which African American women visually survey and confront the trials and malignancies threatening Black female identity in western society. This does not mean that all African American women artists continually render positive imagery of Black women. In fact, *Black feminist visuality* and *visible-aggregation* work to illustrate the various ways African American women artists figure the Black female form through both respectable and controversial representations in efforts to show how differing social, political, economic, cultural, and historical phenomena shape identity. Chapter 5 – “So Now I’m Looking Dead At You, What Are You Gonna Do:” Kara Walker’s Black Feminist Visuality” takes a deeper look into this phenomenon as a detailed analysis of how she employs provocative imagery to address issues regarding Black women's identity. For instance, in her 2014 installation, *A Subtlety*, Walker demonstrates *Black feminist visuality* and *visible-aggregation* through the multiple ways the work both problematizes and reifies the stereotypes regarding

Black women's identity and hypervisibility. *A Subtlety* as a whole – the sculptures, the refining plant, and viewer activity within the space – exists as a multilayered work of art that combines the visual with the performative to reveal degrading ways in which racist visuality defines Black women as deviant and excessive. Yet, the visual qualities of certain layers of the work such as, the intense white hue of the Sugar Baby's material, her enormous figuration as a nude mammy-jezebel sphinx, and viewer's sexually explicit responses to the sculpture, exemplify how larger cultural narratives, specifically those that associate sugar and women's genitalia,<sup>18</sup> work to inform racist visuality and distort more accurate understandings of Black women's histories, experiences, and identities. Exemplifying what Nicole Fleetwood theorizes as excess flesh – “the strategic uses of the [black female] body by black female artists . . . [who engage] with the imago of black female excessiveness and their critique of the racializing and gendering apparatuses of the visual field” –Walker's figurative works represent a form of *Black feminist visuality* as they utilize *visible-aggregation*, layering a history of sexual exploitation, popular cultural representations of the Black “vixen,” jezebel mythology, and visitor participation with her own personal narratives to create a contentious exhibition that exposes how narratives of sexual exploitation also influence the complexities of Black women's identity formation. As stated earlier, each artist creates within her specific historical era, thus Walker complicates and muddles historical conceptualizations of Black women's respectability – a prominent idea in the works of Truth, Lewis, and Catlett – illustrating how popular notions of aberrant sexuality and the “need” to create more positive and

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<sup>18</sup> Here, I'm commenting upon narratives within the Black community that draw these connections as well as others that glorify the sexual objectification of Black women, i.e 1970's pimp culture and its reference to “sugar daddy's” and “sugar baby's.” These references are also found in the era's popular R&B music, such as Ohio Player's *Sweet Sticky Thing*, *Skin Tight* and The Commodores *Brick House*.

conservative imagery of Black women's bodies has had its own effect on processes of identity formation for Black women living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Additionally, where some audiences find Walker's imagery problematic<sup>19</sup>, her works are self-making in that they allow her to face particular traumas, overcoming the metaphysical dilemma as creating these works offer her a more comprehensive understanding of her own existence as well as those of other Black women within American society.

Multilayered, figurative works by the four artists discussed in this study function through time as an alternative visual record of Black women's experiences. They shape new modes of seeing the Black female form while offering *Black feminist visibility* as an innovative interpretive strategy for discerning Black women's subjectivity in the western visual realm. To further illustrate how Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker employ *visible-aggregation* and *Black feminist visibility* to accomplish these tasks, the study navigates several scholarly fields, specifically Women and Gender Studies, Art History, Visual Studies, Museum Studies, and African American History. With Black feminism as its primary theoretical lens it converses with cultural studies of visibility, race, gender, and representation to critically examine the parallels between these artists, as well as the distinct and nuanced variances that distinguish their individual work. The dissertation's title refers to three different intellectual works that critique the affects racist and sexist visual phenomena have on Black women's artistic production and offer larger assessments of the key concepts that operate in this study: race, gender, visibility, and representation. Alice Walker's 1972 essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The

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<sup>19</sup> See Nicholas Powers, "Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit," *The Independent*, June 30, 2014. <http://www.indypendent.org>. and Jamilah King, "The Overwhelming Whiteness of Black Art," *Colorlines*, May 21, 2014. [http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/05/the\\_overwhelming\\_whiteness\\_of\\_black\\_art.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/05/the_overwhelming_whiteness_of_black_art.html).



Creativity of Black Women in the South,” Freida High Tesfagiorgis’s 1993 essay “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” and Nicole Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* present critical commentary on the concepts and questions upon which my analyses focus. In her essay, Alice Walker muses over Jean Toomer’s literary character Avey, Phillis Wheatley’s poetry, Virginia Wolfe’s conceptualizations of what is needed to be a female artist, and her own mother’s gardening to explain how African American women’s artistic activities granted them the capability to withstand the severities of social, political, economic, and sexual oppression. In speaking about her mother’s usage of creative skills as a means to surmount the multifaceted dynamics of Black women’s oppression Walker states, “[f]or her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work [B]lack women have done for a very long time.”<sup>20</sup> *We Are Roses From Our Mothers’ Gardens* investigates that “ability to hold on” – how a Black woman maintains her artistic acumen despite oppressions that very specifically obstruct the resources she needs to cultivate it – by connecting the works of Lewis, Catlett, and Walker through *visible-aggregation* and *Black feminist visuality* to demonstrate that African American women have indeed performed such work for centuries. These theories develop upon Walker’s concept in efforts to delineate specific competencies and processes of African American women’s art making.

Freida High Tesfagiorgis’s essay provides the theoretical methodology for the project as it critically heeds her demand for a Black feminist critique that both “assert[s]

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<sup>20</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (Mariner Books: 2003), 242.

the visibility and production of Black women artists in the USA...uncovering their lives, works, and interventions in society [and] examine[s] representation, particularly in regard to the history and politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>21</sup> Applying these analytical techniques, the study explains that the styles, themes, and meanings that Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker infuse into their figurative works denote *visible-aggregation* and *Black feminist visibility*. Through explorations that interlace artist biography with formal analysis, it also reveals how the artists’ specific professional and personal circumstances both contributed to and restricted their production. It couples vital contextual analysis of each historical era with critic and audience response, demonstrating how figurative works by these artists were received and understood when they were created. This particular analysis will also illustrate how the works themselves act as Black feminist interventions to the western visual field both in their contemporary moments and future eras.<sup>22</sup> Nicole Fleetwood’s work on how visibility and performance function together to make blackness “visually knowable”<sup>23</sup> in western culture guides my analysis and its concern with modes of viewing Black women. Her close attention to “how the process of deciphering itself is a performative act of registering blackness as visual manifestation” informs the analytical methodology used to examine pieces by Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker, specifically concentrating on how their figurative

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<sup>21</sup> I am following in the steps of Phyllis J. Jackson, also inspired by Tesfagiorgis’s work, whose study employed Black Feminist readings of works by African American women artists, as well as works that represent Blacks in the larger art historical scholarship. See Phyllis J. Jackson, *Re-Visioning and Re-Viewing Women of African Descent*.

<sup>22</sup> Freida High Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo, (Blackwell Publishers: Massachusetts, 2001), 162. In a section of her essay Tesfagiorgis presents a series of questions that a Black Feminist analysis of Black women’s art should ask. In this area of my dissertation I’m outlining which of those inquires my analysis applies in its investigation of Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker in efforts to provide critical and concrete answers.

<sup>23</sup> Fleetwood, 6.

works “[call] upon the spectator to do certain work, to perform a function as arbiter, or decoder, of visual signs that become aligned with blackness or [Black womanhood].”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the dissertation layers disparate concepts from each of these works upon Shange’s notions of the *metaphysical dilemma* of Black female selfhood and “a layin on of hands” to formulate its theories of *visible-aggregation*, Black women’s self-making, and *Black feminist visuality* as critical approaches to analyzing figurative works by African American women artists.

### **A Brief Historiography**

From the early 1980’s to the present, African American women artists and art historians have provided critical tools for Black feminist examinations of both figurative and abstract works by Black women artists. Published in 1982, Michelle Cliff’s, “Object Into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists” is the first scholarly essay that analyzes Black women’s art through the history of Black women’s experiences in America. Cliff employs a critical framework that centers the experiences of enslaved women, their struggles to subvert oppression, and their attempts at freedom, particularly those that were successful. She utilizes black women’s identities as represented by characters created by Lorraine Hansberry and Toni Morrison, relationships between white mistresses and enslaved women, as well as their relationships as women to the larger society to interpret works by Harriet Powers, Edmonia Lewis, Elizabeth Catlett, and Betye Saar. Additionally, Cliff supports her argument with works by Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Alice Walker, being the first Black feminist analysis of African American art. In 1987, Freda High Tesfagiorgis furthers this approach in, “Afrofemcentrism and Its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold.” Tesfagiorgis examines works

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

by Ringgold and Catlett, illustrating that black women artists create visual representations from an “Afro-female centered world view.”<sup>25</sup> She posits that African American women’s art should be analyzed through a lens such as Afrofemcentrism primarily because it’s created from a place that centers black women and the historical and cultural experiences of their material realities. The essay delineates the theoretical framework of Afrofemcentricism and through her examination of Catlett’s and Ringgold’s work, demonstrates how African American women’s art is unique in that its techniques display a mastery of both western and African artistic traditions, while the thematic and aesthetic expressions are directly related to Black women. Moreover, she emphasizes how Catlett and Ringgold self-identify as Black feminists to support her overall theoretical argument. In 1993, she continues her development of Black Feminist theoretical frameworks in “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s That Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” which influences Phyllis Jeanette Jackson’s 1996 dissertation “Re-Visioning and Re-Viewing Women of African Descent in the American Visual Tradition.”

Jackson’s work is firmly anchored in a Black feminist art historical methodology as it draws upon both Cliff’s and Tesfagiorgis’s work. Focusing primarily on Black women artists working in the twentieth century, she illuminates through a “coherence of subject-matter” that works by African American women “reveal a collective belief that issues of race, gender, sexuality, and social class profoundly inform the making of art.”<sup>26</sup> She theorizes these works as “Re-visions” of Black women’s experiences that specifically reformulate and resist negative visual portrayals of Blackness by non-white

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<sup>25</sup> Freida High Tesfagiorgis, “Afrofemcentrism and Its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Riinggold, in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York: Westview Press, 1992), 476. Tesfagiorgis defines Afrofemcentricism as an Afro-female centered worldview and its artistic manifestations.

<sup>26</sup> Phyllis Jeanette Jackson, “Re-visioning and Re-viewing Women of African Descent in the American Visual Tradition.” Ph.D. diss., (Northwestern University, 1996), 10.

artists. Thus, her main argument emphasizes the ways in which Black women artists amend western art historical traditions and art making practices. Though Jackson's work is an immense contribution to the scholarly discourse on African American women artists, my project places Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker in conversation to move beyond recognizing the resistant aspects of Black women's art. It is concerned with how African American women's subjectivity itself has been constituted through African American women artists' historical utilization of figurative expressions of Black women's autonomy and integrated identities. Though indebted to all of these works, the project moves toward fresh Black feminist theories that historicize the strategic ways in which African American women artists have depicted Black womanhood for the past three centuries.

Discussions of western visual culture and its relation to Black women as subjects and artists, as well as arguments illustrating the need for critical analysis of Black women's art continued throughout the nineties. In 1992, Lorraine O'Grady published "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," criticizing the degrading ways that Black women have been depicted visually throughout the history of western art. Calling for a visual record that expresses Black female subjectivity, O'Grady asserts Black women must create works that communicate their true identities and combat their invisibility in western society. Critical commentary on Black visual artists' and their battle against invisibility grounds Michele Wallace's essays on Black visual culture. In "Negative Images: Towards A Black Feminist Cultural Criticism," she challenges the positive/negative binary regarding images of African Americans in mainstream American culture. Illustrating that this binary engenders invisibility, Wallace presents how a Black

feminist approach to cultural representations allows for more authentic depictions of African Americans. As an art critic, Wallace's scholarly interventions center the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and how fundamental these connections are for Black women both literally and visually. Her later essay, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," interlaces her thoughts on the visual implications of the Clark's 1954 doll study, Euro-American Modernism and its notions of Primitivism, Ralph Ellison's concept of "invisibility," and the rise of critical theory and postmodernism, raising important questions about representations and conceptualizations of blackness and its effects on the visual in African American culture. She argues that the reluctance and often times blatant refusal of white society to recognize the presence and cultural existence of Black people results in an "economic nepotism" that purposely excludes Black artists from the museum, especially Black women artists. In 1992, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists: The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture," expands these ideas, interrogating the ways that invisibility eliminates possibilities of "greatness" for Black artists in the mainstream art world.<sup>27</sup> She also exposes the fact that Black Studies' primary focus on African American oral, musical, and literary traditions often ignore the visual, further obscuring the cultural innovations of Black visual artists. While O'Grady and Wallace's attention to Black invisibility within the western visual field resonate with many of the analyses in this study, *We Are Roses From Our Mothers' Gardens* is primarily interested

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<sup>27</sup> Michelle Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists: The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture," in *Black Popular Culture*, eds. Gina Dent and Michelle Wallace, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 333-346. This essay was included as the epilogue in the edited volume that accompanied the conference *Black Popular Culture: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, which was held in 1991 at the Studio Museum in Harlem and Dia gallery in Soho, NY. Wallace states that she organized the conference specifically to encourage Black intellectuals to engage the works of Black visual artists and to do more in analyzing the African American visual tradition.

in how African American women artists expression of *Black feminist visuality* reveal that the larger society's modes of vision perpetuate the polarity of Black women's invisibility and hypervisibility in the western visual realm. Rather than reiterating the fact of Black women's invisibility in American visual culture, I'm more concerned with how the classification and picturing of Black, autonomous, multidimensional women dislocates western, visual understandings of Black womanhood.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has ushered in many comprehensive texts that analyze works by Black women artists through engaging historical contextualization and comprehensive visual analysis. In 2002, Lisa Gail Collins published *The Art of History: African American Women Engage the Past*. Collins furthers Wallace's idea, pinpointing the three areas where African American Studies as a discipline has deliberately ignored Black visual production when attempting to address issues regarding artistic representations of people of color. She analyzes contemporary Black women's art, incorporating cultural history with substantial formal analysis as a means to demonstrate how Black women continue to challenge mainstream visual discourses that demean and stereotype their identities as women and artists. In 2005, Lisa E. Farrington's *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, considered to be the definitive text on Black women artists, offers the only comprehensive history of African American women artists from the nineteenth century to the present. Like Collins, she integrates artist biography with in-depth formal analysis to reveal connections between Black women artists over time. The dissertation couples this approach with comprehensive theoretical readings of works by a much smaller group of artists. In terms of Black women's representations in western art, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams enhance the

scholarship in 2002 with a history of how Black women have been represented through photography. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* examines the ways that photography rendered the Black female body in support of scientific racist ideologies concerning African American sexuality and identity. Moreover, they explore the ways in which Black women used photography to represent themselves in efforts to refute these “scientific” truths. Their subsequent text, *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot,”* is a collection of essays that analyzes the origins and proliferation of the Venus Hottentot image, presenting how this image defined both black and white female identity during the 18th and 19th centuries and how it continues to affect Black women’s perception of themselves. My project extends Willis and Williams’s conversations into painting and sculpture, examining the various ways African American women artists use a multitude of mediums to render Black women’s innate subjectivity and multidimensionality.

Part of the justification for *We Are Roses From Our Mothers’ Gardens* is the dearth of scholarly work focused specifically on Black women artists and their works. African American Studies is teeming with scholarly texts that outline and discuss the historical debates concerning visual representation and blackness, as well as the emergence of Black feminist theory and how the political and social climates of the late 1970’s engendered Black women to theorize about the multiplicities of both their personal and professional experiences.<sup>28</sup> Though this movement lasted well into the

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<sup>28</sup> For early debates on blackness and visual representation see W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art”. *The Crisis Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from the N.A.A.C.P.’s Crisis Magazine*. Ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson. New York: The Modern Library, 1999. 317- 325; See also the symposium, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed” that Du Bois began in the April 1926 issue of *The Crisis*. It is extremely important in terms of African American art because it contained the extensive questionnaire Du Bois posed to black artists, writers, and art critics about racial representation in American art. Du Bois printed this questionnaire for several months throughout 1926, along with the responses of Langston Hughes, Joel E.



1990's, contributions to Black feminist theory by Black women visual artists and art historians are often under studied. Similarly lacking are investigations of how structures of vision and visuality influence Black women's art making. This project attempts to fill that void. As both vision and visuality are cultural phenomena that together determine and alter the conditions of Black women's representation, invisibility, and hypervisibility within western culture, the dissertation asserts that a unifying essence between figurative artworks by African American women is an emphasis on *Black feminist visuality*.

Accordingly, their works function cooperatively through time with essays, poetry, fiction, and photographic representations by other Black feminist cultural producers to develop and shape *Black feminist visuality* as an alternative mode of seeing Black women within the western visual realm.

The project argues that by using *visible-aggregation* to create figurative works Truth, Lewis, Catlett, and Walker convey *Black feminist visuality* as a historical demand to be seen as autonomous human beings with multidimensional identities in a world that confines them to one-dimensional characterizations as servile, socially imperious, and sexually abnormal. It chronicles a visual history of African American women's political activism and Black feminist thought through the self-making artistic methodology they

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Spingarn, Jessie Fauset, Alfred A. Knoff, and a host of other prominent artists and art patrons during the New Negro Harlem Renaissance; Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 15 – 16; Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art*. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968). For the development of Black Feminist Theory Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Toni Cade Bombara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2008); Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. (New York: William Morrow, 1996); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, (New York: The New Press, 1995); Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, eds. *The Black Feminist Reader*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Audrey Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (New York: Crossing Press, 2007); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (Mariner Books: 2003).

employ when imaging the Black female body. Furthermore, works by each artist elucidate the affective power of exhibiting figurative works; particularly sculpture by African American women artists, to produce very specific responses to what is visually understood as Black female identity. Primarily, the ideas that stereotype, deviance, and sexual aberrance is the basis of Black womanhood, therefore Black women lack a certain type of respectability or moral character that would garner a visual recognition of their subjectivity, multidimensionality, and empathy towards the history of their experiences, specifically those of physical and sexual abuse. The works examined in this project demonstrate how the gallery space allows African American women visual artists to explain how systems of vision that have historically defined Black women as deviant, have done so against their will and factual evidence of the multiplicity of their lived experiences.

The project chronicles and analyzes African American women artists confrontation with western society's racist visuality, Black women's invisibility and concurrent hypervisibility in the western visual field, the multilayered dynamic unique to Black women's material reality and oppression, statements of integrated, multidimensional identity, and how personal acts of self-making allow Black women to sustain their lives. It also considers how their works offer a lens that coalesces for viewers the various ways in which a Black woman's identity is unified through and influenced by her individual race, gender, class position, sexuality, and subjectivity. Moreover, this lens exposes how racism, sexism, and patriarchy's dominance of the western visual realm forms a particular mode of seeing, one that has historically and

systematically denied Black women equal opportunity and full expressions of their integrated identities.

Thus, *We Are Roses From Our Mothers' Gardens* interprets how African American women visual artists assert figurative visualizations of Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, self-making, and personal empowerment through multi-layered artworks and resistant exhibition strategies to usurp discourses of deviance and excessiveness, while highlighting their contributions to western art history and Black women's overall development of *Black feminist visibility* in the United States. Their creations of multilayered, figurative representations of Black women's material reality disclose the innate subjectivity and integrated identities of Black women. They also communicate how the act of self-making permits Black women to challenge the multifaceted dynamics of their oppression, while simultaneously being images of how to transcend it. The project argues that the multilayered aspect of Black women's material reality is instinctively essential to African American women's art making and that by centering this quality of Black women's experiences at the core of their creative practices, African American women artists demonstrate a historical commitment to artistic expressions that espouse *Black feminist visibility*.

## CHAPTER 2

### AUTHENTIC IMAGINATIONS: REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD IN WESTERN VISUAL CULTURE

#### **Breast Feeding from Her Back: European Colonizers and the Hottentot Woman**

To understand why African American women artists developed Black feminist visuality to combat Euro-American racist visuality and the various ways audiences perpetually questioned their authenticity, my examination begins with illustrated travel narratives from the seventeenth century, through which European colonists established a pornographic iconography of African women's bodies that was understood as factual depictions of Black female physicality and sexuality. European conquest of both Africa and the Americas in the seventeenth century undoubtedly developed the racialized, sexualized, and gendered structures of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade; however it was the pictorial imagery produced by colonizers that most saliently fixed mythologies regarding Black women's identity within the western visual sphere. Explaining how early European literary illustrations set the stage for racist iconographies regarding African women's bodies and sexuality, historian Jennifer Morgan exclaims:

The process by which "Africans" became "blacks" who became "slaves" was initiated – on the European side at least – through a series of encounters made manifest in literary descriptions and only later expanded by the quotidian dimensions of slaveownership and settlement. The publication of images fueled the imaginations of settlers and would-be colonists alike and constituted an essential component of the ideological arsenal that European settlers brought to bear against African laborers.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, in 1634 Thomas Herbert's *A Relation of Some Years Travaile Begunne Anno 1626* appeared in London. Brimming with accounts delineating African "savagery," Herbert

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<sup>29</sup> Jennifer L Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 13.

supported his claims with various drawings, including one of a “Hottentot” woman breast-feeding her child over her shoulder, which was a common visualization of



**Figure 1** Hottentot woman suckling her child over her shoulder. From Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Years Travaile Begunne Anno 1626* (London, 1634), 17. Courtesy of Harvard University.

African women throughout the seventeenth century. It appeared as early as 1602 in Pieter de Marees’s narrative and continued as a popular illustration in European travel narratives well into the eighteenth century, shown here in Peter Kolb’s 1731 portrayal of a “Hottentot” woman suckling her child over her shoulder while smoking marijuana.<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 2** Hottentot woman suckling over her shoulder while smoking marijuana. From Peter Kolb, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope*, vol. 1 (London, 1731).

In efforts to solidify social constructions of race, European settlers utilized the image of the “Hottentot” woman suckling over her shoulder as visual “evidence” of authentic African women. Herbert’s grisly figure stands balanced on one foot with

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<sup>30</sup> Morgan, 13-49.

bleeding entrails hanging from her left hand. She is rendered in profile so that viewers recognize her sharp pointed teeth and her shocking ability to sling her elongated breast over her shoulder to feed the infant clinging to her back. Herbert's image and many others like it were purported to be accurate representations of African women in their "natural" state, suggesting "that [B]lack women's difference was both cultural (in this strange *habit*) and physical (in this strange *ability*)."<sup>31</sup> Thus, European men erroneously visualized African women's bodies to support the claim that Black women were in fact hypersexualized savages. The result was a pornographic iconography – conceptualized by European artists and subsequently understood by European viewers as "truth" – that defined "authentic" Black women as strange and fascinating primitive "objects," who lacked not only a conscious sense of morality and dignity, but to the European eye were living entities completely devoid of selfhood. Morgan explains:

Travel accounts produced in Europe and available in England provided a corpus from which subsequent writers borrowed freely, reproducing images of Native American and African women that resonated with readers. Over the course of the second half of the seventeenth-century, some eighteen new collections with descriptions of Africa and the West Indies were published and reissued in England; by the eighteenth century, more than fifty new synthetic works, reissued again and again, found audiences in England. Both writers and readers of these texts learned to dismiss the idea that women in the Americas and Africa might be innocuous or unremarkable. Rather, indigenous women bore an enormous symbolic burden, as [European] writers used them to mark metaphorically the symbiotic boundaries of European national identities and white supremacy.<sup>32</sup>

This false pictorial narrative then substantiated Black women's supposed "exotic otherness," and ultimately became the basis for Euro-American visual representations of Black women.

