

Black Feminist Theories of Flesh: Embodiment, Biopolitics, Visual Culture

Senior Thesis

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by
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Acknowledgments

I am dedicating my undergraduate senior thesis to the oldest and youngest living members of my family. To my great grandmother, Eva, and my baby cousin, Kade. Let this be a reminder to myself that this work is about the task of knowing and understanding both of you. Grandma, I will never know what you lived through. Kade, I do not know what this world holds for you. My love for you is about embracing the unknown and fighting for all of us in the present.

As I cherish this moment of intense pride and submit my longest piece of writing thus far, I am filled with gratitude towards those who guided me here. To my family, thank you for instilling in me an appreciation of Blackness and womanhood so deep that I see myself and my people as the default. When I think of how you raised me, my choice to major in African & Afro-American Studies and Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies was inevitable.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Flesh
3. Self-Portraiture
4. Female-ish Form
5. Conclusion

1. Introduction

This project emerges from my preoccupation with discourses in Black studies and the history of art on the relationship of embodiment to representation. Understanding abject conditions of Black life as both corporeal and philosophical in nature, I am interested in how violence to the body works with and for eurocentric, masculinist processes of narrativizing Black womanhood. I am intrigued by the possibility of the body as a tool for intervention and resistance despite the violence it has endured under global forms of domination. Navigating an anti-Black world as an abundant-bodied and unapologetically queer Black woman, I have grown to understand my intersecting vulnerabilities as connected to my particular embodiment of unruly desire, weight, race, and gender. Turning to Black women for language and guidance, I picked up Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* and began to explore possibilities of the body as a tool, a primary source, and a site of harm. Thus, my research is in part inspired by *Hunger*. *Hunger* examines what having abundant flesh entails for Black women navigating a society plagued by eurocentric beauty standards. Using the story of her own embodiment as a primary source, Gay engages in a tradition of Black women transforming the discourse on their own bodies through creative production. We are members of a society that has been inundated with propaganda about the excessiveness of Black women's bodies. I consider the modes by which Black women disrupt the distortions of who they are that have been fabricated by hegemonic institutions. The creative process by which Roxane Gay allowed her own body to become the center of a meditation on excessive flesh provides an insight into the possibility of Black women using their hypervisibility as an opportunity to renegotiate the meaning of their own embodiment. Gay expresses her interiority in order to lay bare the ways in which Black women's embodiment has been scientifically conceptualized and narrativized. Gay observes, "In

writing about my body, maybe I should study this flesh, the abundance of it, as a crime scene. I should examine this corporeal effect to determine the cause” (20). Thinking of the flesh as a crime scene alludes to notions of unruliness, transgression, and atrocity. That is to say, my research has led me to investigate the corporeal narratives attached to Black women, and how Black women negotiate these meanings through embodied interventions. Roxane Gay’s utilization of her own embodiment to negotiate meanings of corpulent flesh serves as a literary example of what I will engage through visual culture. While the integrated arts provide various methods by which one can engage the narrativization of Black female embodiment, I focus on visual culture because of my particular interest in the processes by which visibility can transform, disrupt, and occlude eurocentric and masculinist gazes. While deeply influenced by critical theory and literature, I analyze the visual realm because of my focus on what it means to (re)configure and perform Black female embodiment. Although Gay’s work is a literary example, it has much to do with visibility, and with the functioning of the heteropatriarchal white supremacist gaze as it violates Black women’s bodies that are fleshy and abundant. Thus, as my research primarily turns to visual culture, it is important to note that this research began with Roxane Gay’s narrative of her body.

First, I provide a summary of the critical background to my working conceptualization of flesh in order to explain the theories and concepts that inform my visual analyses that follow. While my understanding of flesh is focalized primarily through the work of Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers, I also explain the theoretical context in which other scholars are in dialogue with Spillers’ definition of flesh. Then, I examine photography and self-portraiture as a site at which Black women contemporary artists produce a critique of the ways in which hegemonic discourses on art and science have built hierarchies of human difference. Throughout

my research, histories of western art and western science are interrogated by Black women contemporary artists who criticize the anti-Blackness that is foundational to those institutions. Carrie Mae Weems, Renée Cox, and Nona Faustine turn to self-portraiture as a mode to question the narrative that masculinist and white supremacist epistemologies have assigned to their bodies. Next, I analyze abstraction, grotesquerie, and the female-ish form as motifs that are present in works by Kara Walker and Wangechi Mutu. Their work introduces a different mode by which Black women visual artists address issues of biopolitics and embodiment. Instead of the purported direct representation of the self-portrait and photograph, Mutu and Walker produce provocative and fantastical representations of Black female figures that do not conform to fundamentals of realism and figural representation. Abstracting the female figure allows these works to provide a different angle to query white supremacist and masculinist narratives of Black women's bodies. In essence, my work examines the relationship of flesh and embodiment to realism, abstraction, and representation through the visual works that are my primary sources. I focus on biopolitics because the works I analyze are conducive to embodied theories that interrogate the foundational anti-Blackness of scientific fields such as comparative anatomy and gynecology which have contributed to lasting cultural fictions about Black women's purported inferiority. Employing Black feminist theory and biopolitical discourse, I am conceptualizing theories of flesh within a framework that critically engages contemporary art.

2. Flesh

While I operate primarily on Hortense Spillers' conceptualization of the flesh and Michel Foucault's definition of biopolitics, I turn to