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<sup>31</sup> Morgan, 33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

## The Hottentot Venus: Saartjie Baartman, Georges Cuvier, and Black Female

### Corporeality

Imagery epitomizing the “Hottentot” as the authentic Black woman proliferated throughout western visual culture in the nineteenth century as well, represented most notoriously through debasing exhibitions of Saartjie Baartman – a Khoikhoi woman taken in 1810 from South Africa to Europe where she was sexually exploited for the entertainment of British and French audiences until her untimely death in 1815.<sup>33</sup>

Derogatorily dubbed the “Hottentot Venus,” early artistic portrayals of Baartman adopted a scientific context to reinforce the “Hottentot” as the most authentic physical representation of Black women and their status as visual objects lacking any semblance of autonomy or subjectivity.<sup>34</sup> In 1815, Georges Cuvier commissioned French artists Léon de Wailly and Jean-Baptiste Berré, among others, to render Baartman for detailed “medical examination.” As a comparative anatomist, Cuvier’s goal was to meticulously

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<sup>33</sup> Denean T. Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 18. It should also be noted that sociologist Zine Magubane posits that Baartman or the “Hottentot Venus” was not the core image of Black women in the nineteenth century. Examining various British travel narratives published throughout the nineteenth-century, and other writings by Cuvier, Magubane argues that Europeans openly recognized the diversity among Khoisan peoples and other African cultures within southern Africa. She also posits that social relations informed the ways Europeans both interacted with and understood the non-white “other;” rather than physical appearance. The basis of her argument elucidates the ways that Sander Gilman’s work on Baartman and the development of racialized and sexualized discourses of Black women has directed most analytical inquiry on the subject to center, and therefore re-objectify, Baartman’s body, particularly her genitals. Though I consider the merit of Magubane’s argument, the evidence I use from both seventeenth and eighteenth century European travel narratives, along with Jennifer Morgan’s work, demonstrates that Europeans were pathologizing Khoisan peoples well before Baartman was born. And that much of this pathology was communicated through exaggerated illustrations of Khoisan women’s bodies, particularly their breasts. Therefore, by the nineteenth century Baartman was the most popular representation of a specific mythology regarding Khoisan women established more than two-hundred years prior to her capture. See Zine Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the “Hottentot Venus,”” *Gender and Society* 15, no. 6 (Dec. 2001): 816-834.

<sup>34</sup> Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late-Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1985): 204-242. This essay is the foundational text upon which most late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theoretical analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and art turn. Gilman is one of the earliest cultural historians to use Baartman’s life as a lens through which to understand how visual, medical, literary, and scientific discourses worked together to develop the racist and stereotypical iconographies of Black women’s identity and physicality.

scrutinize Baartman's genitalia to "prove" that Black women's purported inherent lasciviousness resulted directly from their pronounced sexual organs.<sup>35</sup> Cuvier's artistic unit supplied him with incredibly detailed works, of which many were subsequently produced as engravings for the imagery of Baartman in *Historie Naturelle des Mammifères*, his extensive study on the anatomy and behaviors of mammals.



**Figure 3** Léon de Wailly, *Frontal view of Saartje Baartman Hottentot Venus*, 1815. oil on canvas. Musée Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris.

In the European eye, Khoikhoi women, pejoratively renamed "Hottentots," were the ideal representation of primitive existence as European colonizers misunderstood their various customs and behaviors. Specific attention was given to the physical attributes of their genitalia "to disassociate them from the human species"<sup>36</sup> and debasingly categorize them as hypersexualized savages. For seventeenth-century Europeans it was their elongated breasts. By the nineteenth century, Europeans had expanded their fascination with the Khoikhoi woman's body to include her large

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<sup>35</sup> For more on Saartje Baartman's life, exploitation, and how European presentation of her body and genitalia have historically informed visual understandings of Black women in western culture see, Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005); and Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth Century Euro-American Imagination," in Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Skin deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 13-35.



buttocks, hips, and enhanced labia. To fulfill this allure, Léon de Wailly employs the typical clinical approach, presenting Baartman from a frontal and profile view, granting the viewer direct visual access to the size and length of her genitalia for both scientific and pornographic purposes. Yet, Wailly allows Baartman to confront the viewer, as art historian Lisa Gail Collins acknowledges:

Situating her in a place removed from the expected site of examination not only reminds viewers of the young woman's connections to a world beyond the European circus and laboratory but also affords the young woman the power of vision. Here she is represented as having the capacity to see. Although she is shown in one view from the side in order to enable unhindered examination of her backside, the placement of Saartjie Baartman within an expansive setting allows her to symbolically look beyond the parameters of her own containment.<sup>37</sup>

Though Collins's reading of Wailly's image grants Baartman a certain kind of agency, Wailly's placement of her nude figure within vast grasslands nevertheless reinforces popular representations of "authentic" African women found in early European travel narratives. Similar to Herbert, Wailly depicts Baartman as the uninhibited "Hottentot" roaming across the African savannah. His frontal depiction implies that she is comfortable with her display, while his profile representation utilizes perspective to suggest that Baartman moves with great familiarity inside a primitive Africa – the only environment in the European mind where Black women exist in their most authentic forms. However, even in this purported natural environment, Wailly ensures that Baartman's seemingly autonomous motion does not disrupt her position as a stationary visual object for European viewing pleasure. Her movement within his imagined Africa functions only for the voyeuristic European eye. It does not allow her to escape the brutal visual and sexual subjugation that ultimately ended her life. Jean-Baptiste Berré's

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<sup>37</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 15.

depiction of Baartman further substantiates this idea as it presents a static Baartman with other stationary “Hottentots” in their supposed “natural habitat.”<sup>38</sup> Here, African women are again completely exposed to the viewer as exotic creatures fixed within an imaginary Africa that denies both their autonomy and subjectivity.



**Figure 4** *La Venus Hottentote*. Sara, a woman of the Hottentot race, 25 years old, observed, drawn, and painted in the Natural History Museum in March, 1815. Print. Engraved by Louis-Jean Allais from the painting by Jean-Baptiste Berré. Collection of the Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

Explaining Baartman’s discomfort with such violent visual observations, scholar Janell Hobson writes, “they sketched Baartman in the nude, although she resisted full exposure by covering over her private parts with a handkerchief. They attempted to “observe” her genitalia . . . but Baartman refused to satisfy their curiosity.”<sup>39</sup> Baartman’s unwillingness to offer her body to the voyeuristic European eye required Wailly and the others to employ their imagination while viewing and depicting her body.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, he relies on imaginative descriptions produced by the racist visuality of Europeans colonizers to render the most “accurate” depiction of an authentic Baartman – the static,

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<sup>38</sup> Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 36

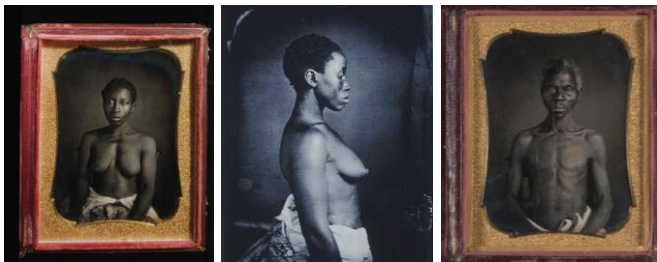
<sup>39</sup> Hobson, 45-46. Salon audiences often offered Baartman candy or alcohol to coax her to fully undress, indicating that she frequently tried as hard as she could to remain covered up. Hobson also notes how Baartman often drank heavily as a form of self-medication to prepare herself for the visual and sexual objectification she faced regularly.

<sup>40</sup> For more on Baartman’s refusal to appear completely nude in front of European audiences, see Collins, *Art of History*; Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*; and Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot.”* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

hypersexualized, primitive “Hottentot.” Picturing her as a resistant African woman who rejected their visual advances would have magnified the fact that she in fact possessed a strong sense of dignity and was absolutely not a living object that lacked autonomy and subjectivity.

### **Shot as a Hottentot: Lewis Agassiz’s Female Slave Daguerreotypes**

In 1839, Frenchman Louis J. M. Daguerre announced his innovative form of picture making. Not soon after, daguerreotyping became the most popular way for Americans to record their lives and activities. Debuting at the height of U.S. slavery, and at a moment where European and Euro-American intellectuals were continuing to define race, both scientists and slaveholders used photography as a means to document what they believed to be the essential difference of people of African descent. At this moment, Black women reappear in popular visual media as objectified sites for pseudo-scientific examinations claiming to validate the primitive, hypersexualized Black female body as the authentic Black woman. On a South Carolina plantation, the Swiss zoologist Louis Agassiz, a protégé of Cuvier, and photographer Joseph T. Zealy arranged some of the first daguerreotypes used specifically for this purpose.



**Figure 5** Joseph T. Zealy, *Delia, American-born of African Parents, Daughter of Renty, Congo* (frontal view), 1850. daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

**Figure 6** Joseph T. Zealy, *Delia, American-born of African Parents, Daughter of Renty, Congo* (profile view), 1850. daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

**Figure 7** Joseph T. Zealy, *Renty, Congo, Plantation of B.F. Taylor, Esq.* (frontal view), 1850. daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.



**Figure 8** Joseph T. Zealy, *Drana, Country born, Daughter of Jack, Guinea* (frontal view), 1850. daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

**Figure 9** Joseph T. Zealy, *Drana, Country born, Daughter of Jack, Guinea* (profile view), 1850. daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

**Figure 10** Joseph T. Zealy, *Jack (driver), Guinea, Plantation of B.F. Taylor, Esq.* (frontal view), 1850. daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Just as Cuvier directed his brood to depict Baartman as both primitive “Hottentot” and scientific specimen who lacked autonomy, Agassiz guided Zealy through the production of sexualized-scientific daguerreotypes of seven enslaved Blacks – Alfred, Fassena, Renty, Jack, Jem, Delia, and Drana<sup>41</sup> which he later used in a visual ethnographic taxonomy said to be the photographic proof of polygenesis – the highly popular notion that humans of different races derived from disparate origins. As photography was understood in the mid-nineteenth century as a visual means of representing an unbiased “truth” or “authentic reality,” Agassiz employed daguerreotyping as a scientific instrument capable of visualizing the biological routes of ancestry. His aim was to demonstrate how people of African descent inherited specific physical attributes – skin tone, hair texture, and facial features – vastly different from

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<sup>41</sup> The images provided here are only two depictions from Agassiz’s group of degrading daguerreotypes of enslaved Blacks in South Carolina. He imaged five men – Alfred, Fassena, Renty, Jack, and Jem – and two women, Delia and Drana to illustrate how specific physical attributes among African descended peoples were retained from one generation to the next.

those of whites, and that this staunch physical dissimilarity between the races also indicated that Blacks could not possibly be genetically identical to whites. Further elucidating Agassiz's use of these images and its larger cultural influence, curator Brian Wallis explains:

[The daguerreotypes] were designed to analyze the physical differences between European whites and African blacks, but at the same time they were meant to prove the superiority of the white race. Agassiz hoped to use the photographs as evidence to prove his theory of "separate creation," the idea that the various races of mankind were in fact separate species. Though strictly scientific in purpose, the daguerreotypes took on a very particular meaning in the context of prevailing political, economic, and aesthetic theories about race. Thus, they help to discredit the very notion of objectivity and call into question the supposed transparency of the photographic record.<sup>42</sup>

It is without question that Agassiz enhanced both the political and economic agendas of slavery by presenting his daguerreotypes as "scientific evidence" authenticating enslaved Blacks' perceived inferiority. Yet, his portrayals of Delia and Drana are important here because they are also visual and aesthetic verifications that employ both science and western art history to advance the idea that the static, hypersexualized, primitive Black female body epitomizes the most authentic form of Black womanhood.

Due to Cuvier's mentorship, Agassiz "was curious about African bodies and sought to study their anatomical details;" therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that Agassiz's work with Cuvier familiarized him with visual interpretations of Baartman and other "Hottentot" women.<sup>43</sup> Discussing how this particular iconography affected African American women, historian Jennifer Morgan writes:

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<sup>42</sup> Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 9:2 (summer 1995), 40. For more on Agassiz's theories and his influence on the representations of Black women in western culture see: Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*; Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); and Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Collins, 18.

Ideas about black sexuality and misconceptions about black female sexual behavior formed the cornerstone of Europeans' and Euro-Americans' general attitudes toward slavery. Arguably, the sexual stereotypes levied against African-American women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were so powerful because of the depth and utility of their roots. Before they came in contact with enslaved women either in West Africa or on American plantations, slaveowners' images and beliefs about race and savagery were indelibly marked on the women's bodies.<sup>44</sup>

Due to a harrowing encounter with Black domestic workers at a Philadelphia hotel in 1846, Agassiz approached his daguerreotyping project with such stereotypical "images and beliefs about race and savagery." In a letter to his mother describing his experience Agassiz writes:

It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. But truth before all. Nevertheless, I experienced pity at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, and their lot inspired compassion in me in thinking that they are really men. Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of the palm of their hands, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away. And when they advanced that hideous hand towards my plate in order to serve me, I wished I were able to depart in order to eat a piece of bread elsewhere, rather than dine with such service. What unhappiness for the white race – to have tied their existence so closely with that of negroes in certain countries! God preserve us from such contact.<sup>45</sup>

At the start of his letter, Agassiz admits he believes that all men are united, which initially engenders "compassion" in him upon his first interactions with Black men. This sentiment only unravels once he exchanges with these men who *act* similarly as him, in

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Louis Agassiz to his mother, December 1846. Original letter in Houghton Library, Harvard University; quoted in Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 17-18. Brian Wallis also quotes portions of this letter in his analysis of Agassiz's daguerreotypes and how they demonstrate the connections between scientific inquiry, politics, and museum practices.

that they exhibit autonomy and subjectivity, however look drastically different from him. In this moment, Agassiz's sight produces a substantial fracture between what he claims as "truth" – the confraternity of all men, and what his eyes literally tell him is true – Black people have a vast physical difference from whites, but behave in a similar manner of dignity and independence. The encounter disrupts his field of vision, forcing him to recognize that the autonomy and subjectivity he previously only identified with white men was also innate to people of color. This visual realization was so jarring for Agassiz that he purposefully photographs and classifies Black bodies as inferior to disprove that people of African descent could ever possess an essential sense of self.

Agassiz's decision to employ the photographic process for his inferiority project was not a coincidence, for daguerreotyping required a static sitter. Photographic subjects were often positioned in specialized chairs that stabilized the body for the duration of the camera's operation. Likewise, photographing enslaved Blacks within the confines of the plantation south guaranteed that Agassiz could force his sitters into positions aimed to convey inferiority. Much like Baartman, Delia and Drana could not control the ways Agassiz and Zealy posed their bodies or object to the subsequent use of their images. For this reason, Collins describes Agassiz and Zealy's imaging of enslaved subjects as a type of "scientific dissection" that necessitated a "relatively one-way contact with [B]lack people" designed to authenticate their racial difference.<sup>46</sup> We may never know if they too resisted such degrading visual exploitation as Baartman often did. Thus, Agassiz's project relies upon "the complicity of visual media"<sup>47</sup> to dispel his fear of autonomous Black subjects.

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<sup>46</sup> Collins, 22-23.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 23.

Following his mentor's model, Agassiz poses both Delia and Drana from frontal and profile positions that accentuate their physiognomy, the size of their heads, and more specifically, the length of their breasts. While their stripped torsos designate their subordinate status, this degree of undress clearly signifies the sexual-scientific displays of Baartman, the slave auction block, and the ways European colonists mythologized Khoikhoi women's bodies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Further elucidating how Black women's breasts became the fulcrum for such visual exploitation, Janell Hobson writes:

These visual exaggerations of African women's bodies, as recorded by European naturalist voyagers, create a monstrous hyper-woman in a sense. That is, the African woman seems to function as overly female compared with the European woman, and overly in abundance with regard to her femaleness: in this case, the stupendous size of her breasts. Moreover, because of the specificity of the female breast as a sign of sexual difference, the black female breast, highlighting race and gender differences, serves as an extreme deviation from the white male body.<sup>48</sup>

Placed within this context, a more salient picture arises when Agassiz's decision to disrobe Delia and Drana is read in cooperation with the way he labels their daguerreotypes. He specifically identifies both women as America-born to African fathers, linking Delia to Renty assumed to be born in Congo, and Drana to Jack assumed to be born in Guinea.<sup>49</sup> As Debra Willis and Carla Williams note, Delia and Drana's "mothers are nowhere in evidence and were probably, as was often the case under slavery, no longer with their families."<sup>50</sup> However, Agassiz offers Baartman as a visual maternal alternative in that his design and classification of the daguerreotypes work together to fix Delia and Drana within a visual genetics that posits the hypersexualized,

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<sup>48</sup> Hobson, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Collins, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 22.



primitive Black female body as the most authentic form of Black womanhood. While his labeling emphasizes paternal lineage as evidence of Delia and Drana's direct biological connection to a "primitive" Africa, exposing their breasts evokes a visual link to the "Hottentot" woman.

Agassiz's sexualized design conjures Cuvier, Wailly, and Berré's representations of Baartman as the spread of lithographs mocking her nudity, along with her physical exhibition, made the "Hottentot Venus" the most familiar depiction of the Black female body to scientific communities and general audiences alike. European and Euro-American viewers then learned to recognize Black womanhood as primitive, grotesque, and hypersexual through degrading imagery of African women's breasts. Thus, Agassiz displays Delia and Drana's breasts to link them to "Hottentot" iconography in efforts to validate their existence as "authentic" Black women. More specifically, exposing their breasts works in concert with how he labels their images to stress that their hypersexualized, primitive, and subordinate circumstances under slavery were in fact genetic and not the results of a gendered, systematic racism. As they are the only two daguerreotypes in his project taken specifically to demonstrate African ancestry, Agassiz deliberately fashions Delia and Drana in a way that contends that Blacks essentially inherit their inferior status to whites. His labeling validates this idea as the supposedly biological evidence which proves Delia and Drana to be genetically inferior, while his display of their breasts – the elongated contour and large, dark areola – serves as visual authentication because it connotes Baartman's so-called "primitive" physicality and references a bodily feature that European and Euro-American audiences only associated with imagery of the female "Hottentot." He associates them with their fathers to ensure

that audiences understand that dark skin, kinky hair, and broad features only result from specific African genotypes, while his sexualized design prompts audiences to identify their elongated breasts and melancholy expressions as visual phenotypes inherited from the quintessential African woman – Saartjie Baartman. His labeling and design then instruct viewers to recognize that Delia and Drana have in fact inherited all the *visual* markers of inferiority. In this way, Agassiz insinuates that maybe Delia and Drana, i.e. African American women, can also suckle over their shoulders. Furthermore, relating Delia and Drana to Baartman by implanting them within the visual genealogy of Black female bodies in western iconography, Agassiz also implies that if “physical aberrance” is genetic among Black women as a whole, then the broader mythologies regarding their sexuality must be inherited as well. The daguerreotypes evoke the specter of the “Hottentot” woman, which had been understood by white audiences as the “true” depiction of Black women since the seventeenth century, to certify that he and Zealy were indeed presenting the most “genuine” sample of enslaved Blacks to both his professional colleagues and public spectators.<sup>51</sup> By linking Delia and Drana’s physicality and genetic relationship to Africa to the nude Hottentot, Agassiz’s daguerreotypes rest firmly within the interstices between art history, science, and politics in that they were conceived as true cultural amalgams that substantiated the primitive, hypersexualized Black female nude as the essential visual marker of Black women’s authenticity.

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<sup>51</sup> Brain Wallis discusses Agassiz’s concern that he would not find “pure examples” of African ethnicity in America as the importation of Africans supposedly became “illegal” in 1808. However, upon meeting Dr. Robert W. Gibbes, who shared intimate relationships with many of South Carolina’s prominent slave owning families, Agassiz traveled to Columbia where he “was delighted with his examination of Ebo, Foulah, Gullah, Guinea, Coromantee, Mandrigo, and Congo Negroes.” Brain Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9:2 (summer 1995), 44-45. Also, Lisa Gail Collins explains how audiences often rushed to view Baartman as she was understood to be a representation of “the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being.” Collins, 12.

Agassiz and Zealy drew upon mythologies of African primitivism and racial inferiority while photographing Delia and Drana, just as Cuvier, Wailly, and Berré relied upon fictive visual illustrations of the “authentic Hottentot” to depict Baartman. Like Herbert and Kolb, they each fused their imagined perceptions of Black women with the racialized and gendered mythologies of their time to fabricate visual images that both strengthened and furthered western pornographic iconography of Black women’s identity and sexuality. Both Cuvier and Agassiz exhibit real Black women as “scientific specimens” that validate racist mythologies in attempts to confirm the “Hottentot” as the most authentic Black woman. This blatant objectification of Black women’s bodies is drastically reinforced by the fact that the literal visual objects – paintings, lithographs, and daguerreotypes – that professed the static, primitive, hypersexualized, Black female nude as the “true” image of an “authentic” Black woman rested in western society’s most celebrated and refined cultural institutions, Cuvier’s at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris and Agassiz’s at Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology.<sup>52</sup> With such staunch cultural preservation, visual caricatures such as the jezebel, mammy, and the tragic mulatta emerged from both the scientific and art historical sexualization of the “Hottentot” woman as Cuvier and Agassiz’s “scientific” representations preceded most of the more familiar stereotypes and derogatory images of African Americans in popular culture.’<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Many of Cuvier’s commissioned depictions of Baartman are housed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, including Berré’s lithograph and the life size plaster cast Cuvier made of Baartman’s corpse in 1816. Upon Baartman’s death Cuvier also dissected and preserved her genitalia, which the museum housed for decades until pressured to return her remains to South Africa for proper burial in 2002. Fifteen of Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes were discovered at the Harvard Peabody Museum in 1970. See Collins, *The Art of History*, 19 & 23; and Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 1-6.

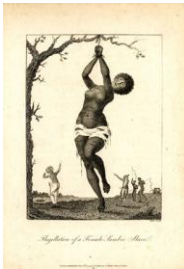
<sup>53</sup> Wallis, 53-54.

## Anti-Slavery Vixens: Abolitionist Representations of Black Women

Examination of abolitionist iconography of the Black female body reveals a similar pattern. From eighteenth-century lithographs to Civil War era photographs, anti-slavery imagery presented the primitive, hypersexualized Black woman as the prototypical representation of Black womanhood. Eighteenth-century abolitionist imagery often centered the violated Black female nude to expose the atrocities of slavery. This is clearly illustrated in Isaac Cruikshank's 1792 hand-colored print of a nude African girl suspended upside down aboard a slave ship and William Blake's 1796 engraving of a nude African woman covered in bleeding lacerations.



**Figure 11** Isaac Cruikshank, “The abolition of the slave trade or the inhumanity of dealers in human flesh exemplified in Captn. Kimber's treatment of a young Negro girl of 15 for her virjen (sic) modesty.” April 10, 1792. London: S.W Fores. lithograph. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



**Figure 12** William Blake, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*, in John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. (London, 1796), 265. engraving.

Though abolitionists employed graphic imagery to engender a loathing rejection of slavery, these salacious depictions contributed to the ongoing sexual exploitation of Black women through artistic and visual media as both images lie firmly within pornographic sadism. Referencing the violence of interracial sexual activity taking place within the confines of slavery, each artist presents an injured Black female nude, beaten viciously by sadistic white male figures. Their tattered cloths, which fall scantily around their hips, sensualize each woman's nudity and state of indecency.

Cruikshank also includes three other naked African women to indicate the succession of

women of color who are relegated to abusive defilements purely because of their sex and gender, reinforcing Black women's positions as both sexual and visual objects within western culture.

Essentially, both images centralize Black women's nudity to accentuate the brutal punishment for claiming their autonomy and refusing their captors' sexual advances. The caption under Cruikshank's print clearly states that the central figure is being punished "for her virgin modesty." Blake's illustration, which was included in John Gabriel Stedman's travel narrative describing his time in Surinam, visualizes Stedman's account of a young enslaved woman's whipping, whose "only crime had consisted in her firmly refusing to submit to the loathsome embraces of her despicable executioner."<sup>54</sup> Thus, even in anti-slavery imagery, Black women's genitalia became the fundamental icon of their identity as both images fuse nudity with the language of sexual pursuit to represent enslaved women's existence. In this way, abolitionists eschewed visual representations of how Black women tried to defend themselves, for more seductive portrayals that appealed to the white male imaginary in a similar manner as Wally's depictions of Baartman and Agassiz's daguerreotypes of Delia and Drana. More damagingly, these visual and verbal abolitionist composites inscribe Black women's autonomy and assertions of dignity onto their bodies as marks of punishment to, as Janell Hobson argues, image the Black woman "as an abject victim of her sex, subjugated by the evil enforcers of the slave system."<sup>55</sup> Nell Irvin Painter further acknowledges, "[e]ven among abolitionist friends, the sexual vulnerability of slave women was a main theme. For friend

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<sup>54</sup> Hobson, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 32-33.

or foe, in racist stereotype and antislavery ideology, rampant sexuality [clung] to the figure of the black woman.”<sup>56</sup>

Though Black women’s bodies were deeply entangled within ideas of sexual immorality as a whole, keener notions of sexual impropriety permeated nineteenth century abolitionist imagery of the mixed-race female figure. For instance, abolitionists frequently captivated northern audiences with cartes-de-visite of Rebecca Huger, as mixed-race youth like her were seen as products of the “socially transgressive act of interracial sexual activity.”<sup>57</sup> Often used to emphasize the arbitrariness of slavery



**Figure 13** M. H. Kimball, *Rebecca, An Emancipated Slave from New Orleans*, c.1863, carte-de-visite. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

**Figure 14** Unknown, *Rebecca, The Slave Girl*, 1863-1864, carte-de-visite. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

and ultimately race itself, abolitionists circulated imagery of mixed-race youth to inform northern whites that thousands of children, who looked very much like their own, were frequently bought and sold for not only physical and domestic labor; but in cities like New Orleans, they were also peddled as sexual commodities. Referencing America’s preoccupation with miscegenation and its fascination with the South’s “dusky” beauties, this narrative reduced children like Huger to very convincing forms of visual

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<sup>56</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1997), 140.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

propaganda.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Huger's liberated body served as a visual abolitionist representation of the widespread sexual exploitation of both mixed-raced and non-mixed-raced Black women in the slave south.

To capitalize upon northern sympathies stirred by the popularity of Harriet Jacobs's narrative, anti-slavery advocates sold over 40 different portraits of Huger posed in both pious and sexually suggestive positions. Pictured above, she is dressed in the most refined fashions, kneeling at a makeshift but ornately draped altar. Though this positioning clearly suggests prayer, reinforced by her lightly folded hands and the upward tilt of her head, it also emphasizes the upturned hem that reveals her petticoat. This simple costume detail sensualizes the image, mingling her apparent virtue with the sexually teasing presence of her undergarment. This sensuality is even more evident in Figure 2.14, where Huger's slightly reclined posture signifies the odalisque as she rests upon a plush fur textile with her hand placed flirtatiously in her hair. A common erotic symbol of women's sexual allure and availability in the nineteenth century, the odalisque – a Turkish female slave or concubine – appeared in numerous masterworks, most famously depicted by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's 1814 painting entitled *La Grande Odalisque*.<sup>59</sup> As many mixed-raced women, both free and enslaved, lived as concubines for well to do white men, notions of irresistible beauty and intense sex appeal complicated the realities of their oppression. Thus Huger's portraits, along with Cruikshank and Blake's prints, show how abolitionists continuously shifted between the

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<sup>58</sup> For more on how abolitionists used portraits of mixed-race children see Shaw, 152-160.

<sup>59</sup> For more on Black women and the odalisque in western photography, see Willis and Williams, 36-40.

erotic, the virtuous, and sexual exploitation when portraying women of color, selling these images for an anti-slavery cause, while simultaneously sexualizing Black women and girls within the common myths regarding their identities. Nonetheless, in the 1850's women like Sojourner Truth, Edmonia Lewis, and Frances E.W. Harper used their own bodies and various artistic media to assert their authenticity through a Black feminist visuality that helped reshape the ways western audiences viewed Black womanhood.



### CHAPTER 3

#### PICTURING AUTHENTICITY: SOJOURNER TRUTH, EDMONIA LEWIS, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK FEMINIST VISUALITY

“If the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is  
discovering woman to herself.”

---Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1893

From the performative stage to the literary page, nineteenth-century Euro-American visual culture was fraught with obscene imagery that branded Black women as quintessential physical representations of alterity. African American women like Sojourner Truth and Edmonia Lewis strategically infiltrated both the scopic and pictorial arenas of this perilous visual terrain with a Black feminist visuality depicting Black women’s self-making, subjectivity, autonomy, and personal empowerment to negate Euro-American constructions of “otherness” and visualize the multidimensionality of Black women’s material reality. As independent women who made their own way as creatives, abolitionists, and feminists Truth and Lewis existed in vast contrast to prominent Euro-American ideas concerning Black women. At this time, white audiences incessantly questioned the accuracy or authenticity of Black women’s existence. For instance, abolitionist and feminist leader Frances E.W. Harper’s presence confused various audiences throughout her career. A South Carolina newspaper reported:

Without any effort at attentive listening we followed the speaker to the end, not discerning a single grammatical inaccuracy of speech, or the slightest violation of good taste in manner or matter. At times the current of thoughts flowed in eloquent and poetic expression, and often her quaint humor would expose the ivory in half a thousand mouths. We confess that we began to wonder, and we asked a fine-looking man before us, “What is her color? Is she dark or light?” He

answered, “She is mulatto; what they call a red mulatto.” The “red” was new to us.<sup>60</sup>

The writers’ curiosity about Harper’s “color” reveals how the literal presence of an autonomous Black woman dislocates the western visual field. Describing how abolitionist William Still, Harper’s close friend, commented on the many ways Harper’s visual presence often vexed her spectators, literary scholar Hazel Carby affirms, “because she was so articulate and engaging as a public speaker, audiences concluded that she couldn’t possibly be a black woman. Some even speculated that she must be a man, while others reasoned that she was painted to look black.”<sup>61</sup> As chapter 2 explains, the “Hottentot” epitomized visual understandings of Black womanhood in early Euro-American visual culture, leading nineteenth-century audiences to visualize Black women along a pictorial spectrum of caricatures – the Hottentot Venus, the Tragic Mulatta, Mammy, and Jezebel – that erroneously categorized their skin tone and physicality based upon the mythologies of a white racist imaginary. As Harper’s eloquent speech, poised stature, and virtuous demeanor does not fit neatly into these common visual perceptions, the South Carolina writers cannot fully comprehend what they are seeing while observing her lecture. Her anomalistic visual presence then alters the writers’ racist visuality, causing them to question her authenticity, as her powerful demonstration of subjectivity and autonomy obscures their vision and essentially triggers their “wonder.” Accordingly, they lean over to ask a Black male attendee to verify that Harper is indeed a *real* Black woman.

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<sup>1</sup> “A Lecture,” *Sumter News* (S.C.), reprinted in the *Philadelphia Press*, (Sept. 17, 1867); in Melba Joyce Boyd, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*, (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1994), 120-122.

<sup>2</sup> Hazel Carby, *Introduction*, in Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), ix.

Examining various ways African American women artists visually asserted their authenticity in the nineteenth century, this chapter situates Edmonia Lewis's application of visible-aggregation in her cartes-de-visite and neoclassical sculpture *Forever Free*, 1867 between Sojourner Truth's 1858 Indiana breast-baring incident and similar utilization of visible-aggregation in photographic self-portraits to demarcate specific moments where African American women artists intentionally employ the podium, the photograph, and the sculptural figure to express Black feminist visibility. The chapter delineates how each of their contributions to African American figurative representational strategies worked together to manipulate and re-direct the white racist gaze. Accordingly, the chapter examines Truth and Lewis as contemporaries to demonstrate how Black feminist visibility developed as a shared self-defined standpoint among Black female cultural producers in the mid nineteenth century. Specifically, the chapter opens with Truth's 1858 breast-baring performance, then moves into her deft usage of the photograph through the 1860's, elucidating how she employs the optics of the political stage and the cultural commodity of the carte-de-visite to assert her autonomy, subjectivity, self making and personal empowerment. It then places Truth and Lewis in conversation through their use of cartes-de-visite, juxtaposing the ways that each utilized photographic representation to express Black feminist visibility.

Focusing on the magnitude of neoclassical renderings of the Black female figure, the ways in which literary tropes like that of the tragic mulatta both obfuscate and amplify Black women's physicality, and how both contributed to racialized modes of viewing African American women, the chapter then argues that Lewis's *Forever Free*, 1867 works along with her cartes-de-visite to contradict the tragic mulatta trope.

Correspondingly, it examines Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1863 Atlantic article *Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sybil*, in which Stowe asserts her grossly exoticized and caricatured portrayal of Truth as the sole inspiration for William Wetmore Story's celebrated *Libyan Sybil*, 1860, establishing how well before Lewis gained a modicum of fame, Euro-American writers and neoclassical sculpture often rendered the Black female body as tragic. An iconic label that influenced the American public's idea of Truth well beyond the Civil War, the chapter discusses how Truth's cultural employment of cartes-de-visite was also a swift response to refute the folklore fueled by Stowe's fictional portrayal.

As the chapter shows how Lewis's photographic self-portraits extend Truth's visual archive, it also posits *Forever Free* as a figurative challenge to the tragic mulatta trope, contending that Lewis's work makes use of the cultural and material heft of white marble to, critique the presumption that mixed-raced African American women were destined for catastrophic demise because of their liminal existence between Blackness and whiteness. Thus, the chapter presents Lewis's self-portraits and figurative characters as visual companions to Truth's pictorial representations to show how African American women artists' Black feminist visuality affirmed the multidimensionality inherent to the lives of women of color. Though Truth is not often understood as an American artist, the chapter positions her career in relation to Lewis's to illuminate how African American women's artistic creativity and art making was critical to the development of Black feminist visuality. Imagining these women as a collective within the western visual field, both their literal presence as Black women artists/activists and the cultural presence of their representations of Black womanhood, the chapter explains how Black feminist visuality developed as a broader motivation among African American female cultural

producers to challenge racist visual imagery and reject the idea that Black women were not part of and could not be accurately depicted within western pictorial traditions.

### **A Defiant Compliance: Sojourner Truth's Black Feminist Performance Art**

Though Ntosake Shange's definition of the metaphysical dilemma does not appear in American culture until 1975, the origins of its presence and effects on African American women can be traced back to the late 1850's when Sojourner Truth was denied recognition as an autonomous subject through the racist visuality of a northern audience. Upon jeers from a group of pro-slavery advocates questioning her subjectivity, as well as the authenticity of her gender, the abolitionist and feminist leader was forced at an 1858 anti-slavery meeting in Indiana to expose her breasts to "prove" that she was in fact a woman. Much like Cuvier and Agassiz, Truth's detractors had come to authenticate Black women as such, through the visual presence of their genitalia. Unashamed by the demand, Truth unrobed and with her usual quick wit emasculated her attackers through a groundbreaking visual act. The *Liberator* reported:

Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to man's estate; that, although they had suckled her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck! In vindication of her truthfulness, she told them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame.<sup>62</sup>

Undoubtedly Truth's nakedness on the political stage signifies the degrading spectacles that shamed women like Baartman, Delia, and Drana. Nevertheless, her defiant compliance demonstrates the powerful effects of Black feminist visuality. For nearly three centuries, white audiences had understood Black women's nudity as a visual icon

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<sup>3</sup> Quotation from the *Liberator*, Boston, October 15, 1858 in Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1997), 139.

for sexual licentiousness and economic reproduction. Specifically, slave traders and white spectators often scrutinized the contours of Black women's genitalia to authenticate just how hypersexual or "primitive" enslaved women were. As a woman very familiar with both the trials of slavery and the uncertainty of freedom, Truth understood the criticality of a Black woman's nudity not only to the American economy, but even more so to the western visual field. Thus, she agreed to expose her breasts before the Indiana audience to proclaim her own *truth*.

Born into slavery as Isabella Van Wagenen,<sup>63</sup> circa 1797 in Ulster County, New York, Truth understood how America's peculiar institution functioned upon the physical, sexual, and often visual presence of the Black female nude. Thus, in response to raucous audience members, she exhibited her body in a daring act of personal empowerment that declared both her autonomy and subjectivity. This Black feminist visuality couples a quick wit with a willingness to undress, transforming her torso into a Black female nude that transcends the popular "Mammy" and "Hottentot" stereotypes. She clearly emphasized that she was not exposing her breasts to satisfy the Euro-American voyeur; rather her choice to undress was well intended to illuminate the realities of enslaved women's experiences and disgrace the pro-slavery advocates. By baring her breasts in her own way, Truth shattered the social codes of the day, offering her audience alternative images of both the enslaved mother and the Black female nude.

Truth's Black feminist visuality strategically positions her nudity within the visual realm of anti-slavery politics to challenge Euro-American scopic understandings of Black women popularized by pseudo-scientific imagery like Cuvier and Agassiz's. As both men, along with dozens of other European and Euro-American scientists and artists,

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<sup>4</sup> She changed her name to Sojourner Truth on June 1, 1843.

worked throughout the nineteenth century to establish the Black female nude as the essential visual marker of aberrance and inferiority, Truth deliberately used her body to communicate the exact opposite. As she disrobed, she explained that her breasts nursed numerous white children “to the exclusion” of the Black children produced in her womb. In pairing her act of undress with a firm articulation of a common exploit of Black female enslavement, Truth strategically layered her personal experiences with the quotidian realities of enslaved women. As follows, she expresses Black feminist visibility through a self-making act that exhibits visible-aggregation. First, she ensured that her corporeal materiality confirmed her authenticity as both a formerly enslaved woman –claiming to have wet nursed “many a white babe” – and a dignified individual whose autonomy and subjectivity is intentionally obstructed by an oppressive system that also falsely renders Black women as “other” to reinforce their enslavement. By illuminating that her nudity was to the shame of her persecutors, and not to Truth herself, she affirmed that Black women had a very clear sense of self and would gladly showcase that authenticity if in fact the larger society did not purposely deny them such opportunities. With such an incendiary charge, Truth then becomes a visual representation of all enslaved women, extending her identity to signify the whole of their experiences. As artist and historian Nell Irvin Painter writes, “[w]et nursing by slaves was far more prevalent in the plantation South than Dutch New York, [thus] Truth’s claim . . . evoked her symbolic history as a slave mother rather than her own actual experience . . . As an authentic representative of slavery, Truth in performance was refashioning herself as a southerner.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1997), 141.

Understanding that racist visibility drove Euro-American conceptualizations and interpretations of Black women's physicality and sexuality, Truth visualized herself at a critical political moment to suggest that if Black women controlled the depictions of their bodies, the imagery regarding Black women's identity would very literally produce a completely different picture. Accordingly, she cleverly designed her performance, constructing her verbalization to function concurrently with her nudity to produce a reality her hecklers did not expect.

By presenting herself as a nude, but independent Black female body, Truth becomes a visual retort that transforms instigation meant to embarrass, discredit, and degrade her into a valiant act that insults those who question her authenticity. She "infantilizes" and "unman[s]"<sup>65</sup> her critics with a sharp critique that converts her nude breasts into visual objects that implicate slaveholders, not Black women, as the *true* social aberration. Thus, her Black feminist visibility disrupts the western visual field to allow for reverse visual interpretations that challenge white manhood instead of confirming Black women's so-called "primitive" womanhood. It also firmly centers her self-making act within enslaved women's material reality to visualize the ways in which they retain a strong sense of autonomy and subjectivity despite their oppression. By verbally layering her actual body with personal experiences, knowledge of enslaved women's reality, and understandings of Euro-American's racist visibility, Truth's performative visible-aggregation demonstrates the power of Black feminist visibility to alter the western visual field and conquer the metaphysical dilemma, allowing her the right to exist as a human being who is at once Black, woman, activist, and artist.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 140.



By illuminating the direct connection between Black women's nude bodies and the sadistic mechanisms of slavery, Truth's Black feminist visuality also usurps the American myth that defined enslaved women as perpetually grinning, happy-go-lucky mammies. As an alternative, her visual verbalizations present a much more accurate image of Black motherhood, explaining how an enslaved woman was often forced to care for white children at the expense of her own based purely upon the wants and needs of her slaveholder or, more disturbingly, his spouse. Thus, her single performative act visually demonstrates how slaveholders exploit Black women economically – her womb increases slave numbers while her breasts nurture future slaveholders; sexually – in many cases an enslaved woman's offspring resulted from rape; physically – enslaved women performed both bodily and sexual labor in the field and the domestic interior; and visually as all these “functions” of the Black woman within the slave holding system permits Truth's liberated body to be subjugated and questioned in the scopic realm of the political stage. The visual essence of Truth's performance then actualizes Black feminist visuality as it illuminates the realities of enslaved women's experiences through a sound assertion of her own autonomy, subjectivity, and personal empowerment, while simultaneously exposing how the fundamental structures of slavery directly inform racist modes of vision. Unlike Cuvier and Agassiz, she employs her naked breasts and the power of language to demonstrate the reality of Black womanhood, vindicating Baartman, Delia, Drana, and millions of other enslaved women through a Black feminist visuality that exhibits her body as evidence of her authenticity as an autonomous subject, and not a primitive “Hottentot.”

## **Picturing Truth**

Restricted from expressing herself through the written word, Truth's utilization of the visual sphere as a means of political self-expression extended to photography, and the carte-de-visite quickly became her artistic weapon of choice.<sup>66</sup> The 1860's engendered a fervent demand for photographic images, and the carte-de-visite was the nation's most prominent form of self-portraiture.<sup>67</sup> Upon its debut, the cart-de-visite transformed American photography, making self-portraiture both accessible and affordable to the masses. Its popularity and reasonable cost made the small photograph a critical commodity for most abolitionists who, like Truth, often sold cartes-de-visite to raise funds for their various organizations. Appealing most fervently to northern Americans, the carte-de-visite undoubtedly helped abolitionists shape the broader anti-slavery agenda; but, where most abolitionists used troubling images of Blacks to illuminate slaveholders' appalling misuse of power, Truth utilized her self-imagery to combat the problematic history of Black women's representation in both abolitionist visual culture and broader western art. Accordingly, she frequently employed visible-aggregation in her cartes-de-visite to further Black feminist visibility, displaying herself as a fully clothed, moral representative of Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and material reality.

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<sup>7</sup> As Truth was unable to write, she purposely wielded the carte-de-visite to represent herself in her own terms, allowing her to usurp the common narratives surrounding Black women's identity. For more on this see Painter, 185-199.

<sup>8</sup> Painter, 185-186.



**Figure 15** Photographer unknown, *Sojourner Truth*, 1864, carte-de-visite. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

**Figure 16** Photographer unknown, *Sojourner Truth*, 1863-1870, carte-de-visite. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution.

In order to shift modes of perception within the western pictorial arena, Truth is just as clever in her self-portraits as she was in Indiana. Her images couple strategic photographic design with the management of economic exchange to express Black feminist visibility. Aptly, her cartes-de-visite state, “I sell the shadow to support the substance,” indicating that not only was she an autonomous subject controlling her image and its subsequent reproduction, but that her management of its circulation sustained her personal economic empowerment, as well as her celebrity in visualizing the substance of Black women’s experiences. Understanding that her cartes-de-visite were critical to revising definitions of true womanhood to include the experiences of Black women, her photographic application of visible-aggregation begins with a strategic layering of material items that symbolize gentility. Above (figure 2.15), Truth is donned in the finest Quaker-style attire. Tailored in a rich silk fabric, the detail embroidery on the vest and sleeves of her jacket dispel any attempt to view her as slave or “exotic other.” Her upright posture and earnest gaze affirm her autonomy and negate notions of illiteracy, as she exudes intelligence from her wire-framed eyeglasses while resting her left elbow lightly upon a leather bound book. In her lap, she holds the essential components of knitting to

illustrate her interests in domesticity, and the incandescence of her shawl and headscarf illuminate her expression of morality.

Truth's material articulation of refinement was the foundational design of all her self-portraits, which she used to emphasize Black women's knowledge of body politics and command of material culture. This complex arrangement of design and theme is essential to Truth's photographic self-making in that it too represents her skillful application of visible-aggregation to express Black feminist visibility. For example, Truth couples western scholastic objects – the eyeglasses and the leather bound book – to visualize her intellect though she herself was illiterate. By doing so, she connects a body that most viewers automatically assumed to be unlearned – the Black female – to the cultural heft of items most commonly associated with intelligence. Her self-presentation emphasizes that despite the fact that slavery prohibited it, Black women often found ways to educate themselves through both common and alternative forms of literacy and that they consistently wielded these forms of knowledge to their advantage. In Truth's case, she was fully literate in the fundamentals of economic exchange and self-fashioning.

Quoting Truth's commitment to financial independence Painter writes:

All along she drew a distinction between selling her artifacts, which was *quid pro quo*, and charity. Selling books and photographs did not compromise one's independence, for sale was an exchange, transferring value for their price . . . Beginning to make her way at antislavery meetings, she would sell sheets printed with her original song lyrics for 5-10 cents each. She prided herself on early *autonomy*: "I was selling songs; for I always had something to pay my way with. Nobody paid me, for I was a free agent, to go and come when I pleased."<sup>68</sup> (emphasis mine)

As a woman whose body was once sold and exchanged for the benefits of others, Truth undoubtedly understood the benefits of remaining an independent "free agent." To

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 197.

solidify her position as such, she manipulated both the expressive and economic possibilities of photography to articulate her autonomy and subjectivity. Painter writes:

Truth's photographs gave her an intangible independence, liberating her from the printed words of others. She sat for her first photographic portraits within a month of the publication of Stowe's "Lybian Sibyl." Truth could not write, but she could project herself photographically. Photographs furnished a new means of communication – one more powerful than writing. They allowed Truth to circumvent genteel discourse and the racial stereotype embedded in her nation's language.<sup>69</sup>

As pictorial objects, Truth's self-portraits also allowed her to escape the visual vocabularies of racist visuality, which were frequently proliferated through fictitious literary accounts like Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl" – the 1863 essay in which Stowe constructs Truth as both a primitive African and a shallow southern mammy. By ornamenting her body with such conventional articles of intelligence, and exposing only her face and hands, Truth purposely avoids visual notions of both primitivism and hypersexuality, communicating instead her authenticity as a Black woman who is equally intelligent and financially independent. Again, her Black feminist visuality nuances cultural meanings to transform material objects, which could be read simply as photographic décor and anti-slavery pictorial commodities, into purveyors of Black women's realities and her personal identity as a sophisticated abolitionist and women's rights advocate.

Truth's photographic employment of visible-aggregation and Black feminist visuality continues as she ingeniously layers her fashions within themes of respectability and true womanhood to demonstrate how literacy frequently manifested for Black women as a keen artistic dexterity in textile design, arrangement, and comprehensive awareness of the cultural and political significance of various fabrics and forms of dress.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 198.

Though the economy of slavery prevented Black women from becoming textile designers in the traditional sense, historically, they frequently converted fabrics meant to substantiate their slave status into colorful garments that better expressed their individuality and sense of dignity. Historian Stephanie M.H. Camp explains:

Just as bondwomen made creative work of quilt making, they spent some of their evenings turning the plain, uncolored tow, denim, hemp, burlap, and cotton cloth they had woven into fancy, decorative cloth. Robert Shepherd remembered his mother's handiwork: "Everything was striped" cause Mammy liked to make it fancy." Catherine Slim's mother, a talented weaver, wove stripes of red, white, and blue as well as flowers into the cloth that she then sewed into dresses for her daughter. Women [also] dyed the coarse material allotted them colors they liked.<sup>70</sup>

Though Truth did not construct her own dresses, her choice of such expertly tailored garments further exemplifies how Black women often utilized textiles to firmly ground their identities within notions of femininity and womanhood. Cultivating their self-expression, in the limited time that was their own, enslaved women designed various types of dresses for self-gratification. Their creations ranged from simple shifts to elaborate full skirt gowns, which they regularly hooped with old grapevines and tree limbs. As the hoop skirt symbolized Victorian ideals of femininity and domesticity, Black women "denaturalized their slave status,"<sup>71</sup> appropriating its form to claim womanhood for themselves. Accordingly, Truth's cartes-de-visite center the fullness of her skirts. By placing small material objects – knitting and a daguerreotype of her grandson – in her lap, Truth visually interlaces the pleats of her skirts with cultural ideals of home life, family, motherhood, and decorative art. Rather than objectify her literal body, as her Indiana

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<sup>70</sup> Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 82. For more on Black women's textile design and skill in the decorative arts see also Lisa Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26-49.

<sup>71</sup> Camp, 83.

detractors tried so blatantly to do, Truth's employment of visible-aggregation here deliberately layers a material self-covering within specific feminine themes to emphasize the objects on and around her body, and not her physicality itself, as visual indicators of her femaleness and subjectivity. Specifically, she chooses to represent her wear of the hoop skirt, practice of knitting, and recognition of family; rather than her genitalia, as visual substantiations of Black womanhood.

Refuting mammy imagery, the pristine condition of both her headscarf and shawl counter notions of servitude in that their neat placement upon her head and shoulders substantiate her grace and confidence. While the knitting utensils represent Black women's work in the domestic sphere, they also doubly signify a Black woman's self-making. By displaying them in her lap, Truth centers a form of Black women's decorative art within her own creative practice to emphasize how Black women's art very literally "works" to their advantage both politically and economically. Much like Truth's self-portraits, Black women's textile work enhanced their economic status allowing some, like Elizabeth Keckley,<sup>72</sup> to purchase their freedom. To be sure, this was not the typical outcome for Black women artisans as many slaveowners exploited their labor for personal gain. However, Black women's literacy in textile design and arrangement maintained its cathartic function as Black "[w]omen's style allowed them to take pleasure in their bodies, to deny that they were only (or mainly) worth the prices their owners placed on them."<sup>73</sup> Truth then asserts and subsequently distributes fashionable representations of herself to visualize this frequently ignored reality, while

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<sup>72</sup> For many years, Elizabeth Keckley was the personal designer to Mary Todd Lincoln and Varina Howell (Mrs. Jefferson Davis). Her career was notable in that she employed her skills as a seamstress to purchase her freedom and eventually begin a very successful career in American fashion design. See Farrington, 43-44 and Keckley's autobiography, Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four in the White House* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>73</sup> Camp, 83.

simultaneously demonstrating that Black women could in fact be respectfully depicted within the tenets of true womanhood and abolitionist visual propaganda. Her cartes-de-visite proved that Black women were being very purposely sexualized within western visual culture and restricted from the tenets of true womanhood in efforts to reinforce gender-based racial subjugation. Further elucidating how Truth's cartes-de-visite redefined notions of womanhood, Painter argues, "[The] Black woman as lady went against the commonplaces of nineteenth-century American culture. But by circulating her photographs widely, Truth claimed womanhood for a black woman who had been a slave, occupying a space ordinarily off limits to women like her. She refused to define herself by her enslavement."<sup>74</sup> Truth's control of both the making and sale of her imagery then reveals that Black feminist visuality could change the pictorial narrative surrounding Black women's identities, while simultaneously furthering the substance of Black women's realities through a commodification of culture made possible by the mechanical processes of industry. Moreover, the luxurious fabrics of Truth's ensembles not only reinforce her position as a respectable middle-class matron; they represent an African American woman's style as claim to femininity, autonomy, womanhood, literacy, and individuality.

Though resistance to western society's damaging iconography of Black women is crucial to African American women's art making, it is just a single thread in Black feminist visuality. Truth's performance and photographic art demonstrates this in that both assert Black women's self-making, autonomy, subjectivity, and personal empowerment to visualize Black women's identity formation in the midst of the larger society's racist visuality. It also participates in the broader African American approach to

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<sup>74</sup> Painter, 198.



self-representation through photography, represented by the daguerreotype of her grandson in Figure 2.16 and most notably through Frederick Douglass's self-portraits.

Being the most frequently photographed man of his time, Douglass was a connoisseur of visual representation. In 1849, he states in *The Liberator*:

We shall venture one remark, which we have never heard before, and which will, perhaps, be set down to the account of our negro vanity; and it may be, not unjustly so, but we have presented it for what it may be worth. It is this: negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinct features. And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have adopted a theory respecting the distinctive features of negro physiognomy. . . They associate with the negro face, high cheek bones, distended nostril, depressed nose, thick lips, and retreating forehead. This theory, impressed strongly on the mind of an artist, exercises a powerful influence over his pencil, and very naturally leads him to distort and exaggerate those peculiarities, even when they scarcely exist in the original. The temptation to make the likeness of the negro rather than of the man, is very strong; and often leads the artist, as well as the player, to 'overstep the modesty of nature.'<sup>75</sup>

The ubiquity of degrading representations of Blacks throughout American visual culture led Douglass to suggest that white artists could not *see* African Americans as they truly existed. Thus, he maintained that until African Americans controlled and produced pictures of themselves, negative visual images depicting Black men and women would remain omnipresent within American culture. Sojourner Truth wasted no time. She skillfully wielded the cultural mechanisms of photography to express Black feminist visuality through a visible-aggregation that layers her pictorial body with clothing, accessories, and themes of Black women's literacy, material culture, and true womanhood to communicate her authenticity as an autonomous subject. Thus, Truth's work isn't simply a contrasting presentation of Black women's bodies; instead, her visual art appropriates and recodes popular western notions and objects to envisage the

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<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Shaw, *Portraits of a People*, 13.

multidimensionality of Black women's identities and experiences, while constructing new modes of viewing the sinews between race, class, gender, and sexuality. Her performance and photographic work then does not simply display her abolitionist and feminist views, but illuminates African American women's art making as a significant component of Black women's material reality and political objectives, demonstrating how vital African American women's artistic creativity is to restructuring the western visual sphere.

### **The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Black Woman**



**Figure 17** Henry Rocher, *Edmonia Lewis, cartes-de-visite*, c. 1870. Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Transfer from Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Bequest of Evert Jansen Wendell.

Singularly, Truth's career provides significant examples of how Black feminist visuality confronts and diminishes mainstream visual narratives that demean Black women's identities. Yet, the concept emerges as a shared self-defined standpoint among African American women artists when Truth is considered alongside her younger contemporary, neoclassical sculptor Edmonia Lewis who was an internationally renowned American artist from 1864-1890. Circa 1870, Lewis sat for a series of portraits that layer the typical feminine markers of the bohemian artist lifestyle within a tousled guise and preoccupied gaze to image the laboring Black female subject as professional artist. As women of color were rarely afforded access to training in the fine arts, Lewis's physical presence as a working artist in Rome completely troubled the western visual

field. *The Revolution* proclaimed, “one of the first studios which we visited in Rome was that of Edmonia Lewis, the colored sculptor. *We were interested in her even before we saw her, or any of her works; not only because of her sex, but of her race,* and our acquaintance with her and her works has only heightened the interest which we felt in her” (emphasis mine).<sup>76</sup> Lewis’s sheer existence frequently baffled audiences to the point of pronounced fascination, just as Harper’s eloquent oration vexes the South Carolina writer’s and Truth’s defiant compliance shames her detractors in Indiana. However, audiences considered Lewis’s autonomy and subjectivity to be so uniquely exotic that in this instance she troubles the writer’s vision without actually being seen. The simple mention of her race, gender, and occupation altogether was enough to “heighten the [writer’s] interest” because it disrupts popular understandings of Black womanhood.

A female artist of both Native American and African American heritage,<sup>77</sup> whites habitually perceived Lewis to be the anomaly of all anomalies. Like Cuvier and Agassiz, newspaper editors and art critics often relied upon the pseudoscientific language of the day, using adjectives like “wild,” “natural,” and “blood,” to describe Lewis’s physicality and her neoclassical works in efforts to understand her existence as a professional sculptor who was at once Chippewa, Black and female.<sup>78</sup> In 1865, she expatriated to

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<sup>76</sup> Laura Curtis Bullard, “Edmonia Lewis.” *The Revolution* 7, no.16 (April 20, 1871).

<sup>77</sup> Lewis’s mother Catherine Lewis was born in Canada to an African American father named John Mike, who was an escaped slave, and a mother of mixed Ojibwa and African American heritage. Later, once the Mike family settled in Albany, NY, Catherine married a West Indian man with the surname Lewis, who Edmonia describes as “a negro and a gentleman’s servant” in an 1866 interview with Henry Wreford of the London Athenæum. Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History’s Black and Indian Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4; Henry Wreford, “A Negro Sculptress,” in *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*, April 7, 1866. For more on Lewis’s biography see also Harry Henderson and Albert Henderson, *The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis: A Narrative Biography* (Connecticut: Esquiline Hill Press, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Buick dedicates an entire chapter to the ways in which Lewis’s heritage frequently informed readings of her artworks by reviewers, critics, and art historians from the nineteenth century to the present. So much so, that an art historical binary emerges that traps Lewis and her works between two analytical

Rome to perfect her skills, and remained abroad for the duration of her career. Thus, her material reality as an American sculptor is central to her photographic employment of visible-aggregation. Her self-portraits then convey her occupation, underscoring her unconventionality and independence through a visual layering that combines themes of labor, femininity, respectability, and womanhood within artist dress – her clothing, short curls, recalcitrant gaze, and accessories – to confirm her authenticity as an internationally renowned American artist. Art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw explains:

From her cropped hair, cut short to stay out of her way while at work as well as in the style of a fellow American sculptor Harriet Hosmer, to the exquisitely trimmed jacket and the unrestrictive cut of her clothes, all serve to identify her as a bohemian and an artist. At the same time they indicate that this was not the average image of a woman of color in the 1870's. Her clothing depicts the dominant and the avant-garde cultural ideologies of feminine and artistic dress as well as the artist's own relationship to these discourses.<sup>79</sup>

With such fervent public allure surrounding her career, Lewis's connections to narratives regarding art making, womanhood, and independence were equally as fraught as Truth's and Harper's. Accordingly, her cartes-de-visite expand Truth's photographic archive, functioning as layered pictorial configurations that express Black feminist visuality and visual companions that extend the principles of true womanhood to include conceptions of Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, self-making, and personal empowerment. The more essential aspect of Lewis's Black feminist visuality; however, is that she employs visible-aggregation to center the Black female as an active, autonomous subject fully engaged in producing neoclassical sculpture.

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paradigms: "that of the exotic on the one hand and, on the other, the wily subversive feminist who manipulated her white audience through the use of her white marble sculpture." Buick, 133-143.

<sup>79</sup> Shaw, 170.

Known for singularly performing all tasks required to complete her works, notions of Black women's industry are central to Lewis's professional image. Laura Bullard, editor of *The Revolution* reported:

Miss Lewis is one of the few sculptors whom no one charges with having assistance in her work. Every one admits that whether good or bad, her marbles are all her own. So determined is she to avoid all occasion for detraction, that she even "puts up" her clay; a work purely mechanical, and one of great drudgery, which scarcely any *male* sculptor does for himself. It is a very hard and very fatiguing process, for it consists in the piling up masses of wet clay into a vague outline of a human figure, out of which the sculptor brings the model into form and beauty. If Miss Lewis were not very strong, she could not do this, and it seems to us an unnecessary expenditure of her physical powers.<sup>80</sup>

Bullard provides fundamental insight into Lewis's passion for neoclassical sculpture as she outlines the arduous physical labor the medium demands from its practitioners and confirms that Lewis accomplishes this work "all [on] her own." Consequently, deeper contexts for Lewis's photographic application of visible-aggregation arise when considering Bullard's 1871 review within ideologies regarding Black women's labor, true womanhood, and questions of Black female authenticity that were popular during Reconstruction, the same era that Lewis commissioned her portraits.

It hardly needs to be stated that Black women were excluded from Victorian concepts of true womanhood because slavery forced them into permanent conditions of strenuous physical labor and relentless sexual abuse. However, this exclusion was also rooted in the romanticisms of Trans-Atlantic travel narratives penned by Europeans, whose imaginative tales depicted Black women as "natural born" laborers, while visually establishing the iconography that identified the African "Hottentot" as the authentic Black woman. Jennifer Morgan explains:

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<sup>80</sup> Bullard, "Edmonia Lewis."

The invisibility of enslaved women in the iconography of early American slave labor is a modern omission. For the men who put black women to work in the fields and for the women who worked there, women's capacity for backbreaking labor was hardly incidental. Indeed it was central to developing racist ideology; the "natural" difference between 'Negroes' and Englishmen often was evidenced by black women's supposed ability to labor ceaselessly. As Europeans registered their "wonder" at African difference, the image of the black intellectual and social milieu from which English slave owners emerged supported an approach to the organization of labor that fully exploited enslaved women's real and imaginary capacity for grueling agricultural toil.<sup>81</sup>

In order for western slave economies to thrive, European plantation owners needed to believe that Black women possessed a unique ability to labor, both reproductively and physically, without pain or fatigue. Thus, both literary and pictorial imagery of Black women performing strenuous labor in cotton fields and dangerous work in Caribbean cane fields dominated colonial and antebellum travel narratives, becoming foundational accounts that substantiated the mythology surrounding Black women's bodies. As the tenets of true womanhood developed alongside slavery and perceptions of enslaved women's "natural ability" to work, beliefs about Black women's incapacity for refinement, sophistication, and morality were cemented into the dominant culture's ideology of femininity and the "lady."

Given that racist societal conditions continued to perpetuate and exacerbate analogous circumstances for emancipated women, sentiments denying Black women's subjectivity and womanliness were also prominent throughout the post-bellum period. While northern philanthropists and Freedman's Bureau agents went about "reconstructing" the south, "few Union officials were inclined to believe that freedwomen as a group should contribute anything less than their full muscle power to

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<sup>81</sup> Morgan, 146.

the rebuilding of the region's economic system."<sup>82</sup> Though Reconstruction allowed Black women to move from their master's fields into the domains of their own homes, southern planters vehemently derided the "freedwomen who 'played the lady' and refused to join workers in the field,"<sup>83</sup> despite the fact that most continued grueling agricultural labor for their families by day and spent most of the night attending to their domestic needs.

Even freedom in the north had its difficulties. During Reconstruction, the costs of living in northern states frequently exceeded the wages Black women earned and many found themselves in compromising economic positions without help from their husbands, their communities, or abolitionist patronage. In 1866, recounting the harrowing position her husband's debt and subsequent death placed her in, Frances Harper exclaimed:

before he had been in his grave three months, the administrator had swept the very milk-crocks and wash tubs from my hands. I was a farmer's wife and made butter for the Columbus market; but what could I do, when they had swept all away? They left me one thing – and that was a looking glass! . . . I took my children in my arms, and went out to seek my living . . . And I went back to Ohio with my orphaned children in my arms, without a single feather bed in the wide world, that was not in the custody of the law. I say, then, that justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law.<sup>84</sup>

With such staunch politics dictating the conditions of their freedom, Harper exclaims how the multilayered amalgam of racism, sexism, and patriarchy produced an oppression that forced Black women to seek their own livings. This act of self-sufficiency also required them to skillfully redefine ideologies of true womanhood to include notions of labor given that it was so central to their material reality. Truth demonstrates such ingenuity as the work she puts into designing her portraits result in cartes-de-visite,

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<sup>82</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1985), 55.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>84</sup> Frances E.W. Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," in Frances Smith Foster, *A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 217.

economic commodities that promote the anti-slavery cause, visualize Black women's subjectivity, autonomy, personal empowerment, and respectability all while garnering her a livable wage. Harper, who notably sustained herself through copious literary publications and fervent abolitionist orations, often encouraged white women to enrich their womanhood by dedicating their talents to work outside the home that uplifted the weak and poorer classes. During her 1875 address at the Centennial Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Harper stated:

Give power and significance to your own life, and in the great work of upbuilding there is room for women's work and women's heart. Oh, that our hearts were alive and our vision quickened, to see the grandeur of the work that lies before. We have some culture among us, but I think our culture lacks enthusiasm. We need a deep earnestness and a lofty unselfishness to round out our lives . . . Women in your golden youth; mother binding around your heart all the precious ties of life – let no magnificence of culture, or amplitude of fortune, or refinement of sensibilities, repel you from helping the weaker and less favored. If you have ampler gifts, hold them as larger opportunities with which you can benefit others.<sup>85</sup>

As true womanhood mandated that white women abstain from physical labor in order to cultivate a “magnificence of culture,” “amplitude of fortune,” and “refinement of sensibilities” within the domestic sphere, Harper is blatantly critiquing these ideas as they customarily inhibited white women's full participation in the social and political efforts she believed proffered a greater responsibility to mankind. She also challenges these notions as they completely ignore the various ways Black women in both southern and northern states cultivated their womanhood through activities like, adroit textile production, interior design, photographic representations, fashion design, and literary publications that were either direct results of or edifying escapes from their daily physical labor.

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<sup>85</sup> Frances E.W. Harper, “The Great Problem to be Solved,” in Frances Smith Foster, *A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 222.



Considering the dominant culture's belief that Black women were "natural laborers" who should work perpetually for the economic advancement of western society and Black women's strategic efforts to enlighten western culture while working primarily for themselves and their communities, Bullard's comments racialize the processes of neoclassical sculpture through a phraseology of exceptionalism, describing Lewis's corporal labor as a "physical power," which sets her apart from her colleagues in Rome. To be sure, Bullard's intent is to celebrate Lewis and her artistic achievements. However, by describing Lewis as a herculean individual with the innate ability to labor strenuously and withstand all adversity, Bullard's review dehumanizes Lewis in the tradition of racist mythologies that legitimized Black women as natural physical laborers. For instance, Bullard confirms that Lewis built all her own models. Yet, in Bullard's opinion, it is precisely this ability that differentiates Lewis from white neoclassical artists as no "male" sculptor performs this chore. Unquestionably, white women sculptors working in the nineteenth century experienced great prejudice and scrutiny when it came to the labor of modeling and carving their sculptures, as their abilities to perform or abstain from this work spoke to the authenticity of their artistry. As art historian Kirsten Buick explains:

Women were automatically done when they hired studio help. The workshop method was something we are familiar with from the Renaissance and Andy Warhol – you hire people more skilled than you to realize your conceptions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was as though women couldn't do the conceptual work. The Italian carvers that they had in their studios were credited with everything.<sup>86</sup>

Lewis's colleagues, Harriet Hosmer and Anne Whitney, were often subjected to such awful discrimination. Sexism within neoclassical sculpture was so blatant in Whitney's case that she was denied the first-place honor her anonymous submission won in the

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<sup>86</sup> Stephanie Cash and Carl Rojas, "Q & A: Q& A with Kirsten Pai Buick," *Burnaway*, March 18, 2016, [www.burnaway.org](http://www.burnaway.org).

competition for a commissioned memorial of United States senator and abolitionist Charles Sumner. Tenets of true womanhood were at work against Whitney as the judges sought “to avoid the indelicate associations of a woman knowledgeable of the male body, particularly the modeling of a man’s legs.”<sup>87</sup> In this case, Whitney’s deft figuring of male anatomy contradicted the piety and virtue true womanhood required of white women.

As Lewis worked very closely with Hosmer and Whitney throughout her time in Rome, Bullard’s failure to mention either woman in her review also racializes Lewis’s preparatory work through notions of true womanhood, insinuating that, as white “ladies,” Hosmer and Whitney did not execute the “mechanical” “drudgery” putting up clay required. At the very beginning of her editorial Bullard claims, Lewis possesses “an untiring patience to conquer all difficulties”<sup>88</sup> simply because she is Black, Chippewa, and female. Hence, Bullard establishes a double binary based on race and gender that separates Lewis from her white constituents because she literally performs what they do not – the work itself. Bullard’s use of descriptive phrases such as, “physical powers” and “very strong,” then link Lewis to colonial and antebellum ideologies of Black women’s “supposed” innate ability to endure grueling circumstances, and post-bellum narratives that used this mythology to deny Black women’s freedom and womanhood. Surely, principles of true womanhood relegated physical labor to the man’s realm, but reading Bullard’s review within the contexts of slavery and Reconstruction reveals how her narrative of Lewis’s exceptionalism draws upon and works within both racist and sexist Victorian ideologies to deliberately relate Lewis to typical derogatory imaginings of the

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<sup>87</sup> Charmaine A. Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>88</sup> Bullard, “Edmonia Lewis.”

Black female laborer in order to differentiate her position as an internationally renowned fine artist from the professional realities of her white contemporaries.

This tone persists as Bullard asserts that despite one's assumption, "Miss Lewis is one of the few sculptors whom no one charges with having assistance in her work."<sup>89</sup> Though Bullard is specifically referencing the absence of studio assistants from Lewis's practice, her review couples Lewis's biography – her rise from the "wilds" of a primitive Native American lifestyle and fledgling African American culture, to the sophistication of neoclassical sculpture and prestige of Rome – with her physical prowess, to convince readers that Lewis is so extraordinary she needs no help at all. But much like Harper in 1866, Lewis desperately needed assistance. Contrary to what Bullard assumes, Lewis could not sustain a living on her "physical powers" alone. She appeals to her patron Maria Weston Chapman for help securing funds for her livelihood and now famous sculpture *Forever Free*. Lewis wrote:

I am in great need of money. What little money I had I put all in that work with my heart. And I truly hope that the work of two long years has not been lost. Dear Mrs. Chapman I been thinking that it may be that you have meat [*sic*] with some who think that it will ruin me to help me – but you may tell them that in giving a little something towards that group – that will not only aid me but will show their good feeling for one who has given all for poor humanity . . . Will you dear Mrs. Chapman be so kind as to see Mr. Sewall and if he has been paid the Eaight [*sic*] hundred dollars (\$800.) will he be so kind as to send to me the same as I am in need of it very mutch [*sic*] – I have done very little this winter and unless I receive this money from home – I will not be able to get on this year.<sup>90</sup>

Though Bullard's perception falsely conceives Lewis as the typical Black woman who could singularly transcend enormous adversity while performing all the bodily tasks essential to maintaining her well-being, Lewis's letter to Chapman indicates that she was

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Edmonia Lewis to Maria Weston Chapman, May 3, 1868, Boston Public Library, Anti-Slavery Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Department.

not an all-powerful, natural-born exception that could accomplish everything alone. With this, Bullard's exceptionalization of Lewis's laboring ability becomes an overall interrogation of her status as a neoclassical sculptor because she suggests that without such "physical powers," Lewis's could never conceptualize, model, or even carve her works "into form and beauty," let alone become a famous international visual artist. For that reason, Bullard deems Lewis's physical labor "an unnecessary expenditure" as neoclassicism was not a modern industry that required Black women's work. Nevertheless, Lewis deliberately emphasizes that it was precisely her labor that authenticated her work and sustained her position as an American artist, stressing to Chapman that with every bit of her heart, she put all her work and capital into *Forever Free*. The juxtaposition of Bullard's review and Lewis's letter then demonstrates how visual interpretations of Black womanhood, particularly Black women's work, often fragmented along racial lines, registering inversely within the western visual field depending on the viewer.

Like most Black women working during the Civil War and Reconstruction, Lewis wanted to be fully compensated for the work she performed, and needed a supportive community of friends and patrons. Just as much as she depended upon her own labor, she was also equally reliant upon the financial patronage of abolitionists and their networks of northern art collectors. So, in conjunction with Truth, Lewis's visible-aggregation reveals her active participation in broader narratives of Black women's independence. In the photos above, she employs visible-aggregation to create imagery that centralizes her physical labor as an essential component of her artist practice, which constitutes her living, expresses Black feminist visibility, and grounds her authenticity as a neoclassical

sculptor. For example, in figure 2.17a Lewis's slightly disheveled appearance implies interruption, as if she'd recently paused and rushed from another activity to sit for the portrait. Her frazzled hair, loosened necktie, and the crumpled textile thrown loosely over her left shoulder give a sense of action and hasty preparation. Although she is seated, the undulating folds of her apparel evoke feelings of movement as they echo both the sway and twists of the tassels on the chair's armrest. The strategic wrinkling of her skirt and the textile, coupled with the untidiness of her curls, signify a body that may have been performing the laborious tasks Bullard describes. In this manner, Lewis's long, full skirt is not the Victorian marker of domesticity; rather, it is the feminine dress of the sculptor. By constructing an image that implies physical activity, Lewis exhibits her determination "to avoid all occasion for detraction,"<sup>91</sup> photographically representing her position as a maker of western art. Concepts of Black women's work then move between the layers of the feminine artist's uniform to link Black women's physical labor to the cultural prestige of artistic genius.

Lewis's gaze also communicates her passion for sculpture and authenticity as an artist. Fixated on something off-camera, her eyes indicate that her attention is elsewhere – possibly on her work in Rome. Though she fabricates image 2.17a to look as if she may have been in the middle of sculpting, in reality, she sat for her portraits in Henry Rocher's Chicago studio. This informs Lewis's Black feminist visuality given that after her apprenticeship with American sculptor Edward A. Brackett, she sailed for Italy and never maintained a studio space in the United States. Instead, she worked independently in Europe and employed various abolitionist networks and publications to solicit American interest in her work. Her pert expression, which disregards the photographer in each

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<sup>91</sup> Bullard, "Edmonia Lewis."

portrait, then signifies her position as an internationally renowned artist. Hence, her look away from the camera reinforces her overall “look” as a professional artist. It encourages the viewer to contemplate what she may be looking at, drawing attention away from her corporeal reality to encourage consideration of the circumstances under which her status arose. Her gaze reinforces her apparel, suggesting that Black women’s industriousness operates concurrently with abolitionist support to stabilize her position. Like Truth, she circulated her portraits as cartes-de-visite.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Lewis’s photographic use of visible-aggregation here visualizes her individual autonomy, subjectivity, and economic empowerment to reject racist visuality and its maintenance of pictorial mythologies that brand authentic Black women as natural laborers or primitive Hottentots. Thus, she layers her gaze and clothing to express hints of physical labor, which articulate the Black woman as an artistic operative; rather than the static object of Euro-American pseudoscientific visual inquiry.

In image 2.17b, Lewis drastically tidies her layered appearance, stating her claims to womanhood and femininity. The large, velvet textile is wrapped loosely but elegantly around her torso, reinforcing perceptions of refinement, while providing additional layers of material coverage to express morality. Her cap is placed carefully atop her head and not a single strand of hair is out of place. Though her presence is firm, her appearance is softened and stilled by the careful unfolding and smoothing of her skirt, hair, and the textile. In this manner, Lewis’s neatened representation suggests sophistication and Black women’s respectability. Additionally, her left hand figures prominently to emphasize the band on her ring finger. Certainly, the exposure of only her face and hands in each

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<sup>92</sup> Shaw, 170. Though it is known that Lewis circulated her cartes-de-visite to potential buyers, a large visual archive of Lewis does not exist. The images included here are only three of a set of six cartes-de-visite commissioned by Lewis. See also Buick, 137.

portrait is in similar accord with Truth's representational approach, emphasizing civility and reinforcing how women of color consciously chose to portray themselves in ways that could not be sexualized. Also, similar to Truth's use of the book and the eyeglasses, Lewis ornaments her body with the quintessential visual icon of marriage to designate Black women's propriety. The ring figures considerably to add social worth to her person as married women often garnered more protection and safety from the ills of society; however, Lewis never married. The ring then demonstrates, as Buick argues, that "African Americans were forced to deploy the ideology of the dominant culture to protest their treatment under the system; [and] their use of sentimentality formed an effective social critique."<sup>93</sup> Here, Lewis's clothing and accessories speak to her understanding of western cultural mores and how to visually wield those values to gain what she needed. Subsequently, her look communicates that Black workingwomen were worthy of not only social commitment, but as Harper exclaimed, equal protection under the law.

Reading both images together illuminates Lewis's complex arrangement of material, design, theme, construction, and space, and how essential visible-aggregation is to her photographic self-making. Explaining how Lewis's highly stylized self-imagery offered her a type of fluidity with which to move through various notions of her identity, Buick argues:

Accordingly, Lewis's *carte-de-visite* is no more "true" or "real" than the myriad of representations of the artist. It, too, is a construction, strategically inserted into the field of representations of Lewis and thus holding no absolute authority over her. Even so, the photograph does constitute a conscious choice on the part of Lewis, perhaps to construct an image that denies the exotic interpretations favored by the biases of the time.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Buick, 56-57.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

As critics, reviewers, and patrons alike frequently read Lewis's work as autobiographical, and her physical presence through the popular racist mythologies of her contemporary moment, it is not hard to conceive why she would commission her own portraits. Maintaining her autonomy and subjectivity were critical. Just as Truth transformed her nude body to illuminate the subjugating visual mechanisms of slavery, while selling cartes-de-viste to sustain her personal self-image and economic independence, Lewis remained abroad to maintain the distance she needed to enact her selfhood and her artistic interests away from myopic understandings that stereotyped both her background and material reality. Her international presence as an American artist then grants her the opportunity to literally mold and shape her sculptures and her identity as she sees fit. Thus, she conquers the metaphysical dilemma through a material articulation of both physical labor and cultural refinement that constitute a photographic design, layering fabric, dress, accessories, gaze, allusions of physical movement, and themes of Black women's labor and sentimentality to demonstrate the multidimensionality of her identity as well as the multiplicities of her life experiences. As follows, her deft employment of visible-aggregation then expresses Black feminist visibility to envisage a self-employed Black woman artist contributing to both her material well-being and the advancement of American art. In this way, she and Truth's strategic use of photography demonstrates that nineteenth century African American women artists' shared a commitment to revealing and contesting western culture's racist visibility through a direct assertion of Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, self-making, and personal empowerment.

### **Neoclassical Musings in Black and White**

Taken together, Lewis's and Truth's cartes-de-visite show early indications of Black feminist visibility as a shared self-defined standpoint among African American



women artists in the nineteenth century. Still, this collective commitment to more nuanced and accurate visual representations of Black women's identity is reinforced when Lewis and Truth's self-imagery is examined in relationship to Lewis's neoclassical depictions of Black women. The previous chapter discussed how European travel narratives written during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established the racist visualization of Black women as hypersexual Hottentots, demonstrating how Euro-American literature directly informed racist visuality. This symbiotic relationship between Euro-American literary and visual representations of Black women continued into the antebellum era as antislavery literature founded yet another discriminatory caricature – the tragic mulatta. Thus, African American women artists like Truth and Lewis took command of the American visual field to assert their authenticity and Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and self-making as they understood all too well the dangerous effects of racist Euro-American literature on Euro-American fine art.

Appearing as early as 1842 in Lydia Maria Child's short story *The Quadroons*, the tragic mulatta and her catastrophic demise quickly became a fundamental trope of abolitionist sentimental fiction.<sup>95</sup> She was a stock character, designed to evoke sympathy from northern audiences simply because her enslaved body looked very much like the white women reading her story. As chapter 2 explained, antebellum visual imagery of

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<sup>95</sup> Though the tragic mulatta is writ large in American literature and literary criticism, for key texts that examine the trope in both antebellum and postbellum works by white and black writers see Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White nor Black: the Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1978); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004). For notable literary works that employ the trope during the antebellum period see, Lydia Maria Child, *The Quadroons*; William Wells Brown *Clotel or The President's Daughter*, & Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

mixed-race women of color centered white-appearing slaves such as Rebecca Huger to humanize the realities of bondage, while stressing the arbitrariness of both slavery and race itself. However, many of these images were so firmly grounded in sexualized notions of irresistible beauty that they further mythologized the mulatta figure. Often rendered as a dejected damsel trapped within the biological admixture of Blackness and whiteness; the image of the tragic mulatta was a calamitous woman doomed to disastrous ends because her racial composition was perceived as a life-threatening social and political consequence. Though the trope figured prominently in American literature throughout the Civil War, when considering how it (along with the other racist stereotypes of Black women) informed nineteenth century perceptions of neoclassical sculpture and the Black female body, it functions as a valuable critical lens through which to understand how Lewis and Truth asserted Black feminist visibility as a means to dismantle literary and visual narratives that defined both mixed-race and non-mixed race Black women as “tragic.”

From the Revolutionary War and subsequent development of the Republic, Americans adapted neoclassicism in the fine and decorative arts as a visual marker of the nation’s connection to ancient Greece. Colonial Americans imbibed Enlightenment ideals, “point[ing] to classical antiquity as proof of man’s capacity to create an ideal social and political society,” which they too believed they could implement in their contemporary moment.<sup>96</sup> Hence, neoclassicism became the popular style of American painting, architecture, sculpture and decorative arts from the mid eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. As the style waned in American painting at the turn of the

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<sup>96</sup> Jules Prown, “Style As Evidence.” *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 15, No.3 (Autumn, 1980), 205.

nineteenth century, it remained prevalent in American architecture and sculpture through the post-bellum era.

Although neoclassicism represented the perceived greatness of American society, both Black and white anti-slavery advocates emphasized that the presence of slavery severely contradicted America's identity as a free democracy. Naturally, this fundamental conflict operated within American neoclassical sculpture. Though marble generally served to elevate its subject matter, it often reinforced or complicated common nineteenth century racial prejudices when Black subjects, particularly the Black female, were represented in the medium. As art historian Charmaine A. Nelson explains:

the whiteness of the marble medium was not of arbitrary significance but functioned to mediate the representation of the racialized body in ways that preserved a moral imperative essential to the ideals of nineteenth-century neoclassicism. Unlike other forms of sculpture or types of art, the medium of marble was inherent to the practice of nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture.<sup>97</sup>

Therefore culturally, the sculptural style worked alongside stereotypical literary constructs of Black women to produce a type of visual fiction that defined both mixed-race and non-mixed raced African American women as naïve and inferior.

This link is presented most clearly in the April 1863 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* where Harriet Beecher Stowe published "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl," the essay that professed Stowe's fictitious literary representation of Truth as the sole inspiration for William Wetmore Story's neoclassical *Libyan Sibyl*, 1860. In the same manner that made *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a literary sensation, Stowe designed a highly caricatured image of Truth – complete with head kerchief, exaggerated dialect, and the exoticisms of the

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<sup>97</sup> Nelson, 57.

primitive African – enchanting readers to see a fictional parody and not the autonomous feminist abolitionist Truth in fact was. For example, Stowe begins by acknowledging Truth “as a frequent speaker at Anti-Slavery meetings . . . travelling on a sort of self-appointed agency through the country.”<sup>98</sup> She then immediately diminishes both Truth’s career and selfhood through contemporaneous terms that suggest primitivism, describing Truth’s body as “a tall, spare form” that was “evidently a full-blooded African,” who “in early youth must have been as fine a specimen of the torrid zone as Cumberworth’s celebrated statuette of the Negro Woman at the Fountain.”<sup>99</sup>

Here, Stowe’s language is the product of a racist visuality that belittles Truth in three ways: (1) Her descriptive vocabulary focuses on Truth’s visible physicality – her height and dark skin tone – to convince readers that Truth is indeed a primitive “other,” reinforcing the typical preoccupations of nineteenth century viewers with the corporeal differences of the Black female body sustained by popular pseudoscientific theories of intellectuals like Agassiz, (2) Truth was born in New York and never claimed to be from Africa,<sup>100</sup> thus Stowe purposely falsifies her account to reduce Truth to a popular minstrel trope easily recognizable to white audiences, and (3) Stowe’s imagining of Truth as a work of art demonstrates how whites habitually saw Black subjects only as quaint forms of amusement, even those as compelling as Truth. As historian Nell Irvin Painter

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<sup>98</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl, *Atlantic Monthly*, (April 1863). <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1863/04/sojourner-truth-the-libyan-sibyl/308775/>

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Nell Irvin Painter emphasizes this point in her biography *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* stating, “Truth – a native of Ulster County, New York, with its Catskill Mountains and freezing winters, and a resident of New York City for more than a decade and a half – becomes an untamed foreigner. Stowe imagines Truth as a creature from the Sahara, and compares her to “[Truth’s] own native palm trees, waving alone in the desert.” She continues with a quote from Truth herself saying, “Truth corrected Stowe’s allegation that she was African: “There is one place where she speaks of me as coming from Africa. My grandmother and my husband’s mother came from Africa, but I did not.” Painter, 155; 162-163.

acknowledges, Stowe depicts herself and her family “as people of culture who appreciate Sojourner Truth as a primitive object d’art and source of entertainment.”<sup>101</sup> Stowe subordinates Truth throughout the entire piece by representing Truth’s statements in a literary dialect, while “quoting herself in literary English that emphasizes the hierarchy that sets the author above her subject.”<sup>102</sup>

Stowe furthers her literary depreciation of Truth’s selfhood by depicting James Caldwell, Truth’s grandson, as “the fattest, jolliest woolly-headed little specimen of Africa that one can imagine.”<sup>103</sup> According to Stowe, Caldwell was a “little African Puck,” completely reminiscent of Topsy in that she similarly describes him as “grinning and showing his glistening white teeth in a state of perpetual merriment.”<sup>104</sup> Once again Stowe reduces her subjects to minstrel types and Truth appears as an insensible mammy, instead of a devoted grandmother striving to teach her grandson the principles of self-sufficiency and the advantages of freedom. Thus, white writer’s fictional depictions of Black women, their representations of actual women like Truth and their imaginary characters, are literary techniques that function visually to erase Black women’s autonomy and agency in ways that substantiate racist stereotypes as authentic images of women of color. So much so, that Stowe claims her fictionalized Truth to be so true-to-life; it engenders Story’s creative vision and provides the impulse behind one of the most celebrated masterpieces of American neoclassical sculpture.

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<sup>101</sup> Painter, 154.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>103</sup> Stowe, “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Though William Wetmore Story was not commonly known to be sympathetic to abolition, his *Libyan Sibyl* is often described as his “anti-slavery sermon in stone.”<sup>105</sup> Well established within New England’s privileged class, Story graduated from Harvard Law in 1840. After a fruitful though brief career as a lawyer, Story moved his family to Rome in 1856 to pursue his passion for art. His camaraderie with Stowe developed in 1857 during her second visit to Rome, since at that time his studio “was a recommended destination for any American on the Grand Tour of Europe.”<sup>106</sup> Stowe socialized with Story and his European colleagues on many occasions, often impersonating Truth in dialect to their delight.<sup>107</sup> Yet in her recount of Truth’s life, Stowe blatantly omits any tales of Truth’s self-sufficiency and the self-reliance she employed to overcome her sufferings, secure her freedom, and begin a new life as an anti-slavery advocate.

Stowe instead reduces Truth to a racist caricature and in her essay, written more than five years later; she describes her imitation as an account of Truth’s personal “history.” Stowe’s use of the term *history* is critical as it suggests that her racist construction of Truth is an unflinching portrayal. She states:

The history of Sojourner Truth worked in his mind and led him into the deeper recesses of the African nature, -- those unexplored depths of being and feeling, mighty and dark as the gigantic depths of tropical forests, mysterious as the hidden rivers and mines of that burning continent *whose life-history is yet to be*. A few days after, he told me that he had conceived the idea of a statue which he should call the Libyan Sibyl. Two years subsequently, I revisited Rome, and found the gorgeous Cleopatra finished, a thing to marvel at, as the creation of a new style of beauty, a new manner of art. Mr. Story requested me to come and repeat to him the history of Sojourner Truth, saying that the conception had never left him. I did so; and a day or two after, he showed me the clay model of the Libyan Sibyl. I have never seen the marble statue; but am told by those who have,

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<sup>105</sup> <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12650>.

<sup>106</sup> Thayer Tolles, “American Neoclassical Sculptors Abroad,” in Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art), October 2004. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ambl/hd\\_ambl.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ambl/hd_ambl.htm). For more on Stowe and Story’s acquaintance see Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 153-154; 157-160.

<sup>107</sup> Painter, 154.

that it was by far the most impressive work of art at the Exhibition.<sup>108</sup> (emphasis mine)

Thus as Herbert and Kolb constructed the image of the “Hottentot” woman breastfeeding over her shoulder, and Cuvier and Agassiz constructed images of Baartman and Delia and Drana to represent the so-called natural subordination and hypersexualization of Black women, Stowe artistically structures her interactions with Truth to undermine Truth’s actuality as an anti-slavery leader. First, through a mimicking performance of Truth for Story and his friends, Stowe establishes a racist depiction of Truth that she believes is so accurate it leads Story “into the deeper recesses of the African nature . . . and mines of that burning continent whose life-history is yet to be.” In this way, Stowe supposes that her own racist conceptualization of Truth is the real depiction of both African history and Black womanhood altogether. Then, through a literary portrayal that fictionally debases Truth but delights white readers, Stowe develops the Libyan Sibyl as both a literary and visual moniker for Truth. Stowe’s Libyan Sibyl subsequently became so engrained in post-bellum American culture that Truth commissioned her self-portraits as a direct challenge to Stowe’s false depiction. Accordingly, Truth asserts Black feminist visibility through her cartes as a recourse against the dual manifestations of Stowe’s racist visibility that caricaturizes Truth in a similar fashion as Stowe depicted characters like Topsy and the tragic Emmeline. Though the tragic mulatta appeared in various literary and visual iterations throughout antebellum American art, particularly Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Child’s *Quadroons*, neither the trope nor narratives of mixed-raced women of color come to mind when discussing a figure like Truth. Yet Stowe’s racist visibility and status

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<sup>108</sup> Stowe, “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl.”

as a renowned American writer interlocks the trope with the prestige of neoclassical sculpture to brand Black women as tragic.

Story's *Libyan Sibyl*, 1860 reinforces this notion. With her head in her hand, her furrowed brow and hollowed stare indicate the disturbed visage that accompanies thoughts of Africa's uncertain future. Writing to his friend Charles Eliot Norton, Story explains "she is looking out of her black eyes into futurity and sees the terrible fate of her race. This is the theme of the figure – Slavery on the horizon, and I made her head as melancholy and severe as possible."<sup>109</sup> In these terms, Story deliberately creates a statue that contemplates Africa's demise from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a demise so catastrophic that even as one of "the legendary women of antiquity who were reputed to possess powers of prophecy,"<sup>110</sup> the *Libyan Sibyl* has no power to stop it. Thus, Story's conceptualization and subsequent rendering of the sculpture is steeped in both the popular and pseudoscientific racist mythologies of the day. He continues:

I have taken the pure Coptic head and figure, the great massive sphinx-face, full-lipped, long-eyed, low-browed and lowering, and the largely-developed limbs of the African . . . The upper part of the figure is nude, and a rich simple mantle clothes her legs. This gave me a grand opportunity for the contrast of the masses of the nude with drapery, and I studied the nude with great care. It is a massive figure, big-shouldered, large-bosomed, with nothing of the Venus in it, but, as far as I could make it, luxuriant and heroic.<sup>111</sup>

Story's emphasis on the *Libyan Sibyl*'s "massive figure," "largely-developed limbs," and "large-bosom," is quite reminiscent of Cuvier's treatment of Baartman. Specifically, Story is sure to mention that "nothing of the Venus" is present in his

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<sup>109</sup> William Wetmore Story to Charles Eliot Norton, August 15, 1861, Charles Eliot Norton Papers, (bMS Am 1088 [7205-7224]), by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University; quoted in Tolles, *American Sculpture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Vol. 1 - A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born before 1865*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 1999; pgs. 90-92.

<sup>110</sup> Tolles, *American Sculpture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 90.

<sup>111</sup> Story to Norton, August 15, 1861, Charles Eliot Norton Papers, quoted in Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 159.



sculpture, meaning he omitted any artistic marker that would prompt audiences to *see* the figure as *beautiful*. Just as Cuvier commissioned French portraitists to depict Baartman as the quintessential opposite of white feminine attractiveness, represented most notably through the grand paintings of the Greek goddess Venus, he also required that each portrait be rendered with the most adept precision as he needed Baartman's representations to stand as scientific proof of Black women's so-called inherent aberrance. Thus, the "luxuriant" features and "heroic" body of Story's *Libyan Sybil* are expertly rendered to attract viewers to the genius of American neoclassicism while purposely setting the figure apart from the more delicate or fine neoclassical representations of white feminine beauty.

Story's need to strip the Libyan Sybil of notions of white femininity is furthered bolstered by the fact that he chooses to model his figure after the lighter, North African, Black body. One that most whites considered to be more attractive, yet nevertheless rejected. Nell Painter explains that Story's "real African type" appeared in a form that many Americans found sufficiently attenuated to be attractive. Story's aesthetic lay north of the Sahara; he was an American avoiding a look associated with the enslaved American working classes. His Libyan Sibyl was "thoroughly African – Libyan Africa of course, not Congo."<sup>112</sup> Similar to his literary colleagues, Story chose to sculpt a Black female who resembled characters like the octoroon, the quadroon and the mulatta. However, despite the fact that white readers often found lighter-skinned Black women to be more attractive, all figured as helpless, tragic characters in American literature simply because they were mixed-race. In this fashion, Story was careful to create an artistic masterpiece that did not disrupt either the literary or the visual iconography previously

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<sup>112</sup> Painter, 158.

established through white representations of the Black female body. Furthermore, Story's use of drapery to accentuate the figure's nude torso visually mimics both Agassiz's literal and photographic stripping of Delia and Drana. Taking all this into account, Story literally "makes" the *Libyan Sibyl* a tragic Black female figure in that his marble refuses to elevate its subject as neoclassical sculpture often did; instead it concretizes the Black female figure into the racist mythologies that deem her and all her descendants to be inferior and powerless.

Stowe and Story's association demonstrates how traces of the tragic mulatto trope appear within the colors of American neoclassical sculpture. Though there are no records that indicate what exactly Stowe told Story about Truth, nor any, where Story confirms Truth or Stowe as the inspirations for his *Libyan Sibyl*, careful discernment of both Stowe's essay and Story's sculpture suggests that racist visuality often influenced both literary and visual depictions of Black women by white artists. So much so that Stowe simply erases Truth with a myriad of racist stereotypes when Truth's actual existence negated the typical antebellum mythologies of Black womanhood. So determined to substantiate what her racist visuality required her to perceive, Stowe actually kills Truth toward the end of the essay, stating "but though Sojourner Truth has passed away from among us as a wave of the sea, her memory still lives in one of the loftiest and most original works of modern art, the *Libyan Sibyl*, by Mr. Story."<sup>113</sup> Though Truth lived well beyond the publication of the article, Stowe's literary murder reveals that the genuine function of racist visuality is to both substantiate and actualize for whites the fiction that Black women do not and cannot exist as autonomous, multidimensional

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<sup>113</sup> Stowe, "Sojourner Truth, the *Libyan Sibyl*."

subjects and certainly not as American artists, which is the very foundation of the metaphysical dilemma.

The white gaze then, so deeply structured by racist mythologies reinforced by skewed visual and literary iconographies, does not allow Black women full expression of their innate autonomy, subjectivity, and multidimensionality. For Stowe, Truth as feminist, as abolitionist, and as autonomous woman could not live as her cartes so obviously verified. Instead, Truth lived here in the only way that Stowe wanted to see her, as a celebrated but static *Libyan Sibyl* powerless to challenge the white woman's gaze and not as the self-sufficient artist whose self-portraits continued to negate Stowe's fictions. Today, William Wetmore Story's original *Libyan Sibyl* resides in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and its replica at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art.<sup>114</sup> Once more, celebrated representations fraught with racist narratives regarding Black womanhood remain elevated by two of the world's most renowned cultural institutions.

Edmonia Lewis's self-portraits and subsequent Black female figures also challenged the fictions whites held toward Black women, including those of Lydia Maria Child. One of Lewis's most avid patrons, Child was a notable figure among nineteenth century feminist writers and abolitionists. As Child was also the editor of Harriet Jacob's 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she was well-known throughout the anti-slavery community for her support of Black women and Native Americans and Lewis benefitted handsomely from Child's patronage. Yet, Child held very problematic

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<sup>114</sup> Story's *Libyan Sibyl* was acquired by the Met from the Erving Wolf Foundation in 1979. Object Provenance. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12650>. The Smithsonian's replica was acquired in 1925 through the Bequest of Henry Cabot Lodge through John Ellerton Lodge. <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=23347>

views of women of color. As her *Quadroons* introduced the tragic mulatta trope to American sentimental fiction, Child's personal views often stereotyped Black women as undeveloped. For instance, to stress her dissatisfaction with Lewis's decision to sculpt a bust of the fallen commander of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, in 1866 Child wrote to Shaw's mother, Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, exclaiming:

I do not think she has any genius, but I think she has a good deal of imitative talent, which, combined with her indomitable perseverance, I have hoped might make her something above mediocrity, if she took *time* enough. But she does *not* take time; she is in too much of a hurry to get up to a conspicuous place, without taking the necessary intermediate steps. I do not think this is so much "self-conceit," as it is an uneasy feeling of the necessity of making things to sell, in order to pay for her daily bread. Then you must remember that *youth*, in its fresh strength and inexperience, naturally thinks itself capable of doing anything . . . and it should not be forgotten that Edmonia is younger than young – brought up, as she was among the Chippewas and negroes without any education. I think it is a pity that she has undertaken to be a sculptor; . . . Brought up among the Chippewas, how *can* she know anything of the delicate properties of refined life."<sup>115</sup>

A pejorative description meant to discredit Lewis's subjectivity as a Black woman with mixed ancestry and her autonomy as an artist, Child's statement represented the common belief that a Black woman's heritage somehow made her naïve, catastrophic, and incapable of self-sufficiency. Thus, Child cannot see Lewis's determination to build a successful artistic career as a healthy or positive form of autonomy; rather, she interprets Lewis's independence as a childish defiance strictly because she disregards the contemporaneous narratives that marked her unqualified by her African (read "young") and Chippewa (read "savage") heritage.

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<sup>115</sup> Benjamin Quarles, "A Sidelight on Edmonia Lewis," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (Jan., 1945), 82-84.

Being a woman who primarily relied upon her own directions, Lewis obviously did not submit to many of Child's recommendations, which of course reinforced tensions between the two. Art historian Kirsten Buick explains:

Publicly, Child was a proponent of the idea that Lewis was a "representative Negro." Privately, however, Child's patronage was more conflicted. As part of her "duty" as Lewis's patron, Child felt bound to provide both aesthetic advice and advice on how the artist should conduct her career. As an Independent creative spirit, Lewis naturally had her own ideas about both. The misunderstandings that arose between them concerning the bust of Robert Gould Shaw illustrate well the difficulties in reconciling their two positions . . . Child's objection is to the reversal of the formula – in this instance a black knowing *subject* and a white known *object*.<sup>116</sup>

As a result, Lewis's expressions of Black feminist visibility in both her cartes-de-visite and neoclassical sculpture become a recourse through which she demonstrates her commitment to a self-sufficient life. However, it is precisely Lewis's close proximity to Child that made her undoubtedly aware of her patron's problematic conceptualizations of Black women. For that reason, Lewis frequently ignored advice from one of her most important patrons in order to assert a Black feminist visibility that shaped her career in ways that interested her.



**Figure 18** Edmonia Lewis, *Forever Free*, 1867, white marble.

Lewis was trained in neoclassical sculpture in 1864 and debuted *Forever Free*, 1867, as an aggressive articulation on race and emancipation. A sculpture that elevates artistic perceptions of Black bodies through neoclassical renderings, *Forever Free*

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<sup>116</sup> Buick, 14-15.

directly references the Emancipation Proclamation in both its title and its depiction of African Americans. Her implementation of the medium as well as her portrayal of a semi-nude figure postured in the classic contrapposto pose firmly places *Forever Free* within the neoclassical style. In terms of physiognomy, most scholars have read the female character's obvious European features as Lewis's way of disconnecting herself from the subject matter. From Lewis's contemporary moment to present day analyses, art history scholars and critics consistently interpreted Lewis's work in direct relationship to her biography.<sup>117</sup> However, by examining *Forever Free* as well as Lewis herself within the intersections of slavery, Black women's reproductive labor, and the antebellum rhetoric of "blackness," Buick presents a compelling argument that "... because she has shed all markers that would identify her as chattel, Lewis's freedwoman in *Forever Free* can no longer be a carrier of property or even racist stereotypes. [Thus], she is indeed "free."<sup>118</sup> Buick argues that much like anti-slavery writers, Lewis purges any obvious visual marker of Blackness from her female protagonist's physiognomy to "neutralize" the figure as a more appealing and sympathetic character for dominant audiences, while simultaneously removing herself from the work as subject.<sup>119</sup>

Though Buick recognizes the inherent complexities in Lewis's choice, I believe that Blackness is still very prevalent within her rendering specifically because her female character is purposely centered at the dawn of Emancipation. Lewis's depiction of the freedwoman thankfully celebrating her freedom very deliberately signifies that she is in fact not white; rather, she is a representation of a mixed raced Black woman who along with her partner, has gained freedom, and is now in control of her own life much like

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<sup>117</sup> See note 19.

<sup>118</sup> Buick, 67.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 66.

Lewis herself. Thus, Lewis's existence as an autonomous mixed-race woman, loyal supporter of abolition, and agent of Black feminist visibility further nuances the criticality of her "whitewashed" female character.

Like Truth, Lewis was very much concerned with her own economic freedom. Well known for designing, pricing, and selling her own works, her sculptural application of visible-aggregation in *Forever Free* begins with a layering of gestures that at first glance appear to reify the popular gendered notions of the nineteenth century. Yet, closer examination suggests that just as Truth used photography, Lewis utilized neoclassicism to re-visualize the tenets of true womanhood in advocacy for Black women's autonomy and subjectivity. For example, the freedman gently and protectively rests his right hand on the freedwoman's right shoulder, supporting her as she kneels thankfully to the heavens. With both his head and left arm lifted in praise, the chain of his broken manacles dangle around his wrist as he gives thanks to God, and *not* Lincoln, for their freedom.<sup>120</sup> Though Lewis's design renders him higher than the freedwoman, he is a strong and stabilizing equal, which suggests a family unit and certain roles within the spousal relationship.

Where many scholars have interpreted this figuration to represent the inequity in traditional Victorian gender roles – male agency, female passivity – Buick clarifies that, "[i]n order to participate fully in the culture of the United States, [newly emancipated] African American men and women had to adhere to the dominant gender conventions, and thus submission by black women was a necessity."<sup>121</sup> Claudia Tate also points out that African Americans in the nineteenth century were well aware of the social mores of

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<sup>120</sup> The gracious slave genuflecting to Lincoln was a very common image in visual representations of Emancipation, particularly American public sculpture. See Thomas Ball's *Freedmen's Memorial to Lincoln*, 1876, Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C.

<sup>121</sup> Buick, 55.

the time period, and staunchly approved of marriage as an indication of respectability, family stability, and social progress and the appearance of Black female submission was crucial to those gains.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, Truth and Lewis's narrative history establishes that both free and enslaved Black women were anything but passive and submissive. Hence, Lewis renders *Forever Free* to visualize a Black couple free to pursue matters such as legalized marriage, equal opportunity employment, primary custody and care for their children, and land ownership, privileges that were historically valued by African Americans, but vehemently denied by the dominant culture during slavery.

Through this reading comes an understanding of Lewis's commitment to Black feminist visuality as her female figure who though kneeling, is an autonomous Black woman, and like her male companion is capable and worthy of freedom and full citizenship. She is an active agent of political change, appreciative but poised and ready for the opportunity to live as she sees herself and not as a slave – to neither her husband under patriarchy or society under racism. Lewis is sure to center the Black female at the very moment of emancipation, visualizing the solidarity needed between Black men and women if they are to succeed in freedom. This neoclassical expression of Black feminist visuality then foregrounds how important both images and acts of Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and self-making are to the future of African American communities.

Subtler design elements of *Forever Free* are layered with themes such as personal destiny and familial support, which also reveal how Lewis employs visible-aggregation to express Black women's self-making and personal empowerment. For instance, she

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<sup>122</sup> Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 90-93.



carefully positions the freedman next to yet slightly behind the freedwoman, suggesting that even though his foot breaks her chain, her freedom comes first. Though she is kneeling, it is not a position of submission or defeat in that she is only on one knee. Lewis positions the freedwoman's left leg sturdily under her frame, implying that when she rises she will do so completely, free and able to pursue her aspirations with the full protection of both her husband and the government behind her.<sup>123</sup> Here, she equips both figures with the same kind of agency exhibited by the millions of Black men and women who self-emancipated and often fought for and secured the freedom of their friends and loved ones. Accordingly, Lewis confronts not only post-bellum images of Black women as mammy or jezebel, more importantly she and her freedwoman stand together in direct opposition of Child's conceptualization of the tragic mulatta – catastrophic women that can only gain freedom through death. With *Forever Free*, Lewis frankly rejects the tragic mulatta trope, showing Child both literally through her personal career choices and visually through her ideal subject matter that Black women of mixed ancestry were not only wise beyond their so-called “cultural age,” but more than capable of securing their freedom in life.

Though the characters in *Forever Free* are posed in grateful manners, simply representing African Americans in neoclassical sculpture signified a boisterous defiance to the visual status quo. As stated earlier, the color of white marble innately informed the elevating principle of neoclassical sculpture and was reserved for the representation of whites only. Lewis deliberately ignores this rule in efforts to challenge its merit and comment upon the lack of accurate representations of Black people in western art. Her Black feminist visuality then aggressively converts neoclassical styles to confront her

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<sup>123</sup> Both the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment and the Freedman's Bureau were established in 1865.

audiences' prejudice, particularly Child's, while simultaneously articulating more complex depictions of African American women's identity. These neoclassical expressions of Black feminist visibility then envisage Black bodies to Euro-American viewers typically blinded by racist visibility. This is most staunchly affirmed in Child's reaction to *Forever Free*. Upon viewing the piece, Child writes again to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw explaining that she would not review the sculpture simply because she did not think Lewis had created a superior work. She states, "I should praise a really good work all the more gladly because it was done by a colored artist; but to my mind, Art is sacred, as well as Philanthropy; and I do not think it either wise or kind to encourage a girl, merely because she is colored, to spoil good marble by making poor statues."<sup>124</sup> In response to Lewis's making of *Hagar in the Wilderness*, 1875, Child remarks, "I think it is better that the Freedman & his Wife [sic], but I do not think it is worth putting in marble."<sup>125</sup> Hagar, Abraham's slave mistress who Sarah condemns to wander the desert after she becomes pregnant with Issac, was a frequent allegorical figure for the plights of enslaved Black women. Thus, Child's commentary about *Hagar*, *Forever Free*, and the sacredness of art illuminates the nineteenth century understanding that the appropriate execution of neoclassical sculpture was never to represent the Black subject in the medium, revealing the amaurosis of not only a racist, patriarchal society, but more pointedly the racist visibility of the one person celebrated as the most sympathetic to African American women's experiences.

Unfortunately, the end of Reconstruction obstructed the themes in both Truth's and Lewis's Black Feminist visibility. By the turn of the century stock images of the

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<sup>124</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, August 1870, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Am 1417 (105). Date is obscured.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

Uncle Tom, Mammy, and Jezebel figures continued to bolster America's racist visuality, which fueled white, racist violence against African Americans well into the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Truth and Lewis's development of Black feminist visuality through multilayered figurative artworks were significant contributions to American visual culture. So much so, that in 1940 philosopher Alain Locke attributed the "advent of Negro art" to *Forever Free* and a portrait of Daniel Payne and his family painted by African American landscape artist Robert S. Duncanson.<sup>126</sup> Locke's praise for *Forever Free* is essential in that he basically accredits Lewis as one of the originators of Black aesthetics in American fine art. In this regard it is apparent that both Lewis's and Truth's confrontational, visual expressions of African American women's identity grounded the beginning of Black visual aesthetics in a solid Black feminist visuality.

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<sup>126</sup> Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art*. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968), 9.

## CHAPTER 4

### I AM BEAUTIFUL IN MY OWN EYES: ELIZABETH CATLETT'S BLACK FEMINIST VISUALITY

“I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

--- Toni Morrison – *Sula* (1974)

African American women artists' espousal of Black feminist visuality did not end with Truth and Lewis. From the turn of the century through the 1950's, women like Meta Warrick Fuller, May Howard Jackson, Laura Wheeler Waring, Augusta Savage, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, Lois Mailou Jones, and Selma Burke were some of the country's premier contemporary artists dedicated to visualizing Black women's experiences.<sup>127</sup> In an era particularly hostile to Black women, they each made the conscious decision to become a visual artist. Despite living in a society that relegated Black women to either the kitchen or the field, each woman charted her own path, balancing motherhood, teaching, and marriage with a sophisticated artist practice to reach a level of professional success. Throughout each of their oeuvres, the Black female figure materializes as a discursive site for universal issues such as history, work, motherhood, equality, and the like. For example, Meta Warrick Fuller emerged as an important American artist at the turn of the century, eventually becoming known as one of the most significant fine artists of her generation.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> For more information on these women see Lisa Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*; and Leslie King-Hammond and Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, *3 Generations of African-American Women Sculptors: A Life in Paradox*, (Philadelphia: The Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, 1996). This was the first and is still the only comprehensive exhibition and study of African American women sculptors.

<sup>128</sup> For a detailed history of Meta Warrick Fuller and her public sculpture see Renée Ater, *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

For instance, NAACP leaders James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois commissioned Fuller's *Ethiopia Awakening*, c. 1921 for New York City's Making of America Festival. In it, Fuller's Black feminist visuality links the Black female body and Black women's labor to popular notions of African contributions to western civilization. Her sculptural application of visible-aggregation, the layering effect of theme, material, space, and design depicts Ethiopia in the act of unwrapping herself from the multiple bindings of mummification. With this, Fuller envisages the self-making processes of Black women emerging from the coffers of historical oppression and obscurity. She chooses a Black female figure, rendering herself visible as the symbol of African Americans' rise to full citizenship and enfranchisement. Thus, *Ethiopia Awakening* is not only an artistic representation of Black women making themselves whole; it exists as a powerful figurative work that symbolizes how Black women's self-making, personal empowerment, subjectivity, and autonomy very literally allows them to conquer a metaphorical death. Fuller's Black feminist visuality then demonstrates how Black women rescue both their bodies and identities from the destruction of western culture's racist visuality and multilayered synthesis of racism, sexism, and patriarchy, symbolizing how the quotidian achievements of African descended peoples advanced the western world.

Upon the shoulders of Fuller and her contemporaries arose the genius that was artist Elizabeth Catlett. The social and political climate of the 1980's engendered an influx of cultural production from African American women that communicated the multifaceted nature of the oppression they faced in American society. When asked in a 1981 interview what she thought about women in the arts, artist Elizabeth Catlett states:

But women have always been involved in the arts. Black women in Africa, they are the ones that did that piecework, quilting, brought it to the United States . . . What I feel is that women have to fight for their opportunity . . . Black women have been cast in the role of carrying on the survival of black people through their position as mothers and wives, protecting and educating and stimulating children and black men. We can learn from [B]lack women. They have had to struggle for centuries. I feel that we have so much more to express and that we should demand to be heard and demand to be seen because we know and feel and can express so much, [and] contribute so much aesthetically.<sup>129</sup>

Affirming the history of Black women in the arts and declaring that Black women “demand” to have their visualizations of identity recognized as their particular truths, Catlett confirms and encourages the various ways in which Black women’s art blatantly confronts the spurious discourses that define Black female identity as aberrant. Catlett, who in the 1980’s was finally gaining prominence as an American artist after a career that spanned over 35 years, was well educated in the adverse effects the combination of racism, sexism, and patriarchy had on African American women, especially those working as professional visual artists. Though her professional circumstances expose how the complexities of Black womanhood are historically understood through categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality Catlett suggests that the difficulties of Black female selfhood – being at once human, artist, Black, and woman – are graver issues that require further exploration and nuanced investigation. In her brief statement, she recognizes the intellectual and cultural wealth of Black women’s experiences, while subtly acknowledging that the strictures of race, class, sexuality, and gender in western society have stifled and rendered those experiences invisible.

For over 70 years Elizabeth Catlett’s elegant sculpture and energetic print work penetrated and transformed the American art world, illustrating art’s crucial function as a

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<sup>129</sup> Interview with Glory Van Scott, December 8, 1981, (New York, NY: Hatch Billops Collection, 1991), 15.

catalyst for social and political change. Outlining what curator Isolde Brielmaier describes as the “beauty, aesthetic excellence, conceptual strength, and inventive stance of Catlett’s work throughout time,”<sup>130</sup> this chapter takes a close look at Catlett’s 1946-47 linoleum cut series *The Negro (Black) Woman* and sculptural figures – *Negro Mother and Child*, 1940; *Figura*, 1962; *Homage To My Young Black Sisters*, 1969; and *Homage To My Black Women Poets*, 1984 to examine the various ways she employed visible-aggregation to express Black feminist visuality throughout a magnificent life dedicated to imaging the history and culture of African American and Mexican peoples.

### **Her Mothers’ Gardens: Visualizing Black Maternity**

Born in Washington D.C. on April 15, 1915, Alice Elizabeth Catlett’s talents were cultivated in an environment that valued education.<sup>131</sup> Her parents, John Catlett and Mary Carson Catlett, were teachers employed in the D.C. public school system. John Catlett was a former professor at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and Mary Catlett worked as a truant officer. It is from her mother’s teachings and social work in urban D.C. that Elizabeth Catlett began to form the lens through which she identified herself as a woman, an activist, and an artist. Coming of age at a time when segregation and racial violence were pervasive throughout the South, opportunities for Black women to study and become professional artists were scarce. However, because her mother was such an avid supporter of her daughter’s love for art, Catlett began developing her artistic acumen at Dunbar High School. She graduated in 1931 and went on to receive a Bachelor of

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<sup>130</sup> Isolde Brielmaier, *Stargazers: Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation with Sanford Biggers, Iona Rozeal Brown, Patty Chang, et al.* (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2010), 64.

<sup>131</sup> All biographical information from this point forward is taken from Kelli Morgan, “The Portrait of an Artist: The Life and Memory of Elizabeth Catlett,” obituary for Elizabeth Catlett in *Against The Current*, no. 160 (September/October 2012): 37-38. For more detailed facts concerning Catlett’s biography see also Melanie Ann Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) and Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett*, (Los Angeles: Hancraft Studios, 1984).

Science in Art from Howard University in 1935. As an undergraduate, Catlett studied design, drawing, and printmaking with Lois Mailou Jones, James Lesesne Wells, and James Porter, some of the premier Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Between her high school graduation and her undergraduate studies at Howard, Catlett experienced the effects of American racism when she was denied entrance to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, now Carnegie Mellon University, because she was African American. This rejection connected Catlett to the myriad discriminatory experiences of Black women that her mother often recounted. It is from such adversity that Catlett primarily centered her artistic career upon the plights of Black women. Throughout her career her artwork exemplified the lives of Black women, honoring their capacity to overcome the harsh, oppressive circumstances in which they lived.



**Figure 19** *Negro Mother and Child*, 1940, limestone.

Upon graduating from Howard, Catlett followed in her parents' footsteps, becoming a public school teacher in Durham, North Carolina. After teaching there for two years, she entered graduate school at the University of Iowa, studying under the renowned American painter Grant Wood. Wood advised her to create work from subject matter with which she was most familiar. From this guidance Catlett created her master's thesis, *Negro Mother and Child*, 1940, a sculpture that served as a precursor to the major themes of Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and self-making that emanated from her work throughout her career. In *Negro Mother and Child*,



she depicts a Black mother and infant to express the love, beauty, and strength within the maternal bond. Showing a young child quietly nestled in the supportive arms of his mother, Catlett provides a sculptural representation of Black motherhood that debunked the popular American belief that Black mothers were efficient mammies, yet lacked maternal instincts in regards to their own children.<sup>132</sup> As art historian Melanie Herzog explains:

Her 1940 sculpture – the first of her many representations of the theme of black maternity – asserted her sense of African American women’s identity. It was important to her, as she would later argue, that hers be images of black women and children, counter to the then-prevailing Eurocentric notion that portrayals of people of European ancestry uniquely represent a “universal” humanity.<sup>133</sup>

As Catlett came of age in a household headed by women, she shared very intimate relationships with both her mother and maternal grandmother, who contributed significantly to her understanding and interpretations of Black womanhood. These relationships were the initial motivations for Catlett’s artistic portrayals of Black mothers with their children. Later, when Catlett became a mother herself, she claimed how her children and the bond she shared with them was never an aspect that was divorced from her artistry. Therefore, depictions of Black women’s subjectivity and autonomy as maternal figures situate prominently within her expressions of Black feminist visuality.

For instance, seated in a protective position, Catlett’s figure holds her infant close to her breasts in a tender yet assertive posture. Rendered upright with her head forward and her back straight, the mother’s gaze confronts the viewer directly, demanding to be met on her own terms. Here, Catlett employs visible-aggregation, layering a strong

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<sup>132</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>133</sup> Melaine Ann Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 23.

maternal stance with the figure's soft expression and the child's quiet demeanor to assert the innate humanity and dignity of ordinary Black women and children in American society. *Negro Woman and Child* is also a very significant piece in that it confronts the inaccuracy of early European travel narratives that consistently presented the breast-feeding Black female as lewd and monstrous. As a direct challenge to such imagery, Catlett exposes her figure's breasts as a representation of the nurturing and life giving beauty of the intimacy within the maternal bond. Much like Truth exposed her breasts to shame her detractors, Catlett's Black feminist visuality centers the mother's partial nudity to refute ideas of Black female perverseness. As she matured in her own maternity, her artwork flourished in form, theme, and style. *Negro Mother and Child* was awarded first prize in sculpture when it was exhibited in the 1940 Chicago American Negro Exposition. It was also included as an exemplary work of African American Art in Alain Locke's *The Negro in Art* and James Porter's *Modern Negro Art*. With *Negro Mother and Child* as her thesis, Catlett became one of the first recipients of a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa, and with it she continued her dedication to educating students in art.

### **The Negro Woman: Black Feminist Visuality and the Black Female Gaze**

Catlett became the chair of the Art Department at Dillard University from 1940 to 1942, where she taught printmaking, drawing, art history, and painting, but in the summer of 1941 she worked and studied at the Southside Community Center in Chicago. Here, she became fully acquainted with the visual and literary artists of the Black Chicago Renaissance, working closely alongside Margaret Burroughs, Eldzier Cortor, Charles White (whom she later married and divorced), Margaret Walker (who was her roommate

while she studied at the University Iowa and her life-long friend), and several others, Catlett became fully immersed in the tenets of Social Realist Art, Socialism, and Communism.

The Chicago artists were greatly influenced by Marxism, and the role of the Black worker in American society was crucial to their work.<sup>134</sup> They were committed to the belief that art should provide a tangible function for the African American community. Some were dedicated social realists, while others used modernist aesthetics to create art that communicated universal ideas through Black experiences. Many of these artists were members of the Communist Party, believing that Communism as an ideological and political tool offered the best solution to both racial discrimination and class subordination. They utilized Black Chicago in their art as a metaphor to help explain broader issues of social, political, and cultural oppression. From here she went on to New York to study abstraction with modernist sculptor Ossip Zadkine, and from 1944 to 1946 she taught working and lower class Blacks at the George Washington Carver School. Working with students in New York broadened Catlett's awareness of the Black experience in America as these students reiterated her mother's experiences as a social worker.

From the time she entered college social and political activism was an essential aspect of Catlett's personal and professional life. She participated in anti-fascism and anti-war activities at Howard University, and she participated in protests demanding higher wages for schoolteachers while working in Durham. She challenged segregation in New Orleans by supporting a group of Dillard students who were wrongly arrested for removing the "For Colored Only" signs on a city bus, and by taking her students to a

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<sup>134</sup> Blk Chicago references.

Picasso exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art that was located in an area inadmissible for African Americans. These activities served as the fulcrum upon which her Marxist and socialist ideals operated.

Her work in social realism with Black Chicago artists reinforced these ideals, but it was her work at the Carver School, a Popular Front school led by the Communist Party, that brought her social and political activism to artistic realization. At the Carver School Catlett worked primarily with Black women, teaching them artistic practices from a Marxist perspective. In 1991 she told her biographer, art historian Melanie Anne Herzog that these sessions gave her the basis for what she wanted to do as an artist.<sup>135</sup> Prior to working with these women, Catlett did not identify herself with the working and poor classes of African Americans, despite the substantial influence of her mother on her development as an artist. Yet, after teaching and learning from her students at the Carver school, Catlett solidified depictions of lower and working class Black women's empowerment and self-making as another crucial aspect of her Black feminist visuality. From here, she dedicated her career to powerful artistic representations of everyday Black women, which was conspicuously centralized within her next major work, *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47.

In 1946 a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald fund allowed Catlett to travel to Mexico, where she established herself as a permanent resident in 1947. In Mexico she began her acclaimed graphic work at the Taller de Gráfica Popular, met her second husband, Francisco Mora, who preceded her in death in 2002, and gave birth to her three sons: Francisco, Juan and David Mora. Very familiar with how Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros influenced American art,

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<sup>135</sup> Herzog, 39.

Catlett was eager to work with the socially active artists at the Taller. However, her activities here made her a target of the vicious postwar, anti-Communist, political environment that buttressed the cold war and McCarthyism. She experienced aggressive political scrutiny by the U.S. government (through the House Un-American Activities Committee-HUAC and the U.S. embassy in Mexico) throughout the 1950's, which forced her to become a Mexican citizen in 1962. She quickly incorporated into *The Negro Woman* what she learned from the Black Chicago artists and the Taller's artists' commitment to making art for the people. In this series, Catlett employs social realism as the stylistic vehicle through which she images the plight of poor and working class Black women. From an African American feminist perspective, Catlett's images serve as reconstructed American history that function as cultural memory for an international audience.

*The Negro Woman* uncovers the complex ways in which African American women visually survey and confront the malignancies threatening Black female identity. Again, Catlett's Black feminist visuality centralizes the figure's gaze and Black women's history to confront the viewing public. Her deft use of line and perspective are then strategic design elements within her application of visible-aggregation, which elucidates Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and self-making while offering audiences more accurate representations of African American women's experiences and their history. Therefore, just as Truth and Lewis before her, Catlett participates in an artistic methodology that centers Black women's material realities and challenges mainstream visual conceptualizations of their identities.

*The Negro Woman* series confronts viewers by simply making eye contact. As the previous chapters have shown, one of the most crucial aspects of western visual culture is the very act of looking, and various processes of looking have plagued African American women throughout history for they have always been viewed, yet never really seen. Meaning, historically Black women have largely been perceived, described, and defined in terms of their viewers' own conceptualizations of Blackness. Elucidating this perception, Nicole Fleetwood states that "[b]lackness troubles vision in Western discourse. And the troubling affect of blackness becomes heightened when located on certain bodies marked as such."<sup>136</sup> Arguing that the Black body is an always-already troubling presence to and within the dominant visual field, Fleetwood explains that the emotive difficulties evoked by visible Blackness are not necessarily inherent to the visible Black Body itself; instead these troubling feelings emerge from the act of sight on part of the viewer, coupled with the performative aspects that are understood as Blackness.<sup>137</sup> Thus, because of the skewed ways their racist visuality conceptualizes and defines Black womanhood Cuvier sees Baartman as scientific specimen, Agassiz sees Delia and Drana as slave, the South Carolina writers are completely baffled by Harper's visual presence, Stowe sees Truth as caricature, and Child sees Lewis as young. To further historicize this point, at the height of slavery in North America, Harriet Jacobs explained the abuse that she and millions of other enslaved women continually experienced under the gaze of white viewers, particularly the slave master. Often resulting in concubinage, rape, and other violent forms of sexual assault, the slaveholder's gaze circumscribed Black women into lives of sexual terror. Describing the

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<sup>136</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, Blackness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

fear of living within Dr. Flint's constant eyesight Jacobs states, "my master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, . . . [i]f I went out for a breath of fresh air, . . . his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there."<sup>138</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, Jennifer Morgan shows that European writers and artists developed the discourses that allowed slaveholders to visually terrorize enslaved women as sexual receptacles centuries before the peculiar institution became popular. As Michel Foucault theorized, "the gaze was alert everywhere."<sup>139</sup>

If the history is read only from the dominant culture's perspective however, it is easy to believe that Black women had no or very limited access to visual technologies that would provide them recourse to challenge this subjugation. Nevertheless, Stephanie Camp illuminates the various ways African American women subverted the slaveholder's gaze by developing "rival geographies" – ways in which Black women stole their bodies away from their master's gaze and created their own personal spaces, if only for a short period of time. She argues that enslaved African American women removed themselves from their master's gaze by attending secret parties and dressing themselves in garments that were considered to be outside of the clothing designated for those in bondage, the same visual technique Truth employed expertly in her photographs.<sup>140</sup> So, just as Truth and Lewis utilized their self-portraits to resist the racist ways in which they were often seen in western culture, Catlett's series also demonstrates that not only did African American women artists continue to use visual means to assert Black women's

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<sup>138</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 28.

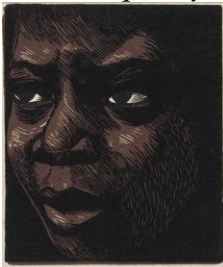
<sup>139</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977), ebook, 185.

<sup>140</sup> Stephanie M.H Camp, *Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2004, 60-92.

autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and self-making; they also continued to cast this Black feminist visibility directly back at white society.

The *Negro Woman* presents a much more direct look into the experiences of African American women living in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Catlett's series is a set of 16 linoleum cuts, and each plate speaks directly to an aspect of African American women's lives from slavery to the late 1940's. When the plates' titles are read collectively, an autobiographical narrative of the Black woman emerges:

*I Am the Negro Woman, I Have Always Worked Hard in America, In the Fields, In Other Folks' Homes, I Have Given the World My Songs, In Sojourner Truth I Fought for the Rights of Women as Well as Negroes, In Harriet Tubman I Helped Hundreds to Freedom, In Phillis Wheatley I Proved Intellectual Equality in the Midst of Slavery, My Role Has Been Important in the Struggle to Organize the Unorganized, I've Studied in Ever Increasing Numbers, My Reward Has Been Bars Between Me and the Rest of the Land, I Have Special Reservations, Special Houses, And a Special Fear for My Loved Ones, and My Right Is a Future of Equality with Other Americans.*<sup>141</sup>



**Figure 20** “I Am the Negro Woman,” *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; color linoleum cut, 13.3 x 10.1 cm. Plate 1

This strategic titling maneuver layered within the images themselves, exposes three specific aspects that constitute Black women's identity for Catlett: independence, the influence of Black Women's History, and political activism. Here, Catlett places the viewer face to face with an African American woman and verbally inside this woman's identity. Art historian Richard Powell states, “. . . Catlett invites everyone – women, men,

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<sup>141</sup> Farrington, 123.



blacks, whites, whomever – to act as surrogate “Negro Women”, if only via the stating of each title” in the series.<sup>142</sup>

Through a use of the first person, Catlett proclaims that Black women identify and understand themselves as autonomous individuals. The very first plate in the series, entitled “I Am the Negro Woman,” depicts a young African American woman with an intense gaze into the distance as if she is focused on the future. Through her powerful stare and furrowed brow, Catlett suggests confrontation, beautifully evoking the severity and sincerity of African American women who control their own destinies and who are determined to change their conditions in American society. Catlett clearly illustrates that this woman is focused on a distant objective, which could be the desire to challenge segregation. Catlett creates this series in 1947 while on a Rosenwald fellowship in Mexico, the same year that CORE – The Congress of Racial Equality conducted the very first Freedom Ride – “The Journey of Reconciliation.”<sup>143</sup> Though it was not as successful as the later Freedom Rides, the Journey of Reconciliation was CORE's first attempt at peaceful direct action aimed to dismantle Jim Crow segregation of public transportation in the upper south.

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<sup>142</sup> Herzog, 59.

<sup>143</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).



**Figure 21** “I Have Always Worked Hard in America,” *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; linoleum cut, 21.5 x 15 cm. Plate 3.

**Figure 22** “I Have Given the World My Songs,” *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; linoleum cut, 18.8 x 12.7 cm. Plate 6.

**Figure 23** “Special Houses,” *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; linoleum cut, 10.8 x 15 cm. Plate 14.

In “I Have Always Worked Hard in America,” “In Other Folks’ Homes,” and “I Have Given the World My Songs,” Catlett exhibits the tremendous strength of African American women who have worked and sang to support and empower themselves, their families and their communities. Catlett raises African American women from the subordinate status racist discourses designate them to, presenting her characters as large figures that dominate the foreground of each linocut. She skillfully renders African American women who appear prodigious within the frame, their large bodies representing the significance of the African American female working class. This indicates the immeasurable contributions African American women have given to the dominant society without recompense. Historian Jacqueline Jones expresses this perspective on the experiences of working class African American women:

Black women’s work took place within two distinct spheres that were at the same time mutually reinforcing and antagonistic. One workplace was centered in their own homes and communities . . . In contrast to this type of work . . . participation in the paid labor force (or slave economy) reinforced their subordinate status as women and as [B]lacks within American society. Because of their doubly disadvantaged status, [B]lack women were confined to two types of work that seemed ironically contradictory – the first was domestic and institutional service,

vindictively termed women's work; the other was manual labor so physically arduous it was usually considered men's work.<sup>144</sup>

Catlett's deft precision creates realistic images of African American women, making pain, strength, struggle and hope easily identifiable upon the faces of her subjects. She presents working class African American women in the post-emancipation era, but contrary to western images of Black women during this time, Catlett's linocuts reveal the grueling and tiresome reality of freed women's lives. Her subjects are not the merrily grinning mammies that plague American collective memory. Instead, Catlett visualizes the contradictory working conditions Jones describes. In this way, Catlett visually "re-makes"<sup>145</sup> the dominant culture's oppositional history by accurately representing what the status of second class American citizenship looked like for African American women. In "I Have Given the World My Songs," she confirms that African American women sang the blues as a way to ease the rigors of their work and oppression. The figure's downcast gaze coupled with her guitar playing suggests that she is employing the blues as an artistic vessel to release the stress of her life. These hardships are represented in the upper right corner, where the imagery of a lynching evokes the essence of history and memory. Catlett's use of perspective along with her background placement of the lynching implies distance, suggesting scenes from a violent past. Thus, Catlett's multilayered design and composition of the linocut illustrates how lynching is a part of both the figure's personal memories and the collective African American experience.

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<sup>144</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, (New York: Random House, 1985), 3-4.

<sup>145</sup> bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 95. This idea of Black women artists re-making and re-remembering history is borrowed from hooks's analysis of Lorna Simpson's photography.

In *Special Houses* we meet the figure on the left eye to eye as she stands before her housing tenement. Throughout the 1940's, Catlett was a frequent visitor of Chicago's Southside Community Center. There she studied and socialized with many of the artists from the Black Chicago Renaissance, most notably Margaret Burroughs (the founder of the DuSable Museum), writer Margaret Walker (who was also her colleague at Iowa), and her first husband Charles White, who is well known for his social realist images. While in Chicago, Catlett experienced first-hand the struggles of African American women living in urban ghettos. She communicates those struggles through a prominent subtext within this figure's gaze that not only confronts the white gaze and its racist visuality, but again the figure returns her own gaze suggesting that African American women are looking back at the larger society, seeing white privilege, discrimination, and racial violence in a country that promotes freedom and justice for all. Though the second figure's gaze is cast downward, the precision with which Catlett has etched her jawline visualizes the anger and exhaustion African American women living under these conditions are faced with everyday. Catlett's artistic skill also emphasizes the physical and emotional burdens that come along with economic oppression.



**Figure 24** “My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized,” *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; linoleum cut, 14.6 x 22.9 cm. Plate 10.

**Figure 25** “In Sojourner Truth I fought for the Rights of Women as well as Negroes,” *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; linoleum cut, 14.6 x 22.9 cm. Plate 7.

Catlett's strategic titling maneuver also reveals the importance of African American women's history to the formation of Black women's identity. Upon meeting the gaze of the central figure in "My Role Has Been Important in the Struggle to Organize the Unorganized," audiences literally see how African American women's historical experiences have influenced their identity as active agents of change both politically and socially. She depicts a courageous Black woman organizing her community with her left fist raised to the sky while confronting two white men. Moreover, this image appears in sequence after images of American history's most recognized Black women: Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, and most importantly for this study – Sojourner Truth.

By including Truth here, Catlett emphasizes the importance of Truth's work to both the anti-slavery cause and Black women's command of the American visual sphere. She signifies Truth's self-portraits, depicting her as a strong, respectable, autonomous figure that is also literate and powerful, as she stands at a podium with the Bible open in front of her. Rendered as an orator, Catlett points Truth's right index finger upward to indicate the direction she intended to take both herself and the various communities of women and Blacks for which she fought so hard. In this way, Catlett's application of visible-aggregation layers Truth's professional, visual, and performative histories within a two-dimensional design and pictorial sequence that links Black women's historical actions in both the visual and political realms to her own contemporary moment. She stresses that the experiences of African American women like Truth, women who were renowned American writers, abolitionist/feminist leaders, and political agents, directly contributed to the history of the Black female organizer represented in Plate 10. Therefore, Catlett is literally visualizing how African American women's historical

experiences have shaped the various ways in which Black women were politically active in the late 1940's. This image's significance is further founded in the fact that it was an early communication of Catlett's socialist and communist beliefs, as she was a very staunch union supporter. Moreover, the series does not simply present a different historical narrative regarding African American women; it asserts a Black feminist visuality that confronts and corrects the mythologies surrounding Black women's identities. Thus, through 6 images she covers a three hundred year time period, showing that African American women have been present and functioning as much more than hottentots and mammies throughout America's existence.

Catlett's figures and their gazes serve as a means of self-reclamation, to communicate that Black female identity is much more than racist visuality implies. Her figures return a gaze of their own, claiming Black female sovereignty and functioning to undermine, defy, and ultimately subvert the visual subjugation of the white gaze. Though Catlett's work stood firmly within modernist aesthetics, it remained outside racist, modernist discourses regarding Black women's identity, literally creating its own visual discourse. Hence, the final print in Catlett's series depicts a young Black woman asserting her right to equal treatment as both an American citizen and human being.



**Figure 26** "My Right is a Future of Equality with Other Americans," *The Negro Woman*, 1946-47; linoleum cut, 14.6 x 22.9 cm. Plate 16.

## Catlett's Figures: Black Feminist Visuality and the Black Female Nude



**Figure 27** *Figura*, 1962, mahogany.

Catlett's elegant nudes continued to dismiss the indignity surrounding Black female sexuality in modernist art and popular culture. Catlett renders her nudes in a very distinguished and beautiful manner that does not emanate the shame and disgust perpetuated through early western iconography of the Black female nude. Creating many of her nudes from mahogany and cedar, Catlett employs the wood's richness to bring an exquisite depth to the skin tone of each of her figures. The wood's natural coloring, coupled with the proportions in which Catlett sculpts her figures, brings the Black female nude to life in ways that were rarely seen in twentieth century American modern art. For example, *Figura* shows the beauty and the softness of the Black female body. She is a voluptuous woman with proportions based on the reality of a mature woman's body. *Figura* is positioned in a very modest stance, but unlike images of Baartman, Delia, and Drana, she governs her own body. Unashamed of her bare form, *Figura* wraps her arms lightly around her waist and hips, claiming her nudity by holding her left forearm and slightly touching her naked thigh.

In this fashion, Catlett's visible-aggregation layers hue and *Figura's* posture within themes of sexuality to reinforce the idea that self-making acts assist Black women to understand themselves in their completely unified essence. For instance, Catlett states

that her nudes represent the female body as she has experienced it. She maintains: “When I am bathing or dressing, I see how my body feels or looks and moves. I never do sculpture from a nude model...mostly I watch women.”<sup>146</sup> Here, Catlett affirms how her depictions of Black women grow first from her conceptualizations and acceptance of herself, expanding subsequently out from her interactions with other women around her. Considering Shange’s idea of the metaphysical dilemma, *Figura* then represents Catlett’s expression of self-making and how Black women have to first recognize and accept themselves in order to create and assert more accurate depictions of their bodies.



**Figure 28** *Homage to My Young Black Sistahs*, 1969, Cedar, 68”x12”x12”.

**Figure 29** *Homage to My Black Women Poets*, 1984

*Figura* was created by an African American woman who loves and admires herself as well as other Black women. Thus, Catlett deliberately avoids degrading and eroticized representations of Black women. For inspiration outside of herself and her international communities, she looks to more praiseful representations in the ancestries of Black women, like the work of African wood carvers. This inspiration is beautifully displayed in other pieces like *Figure*, 1974 and *Female Torso*, 1998, *Ife*, 2002 and *Bather* 2009. The way she carefully fashions and poses each piece along with the fact that she

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<sup>146</sup> Herzog, 122.



continued to sculpt female figures well into the twenty-first century vividly illustrates the love and respect Catlett held towards black women. For instance, *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* represents the influence of hundreds of everyday young women who participated in the Black Power movement.

Catlett often identified with these women because she too was consistently beleaguered by the U.S. government for her revolutionary political ties and eventually forced to relinquish her American citizenship in 1962. Thus, the gesture of the sculpture is clear. Its clenched fist and defiant stance screams Black Power in the face of an overbearing government determined to extinguish the flames of a growing Black Nationalism. Though the figure has no mouth, *Homage* speaks openly to her audience, revealing that the impetus of Black Power begins within its women. Accordingly, Catlett tunnels the figure's torso – a womb-like space that grows larger and wider from back to front. Through this design she visualizes the spiraled process of self-identification as one that originates from the inner most space of human existence to then be cultivated and carried upward and outward into the world. In this way, she evokes themes of birth and motherhood, illuminating that the spirit of Black Power gestates deep within the Black female body and is then carried out through the political action of Black revolutionary women. Refuting the patriarchal discourses championed by some of the movement's most prominent male leaders, Catlett's sculpture centers Black women's capabilities and their dominant presence at the grassroots level.

In 1984, she continues this theme in *Homage to My Black Women Poets*, a piece created in solidarity with Black women writers like Toni Cade Bombara, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Alice Walker who were illuminating the importance of Black

women's experiences in America. Like *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*, *Homage to My Black Women Poets* is a dominant figure. Once more, Catlett employs a spiral motif to show how Black women's power both grows and travels upward from the base of their being to the tips of their fingers to once again culminate into a powerful fist.

Additionally, this sculpture represents the dawn of a new era for Black women. Unlike the latter *Homage*, Catlett renders *Homage to My Black Women Poets* with opened eyes and a fully formed mouth, depicting the Black women writers, many of whom were very active during the Black Power movement, who in 1984 were in the midst of communicating the tenets of Black female aesthetics. For this reason, *Homage to My Black Women Poets* has the opposite fist raised, signifying a past period while simultaneously signaling that a new moment for Black women arrived in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Elizabeth Catlett's sculpture reclaims black female sexuality in that it creates a counter discourse that subverts racist visuality. Her figures represent Black women as they are and appear to themselves, not in relation to how others view them. Catlett also uses modernist aesthetics to reclaim the value of African art from the popular notion that European Modernism was the only determinant of its cultural value. Catlett's work accomplishes all these tasks through a utilization of West African sculptural design, fashioning dominant figures that hold confident stances and emit intense, direct gazes that look back upon their viewers asserting that though Black women are being watched, they too are watching as well.

## CHAPTER 5

### “SO NOW I’M LOOKING DEAD AT YOU, WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO:” KARA WALKER AND BLACK FEMINIST VISUALITY

In the latter part of May 2014, I erupted with intense excitement at the announcement of Kara Walker's Brooklyn exhibition, *A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby, An Homage To The Unpaid and Overworked Artisans Who Have Refined Our Sweet Tastes From The Cane Fields To The Kitchens Of The New World On The Occasion Of The Demolition Of The Domino Sugar Refining Plant*.<sup>147</sup> When I initially saw Creative Time's advertisement, the show was opening three days after I relocated to Birmingham, Alabama from Amherst, Massachusetts. Knowing that I would not have time to make one last drive to New York, I settled for mining Creative Time's website and decided to purchase whatever publication they produced to help me with my upcoming curatorial and dissertation work. Yet, the universe had different plans for me. As social media exploded with images and critiques of *A Subtlety*, my Facebook page was inundated with posts of exhibition images and reviews attached to comments asking, *Have you seen this?!!* or declaring, *You have to check this out!!!*<sup>148</sup> The next thing I knew, my page became a medium for me to access Walker's show through others'

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<sup>147</sup> In May 2014 Creative Time, a non-profit arts organization based in New York, known for commissioning large public art projects, presented Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*. The sculptural installation was Walker's artistic commentary upon the various histories that the Domino Sugar Refining Plant represented. The building was to be demolished in late July in contributive efforts to the on-going gentrification of the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, which was culminating through the demolition to make way for a new luxury condominium development.

<sup>148</sup> Creative Time's sponsorship and promotion of Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* also included a substantial virtual presence through their own website [www.creativetime.org](http://www.creativetime.org) and several social media sites, particularly Instagram and Facebook. The organization trended the Instagram hashtag #KaraWalkerDomino where they encouraged visitors to post photos and testimonials of their experiences at the exhibition.

experiences and to facilitate critical conversations regarding her previous works as well as *A Subtlety*.<sup>149</sup>

As my analyses of exhibition reviews continued, a colleague posted Joseph Osmundson's "Kara Walker and the Sweet Taste of Gentrification" and Nathan Kensinger's "Artist Kara Walker Says Farewell to the Domino Sugar Refinery" to my Facebook page. My intellectual barometer peaked for I felt these to be the most intriguing reviews to come across my touchscreen purely because of what their commentaries lacked. Osmundson's critique delineated the consanguinity between western consumer culture, the white gaze, colonization, industrialization, gentrification, and Black/Brown bodies. He addressed all the aspects of western society and its sordid history that I believed Walker was commenting on in her piece, except the most obvious – the criticality of Black women's bodies, sexuality, and reproductive capabilities to each system.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, Kensinger's essay neglected the same concepts, yet included a recollection of an exhibition volunteer saying to visitors, "Please don't touch it . . . And, don't lick it! I know you want to lick it."<sup>151</sup> My reaction was, wait a minute, what!? Who

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<sup>149</sup> Because my scholarly specialization is African American women artists, many of my friends, professional colleagues, students, etc. often talk with me about the hatred or admiration they feel toward Walker. The controversy stirred by *A Subtlety* engendered several conversations that I facilitated about Walker and her work through my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts.

<sup>150</sup> Joseph Osmundson, "Kara Walker and the Sweet Taste of Gentrification," *The Feminist Wire*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com>. Focusing primarily on the gentrification happening in Williamsburg, Osmundson writes a sound commentary, linking the violence of the white gaze to Black bodies and how this informs processes of gentrification and its historical links to colonization and industrialization. Yet, his essay lacks a critical lens that can view these processes and their historical linkages through the experiences of Black women. Thus, his overall argument erases or more so ignores the very thing Walker is communicating – that Black women should be a very prominent face when "looking at" processes of industrialization, its labor force, and the displacement it inevitably causes. Walker, a deftly skilled artist in various mediums, could have created any form she wanted, but she specifically sculpted a Black female form as a means for audiences to recognize, understand, and ultimately empathize with the plights of displaced workers and residents in Williamsburg. Osmundson's analysis completely ignores this concept.

<sup>151</sup> Nathan Kensinger, "Artist Kara Walker Says Farewell to the Domino Sugar Refinery," *Camera Obscura*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.ny.curbed.com>. Kensinger focuses primarily on the gentrification happening in Williamsburg, the demolition of the refinery, the displacement of workers, and lack of

goes into a decaying factory that has been in ruin for a decade, known to be an active demolition site, and decides to place their tongue on anything!?! And why exactly is that particular recollection important to a photo-essay that primarily focuses on the fading history of the Domino Sugar Refinery site and the changing landscape of Brooklyn's waterfront?<sup>152</sup>

Deeper contemplation led me to more analytical questions such as, why does Osmundson contribute such a comprehensive piece to *The Feminist Wire* and omit any kind of critical discussion of Black female sexual oppression, while deliberately including an image of the Sugar Baby's genitalia? And why does Kensinger completely ignore the presence of Black women in his coverage of an art installation created by a Black woman, which employs a monumental sculpture of a Black female as a lens through which to understand the historical contexts of industry, race, and gentrification, but include a volunteer's statement that is loaded with sexual innuendo? What substantiates these types of discussions, which simultaneously hypervisualize Black women's nudity and sexuality through an erasure of the sexual violence, abuse, and physical labor those bodies have endured for centuries? And what exactly is Walker's artistic premise and responsibility as a Black woman artist who creates disturbing imagery of Black female nudes that engender such discussions? The more I pondered these inquires, I realized that the premise of this project served as my most viable means to unpack, define, and clarify possible answers. One month later I was on a plane to New

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historical context Walker's exhibition provides about the actual site. His essay includes absolutely no treatment of Black women other than the obvious statement that Walker herself is Black. His essay also makes no mention of the historical links between colonization, slavery, industrialization, and gentrification that Walker's sculptures illuminate so vividly.

<sup>152</sup> Kensinger, "Artist Kara Walker Says Farewell to the Domino Sugar Refinery."

York brimming with excitement to see *A Subtlety* and begin my investigations of Walker's work.

Kensinger's use of the volunteer's comment and each writer's inattention to the importance of Black women's history and experiences to contemporary western culture seemed so peculiar, yet once I attended *A Subtlety*, their negligence became strangely pertinent to how and why African American women artists have historically, (1) utilized the Black female body as a discursive site for confronting the stereotypes and realities of Black female identity, and (2) espoused Black feminist visibility through multilayered, figurative works that reveal the ubiquitous polarity of Black women's visual presence within western culture – being simultaneously hypervisible and invisible – and illuminate how western society's primary visual conceptualizations of Black women's identities have been constructed and shaped through its racist visibility, which completely ignores Black women's own powerful expressions of identity, autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, and self-making.



**Figure 30:** Kara Walker, *A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby, An Homage To The Unpaid and Overworked Artisans Who Have Refined Our Sweet Tastes From The Cane Fields To The Kitchens Of The New World On The Occasion Of The Demolition Of The Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, 2014, Installation.

Once in line outside the exhibit, I stood in awe amidst hundreds of anxious visitors from all walks of life. An indiscriminate mass, the crowd revealed no boundaries between age, race, gender, or social class. Middle-class families stood excitedly among

groups of college students, Hollywood celebrities, elderly couples, contemporary art aficionados, and foreign tourists. I was so excited that works rendered by an African American female artist, despite Walker's reputation for creating controversial images, drew such a diverse audience. However, the appearance of audience diversity was immediately challenged once inside the refinery, where Walker's sculptures engaged in a visual melodrama with the dilapidated building to implicate the viewer's mode of vision as a process that substantiates both Black women's invisibility and coexistent hypervisibility in the western visual field, along with the two most prevalent stereotypes regarding Black womanhood – the Mammy and the Jezebel. Upon entering the space, visitor's visual and olfactory senses were immediately arrested by the Sugar Baby's imposing stature and the refining plant's eroding structure. Lit exclusively by natural light permeating through the factory's windows, her colossal form emitted an intense luminosity against the structure's decaying walls, so thickly coated with rust and molasses that they appeared to be bleeding. This structural hemorrhaging coupled with the 40 tons of sugar used to construct the Sugar Baby and the resin make-up of the smaller sculptures produced an odor so dense and so sweet that it eventually became fetid. The Sugar Baby's face was rendered in the conventional physiognomy specific to the Mammy stereotype, complete with full lips, broad nose, and head kerchief, yet interestingly lacking the iconic wide eyes and gleaming grin. Instead, she donned a stoic and somewhat reflective expression indicated by her closed eyes. Her body, though modeled like the Sphinx, communicated the hypersexualized nature of the Jezebel caricature through an immodest exposure of her protruding breasts and prominent display of her large buttocks and distended vagina. Her little male attendants were rendered in much smaller sizes with

slightly grinning faces, yet the presence of sunlight upon their dissolving resin forms caused them to look as if they were burning from the inside out.

Almost on cue, visitors brought out their cell phones and expensive digital cameras to capture the "beauty" of the space and the figures within it. Instantaneously, visitors of all kinds snapped selfies and group shots with the sculptures in every lewd and vulgar pose one could imagine. At that moment, I realized that Walker had created a space that transformed visitors into active participants in a contemporary performance of the spectacle that degraded millions of Black women and children from the dawn of European colonization in Africa, through the humiliating presentations of Black women like Baartman, Delia, and Drana, to the debasing experiences of the slave auction block. Similar to these nineteenth century scenes, the exhibition audience was enmeshed in a visual performance that combined sculpture, space, and viewer engagement to illustrate that the horrors of western colonization, slavery, and the commodification of Black bodies continues to haunt the contemporary visual field. Thus, the multifaceted nature of Walker's work slowly nullified the appearance of audience diversity. The moments their phones and cameras flashed, each visitor transformed into a participatory consumer, spectator, and actor in western society's continued visual objectification of Black bodies.

Consequently, most exhibition viewers had no idea that like the Sugar Baby, her little attendants, and the refinery itself, they too were figurative works that Walker had on display. Her structuring of the exhibition uncovered how audiences' conduct within a gallery space symbolize the complexities and problematic ways in which we come to know others and ourselves through visual understandings of what we think we see. Thus, Walker's installation represents a Black feminist visibility that engages the scopic sphere



to implicate the viewer's mode of vision as a process, which substantiates both Black women's invisibility and coexistent hypervisibility in the western visual field, along with the two most recognizable stereotypes of Black womanhood. Osmundson's and Kensinger's inability to "see" this, as well as the history and centrality of Black women's sexual exploitation in *A Subtlety*, while being very capable of recognizing the Sugar Baby's nudity, demonstrates that in American culture racist visuality denies Black women the opportunity to be visually understood as anything other than mythological caricatures. It reveals how racist and sexist conceptualizations of the Black female nude and Black women's sexuality prevents her unclothed body, or representations of it, from being visually recognized as expressions of humanity and autonomy, or as challenges to and critiques of Black women's hypervisibility and concomitant invisibility in western visual culture. With this understanding, I realized that Walker had created a multi-layered work that not only communicated Black women's autonomy, subjectivity, personal empowerment, self-making, and integrated identities, but also revealed how visual systems and modes of seeing worked in tandem to both hyper-visualize and erase Black women's bodies and experiences.

Kensinger's use of the comment seemed so out of place upon my initial reading of his essay, yet once I experienced *A Subtlety* myself it became strangely relevant to how Black women are literally seen and unseen in western society. Of course I understood the sculpture was constructed from 40 tons of refined sugar, a sweet delicacy most Americans associate with palatable pleasure. Yet, because this sugar was confectioned into the form of a Black female nude, the comment bares an innate sexual undertone. Originating from a racist visuality that only understands the Black female nude as

aberrant, the Black woman as a licentious, sexual deviant who is always-already for sexual consumption and ultimately intercourse is one such historical myth that is conceptualized as visual truth in western culture. Western visual history has consistently represented the nude Black female body as an excessive body, existing beyond the proper boundaries of white femininity. Thus, Black women's nude bodies become the quintessential visual representations of erotic, sexual pleasure, unable to be visually conceptualized in any other way in the western visual field. Understanding how this racist visuality operates upon representations of Black women's bodies then lends itself to a much more analytical reading of viewer responses to *A Subtlety*, the volunteer's comment, Kensinger's use of it, and how and why Walker's work engenders such reactions.

The volunteer's statement of "knowing" that visitors wanted to lick the sculpture suggests that most exhibition patrons subscribe to a racist visuality that defines the nude Black female body as always-already sexually aberrant, licentious, and lascivious. It assumes that viewers come into the gallery space with an understanding of the nude Black woman as always-already available to their advances, be they sexual or otherwise. This then allows the volunteer to express with surety that viewers immediately have the desire to engage in oral, sexual acts with the sculpture upon "seeing" her material, her nudity, and sexual figuration. The comment also reveals how viewer conceptualization of the Black female body and Black women's sexuality, ground the false concepts of racist visuality, which prevents viewers from seeing the Black female nude as a challenge to and critique of Black women's hypervisibility and concomitant invisibility in the western visual field. It perpetuates a type of myopic vision that sees only sexual aberrance and

availability. This is what permits the exhibition volunteer to cloak acts of sexual desire in attempts to discourage physical contact with the sculpture when communicating the usual directive of ‘do not touch’ that is common to most gallery spaces. In other words, the visual consumption of Black female sexuality and the assumed readiness of Black women’s bodies for sex is so pervasive within American culture that it totally nullifies the typical physical restraint art audiences exercise when interacting with art objects. It is also what allows Kensinger to use this comment as the only recognition of the sculpture throughout his entire essay, which of course recognizes the sculpture’s sexual allusions, while completely ignoring the broader historical context of the physical and sexual violence Black women and children endured during their envelopment in the sugar trade; a point that Walker makes so gigantically obvious.

From the exhibition title to the Sugar Baby’s 35 foot magnitude, Walker clearly states that the installation is “...*An Homage To The Unpaid and Overworked Artisans Who Have Refined Our Sweet Tastes From The Cane Fields To The Kitchens Of The New World.*” Her title suggests her usage of the historical and mythological narratives surrounding the mammy caricature as a lens through which to understand Black women’s roles as agricultural laborers in the cane fields, reproductive laborers on sugar plantations, industrial laborers in sugar refineries, and domestic laborers who utilized and served the confection in millions of white American homes. When discussing contemporary visual understandings of Black women, their histories, and how mammy’s specter seems to haunt Black women’s identities in American visual culture Walker states:

I don’t want to reduce it to just the mammy figure that’s lurking behind there. There is this whole cosmology, this whole pantheon of caricatures, but not just black caricatures. There’s a very American set of caricatures who are

informative about the ideas, ideals, mistakes, and goals of this experiment that the new world represents—the experiment that has gone wrong.<sup>153</sup>

She recognizes that mammy is only one visual parody within a multitude of stereotypes that constitute the pictorial record of American history, illuminating that the mammy caricature alone does not define racist conceptualizations of Black women's identities in the western visual realm. Instead, Walker suggests that mammy is part of a larger fictional though visual framework that specifically produced mythologies about Black women's bodies and sexuality to reinforce the functions of the sugar trade and its exploits of Black women and children for economic advancement and international commerce.

Thus, Walker's Black feminist visuality illuminates mammy's location within this "pantheon of caricatures" and the myths they convey altogether, showing how racist caricatures work within the realities of slavery to inform the racist visuality that envisages Black women as both excessive and invisible. In this way, *A Subtlety* becomes a deliberate expression of Walker's Black feminist visuality as she uses her own visage with mammy and jezebel's iconicity to encapsulate viewers, drawing attention to the broader histories and mythologies that inform the caricature, and how contemporary audiences come to identify both themselves and Black women through such fictions. By, *iconicity* I mean the ways a singular image comes to represent a myriad of historical "processes and occurrences."<sup>154</sup> Yet, despite Walker's vehement communication of all these concepts, as well as Black women's historical experiences throughout the exhibition, viewer response, the volunteer's comment, and Kensinger's use of it emphasize the fact that the Black female body's excessive existence within American

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<sup>153</sup> Antwaun Sargent, "Interview: Kara Walker Decodes Her New World Sphinx at Domino Sugar Factory," *Complex*, May 13, 2014, <http://www.complex.com/style/2014/05/kara-walker-interview>.

<sup>154</sup> Here I am employing the definition of "iconicity" used in Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, Blackness*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 2.

visual culture continues to underwrite Black women's overall state of invisibility. This erasure of Black women's actual experiences by exhibition visitor's, the volunteer, and Kensinger, reveal how racist visibility functions to substantiate mythologies of Black women's sexuality.

Consequently, no matter how visually apparent Walker makes the realities of Black women's sexual abuse, it is lost within a racist and sexist myopia that is blind to its tangible existence. The Sugar Baby's representation of mammy's physical and historical presence as both domestic and sexual laborer, as well as Walker's existence, is then ignored by the audience's ability to see only her sexual deviance in the capacity of sensual entertainment. Describing how systematic racism confines Black women to such a precarious space within the American visual realm, Audrey Lorde writes, "within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism."<sup>155</sup> Walker, who has a very sound understanding of Lorde's concept and its visual perpetuation through the mammy and jezebel stereotypes states,

I have been making an effort in my own practice to own, understand, and undermine the intended readings of the mammy, picaninny, or Uncle Moe kinds of caricatures. I really do want to understand how a modern [B]lack woman might become archetypal and contain all the paradoxes of information created by others.<sup>156</sup>

Walker clearly recognizes that Black women are often understood within the western visual realm through fictional concepts that are not manufactured by Black women. Thus, her Black feminist visibility expects visitors to come into her shows donning the racist

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<sup>155</sup> Audrey Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Random House: New York, 2007. 41. Electronic.

<sup>156</sup> Sargent.

visuality that exhibits how “the depersonalization of racism” functions through western modes of vision.

Her exhibitions are notorious for the various ways her works present the Black woman as excess to illuminate how racist visuality employs a historical amnesia, which ignores the sexual exploitation and abuse of Black women, to depersonalize both the physical and psychological affects of racism on the Black female body. This particular feature of Walker’s exhibitions extend into the performative realm through a viewer engagement that generates both intriguing and disturbing responses from her audiences. A *Subtlety* represents this concept most discernibly through the Sugar Baby’s sexual figuration, which prompted masses of viewers to pose themselves in sexual positions with the sculpture for individual and group photos.

Certain patrons, who “acted” as if they were participating in sexual exploits with the Sugar Baby, further confounded this. Of course, this outward disrespect by white audience members of Black women’s history and the very literal pain of that history infuriated many Black exhibition visitors.<sup>157</sup> However, for as many Black women and men that I observed in either a rage or in tears as they digested the antics of white viewers and the severity of the exhibition as a whole, there was a comparable number of Black men and women participating in similar degrading acts with the sculptures. This speaks to another point Walker’s Black feminist visuality addresses – the various ways in which the ideas that ground racist visuality also inform how both Black men and women come

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<sup>157</sup> Nicholas Powers, “Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit,” *The Independent*, June 30, 2014. <http://www.indydependent.org>. Expressing the pain he felt while witnessing whites’ degrading reactions to Walker’s sculptures, Powers delineates the angered reactions of several Black visitors, including the social organization We Are Here who worked the exhibition in efforts to remind visitors to be mindful of their responses because the sculptures represented a very important and sensitive history for African Americans who were also at the exhibit. See also, Jamilah King, “The Overwhelming Whiteness of Black Art,” *Colorlines*, May 21, 2014. [http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/05/the\\_overwhelming\\_whiteness\\_of\\_black\\_art.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/05/the_overwhelming_whiteness_of_black_art.html)

to identify themselves. Black viewer response to *A Subtlety* exposed how Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" continues to plague people of color in the contemporary visual sphere. Their reactions revealed the nuanced affects of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, [and] measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>158</sup>

Thus, Walker's Black feminist visuality utilizes the hypervisibility of Black women's nude bodies, along with viewer's racist understandings of them, to encourage both conscious and unconscious expressions of racist visuality in efforts to expose how it continues to function and negatively affect both Black and white Americans within the contemporary visual realm. Therefore, appearances of viewer disregard of the broader historical and cultural contexts embedded in her works are an outcome she prepares for and to some degree encourages. In her discussion of Walker's 2005 exhibition, *Song of the South*, where Walker demonstrates these concepts through an animation of shadow puppets named Mammie and King Cotton, Lorraine Morales Cox states:

[Walker's] work provokes viewers to excavate, contemplate, and evaluate deep-seated collective and individual perpetuations of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Through a layered multi-dimensional body of work, weaving together fiction, history, autobiography, and popular culture . . . Walker's art plays a vital yet challenging role in confronting a culture deeply plagued by racism and general xenophobia . . .<sup>159</sup>

Cox focuses specifically on *Song of the South* and some of Walker's earlier shows to illustrate what she theorizes as Walker's "performative turn." She delineates the progress of Walker's engagement with and encouragement of viewer participation through installations that require audiences to react and respond to both Black male and

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<sup>158</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Random House: New Jersey, 1994), 5.

<sup>159</sup> Lorraine Morales Cox, "A Performative Turn: Kara Walker's *Song of the South*," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (March 2007): 59-87.

female bodies that are being sexually abused, or as in the case of *A Subtlety*, how systems of oppression prime Black bodies for sexual exploitation. By forcing audiences to “look at” and perform in staged historical scenes of Black women’s sexual abuse, Walker’s Black feminist visuality overrides racist visuality and its historical amnesia as it forces viewers to “see” their own, as well as others, instinctive perpetuations of the historical abuse Black women experienced during and after slavery. As Cox explains, Walker’s installation and shadow puppet show in *Song of the South* caused:

the audience, perhaps unknowingly for some, [to become] agents in the long history of exploitative entertainment, beginning with slave master’s shooting at the feet of their slaves to ‘make them dance’. While some laughed, others fell awkwardly silent. . . . This uncomfortable humor, of deciding whether or when to laugh, is an aspect of Walker’s work, which highlights how what we laugh at often determines or is determined, by our sense of self.<sup>160</sup>

Through a visualization of the audience and its own racist behaviors, Walker’s Black feminist visuality compels viewers to acknowledge the realities of slavery, its abuses of Black women, and how vestiges of each continue to manifest themselves within contemporary society. Walker very deliberately plays upon both Black and white viewers’ understandings of self, elucidating how individuals identify themselves at her shows based on the ways they literally “see,” understand, and respond to her representations of nude Black female bodies. In this way, Walker’s exhibitions and the performances they engender from various audiences, provide a type of visual intervention within the western visual field in that they do not simply identify or reify racist visuality and its history of spectacle surrounding the Black female body; rather, they expose how it remains to be a very integral component of our contemporary, visual reality. Hence, *Song of the South*, *A Subtlety*, and many of Walker’s other installations demonstrate how we

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 77.



remain to be actors in and perpetrators of western history's circus sideshow of Black women's identity. So much so, that upon leaving *A Subtlety*, my friend turned to me and said, “We take it with us, it literally sticks to your shoes...meaning we literally walk away with it and track it everywhere we go.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> I am appreciative to Thaddeus J. Desmond, who offered such a deeply reflective comment that informs this work, but who also accompanied me to the exhibition and remained there with me for over two hours as I talked with fellow viewers, took copious notes, talked briefly with Walker herself, and then spent my own time observing the exhibition as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

### BLOOMING ONE PETAL AT A TIME

In May 1974, *Ms. Magazine*, the leading U.S. feminist publication, published Alice Walker's groundbreaking essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South."<sup>162</sup> In it, Walker illuminates the centrality of artistic creativity to the lives of Black women in America. Through a beautiful recounting of her mother's gardening she reveals that throughout American history, Black women have employed their artistic skills as a form of resistance against socioeconomic and sexual oppression. To demonstrate how deeply imbedded within the American cultural fabric racial, sexual, and economic subjugations against Black women are, she analyzes the life of eighteenth century American poet Phillis Wheatley, Jean Toomer's short story "Avey," and Virginia Wolfe's inability to understand that a Black woman living in the eighteenth or nineteenth century could not even possess her own body, let alone retain a "Room." Her discussion explains how historical, literary, and visual discourses crafted by the larger American society, which for Walker includes Black men, have either rendered Black women's lives completely invisible or visualized their experiences through mythologies that define them as "saints," "mammies," or "jezebels." For example, she states:

We have also been called "Matriarchs," "Superwomen," and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention "Castraters" (*sic*) and "Sapphire's Mama." When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our

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<sup>162</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," *Ms.* 2, 71, (May 1974).

throats. To be an artist and a [B]lack woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be.<sup>163</sup>

In this compelling statement Walker explains how Black women's plea for basic recognition within their own communities, as well as the broader American society, double as expressions of visibility and assertions of autonomy. She declares that the invisibility of Black women's physical, emotional, and social realities does not deter their artistic creativity as it is this very specific phenomena of being both seen and unseen, coupled with the interlocking aspects of race, gender, and class oppression that stimulates their determination to create. With this, she joins the Combahee River Collective's emphasis that it is the multidimensionality of Black women's lives that make their experiences so unique. And, it is through this understanding that Black women, like Walker's mother, have historically and continue to use the resources available to them to create beautiful works of art allowing them to surmount the pressures of their sexual and social subordination.

At its initial publication, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" was considered a major contribution to the dearth of scholarly literature dedicated to the experiences of Black women. Walker, previously well known for the ways that both her poetry and prose centered Black women's lives, as well as her recovery of Zora Neale Hurston's literary and anthropological work, was one of the few Black women writers who had attained notoriety within the American literary world and utilized her position to visualize the complexities of Black women's material reality. Yet, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" presented a unique appraisal of African American women's history that extended well beyond a simple reclamation of Black women's literary traditions. Her

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<sup>163</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Mariner Books, 2003, 237.

essay uncovered the criticality of aesthetic fulfillment to Black women's lives and presented a concept from which to understand those creative methodologies. It is from this concept that I attempt to theorize about how Black women artists both structured and informed Black women's identities. Walker had indeed presented something brilliant.

The grounding principle of her essay, which she terms *the ability to hold on* – how a Black woman maintains her artistic acumen despite oppressions that very specifically obstruct the resources she needs to cultivate it – explains the benefit of Black women's self-making processes. This *ability to hold on*, or as I understand it, mode of Black women's self-making was not something that only Walker was aware of. Many Black feminist scholars writing in the 1970's and 1980's, such as Michelle Cliff, Ntosake Shange, and Lorraine O'Grady to name just a few, were emphatic about it, as well as how Black women expressed it through visual means. Their works are replete with visual language, suggesting the importance of "image" and "invisibility" as they relate to Black women in American society. They also focus on the inherent personal characteristic involved in self-making processes, claiming that their own efforts to theorize a Black feminist aesthetic and assert both the integrated identities and autonomy of Black women, was a process to help them discover themselves – a concomitant self-making act. This *Black Feminist Visuality* – the creative imaging of Black women's self-making, autonomy, subjectivity, and personal empowerment that allows them to transcend the distorted, mythological constructions of Black female identity concretized within western visual culture as it reveals the functions of western culture's racist visuality and rejects its subjugation of Black women's identity formation – reimagines Black women's artistic

practices and artworks as performative acts that reveal the self-defining and libratory aspects of Black women's art and art making.

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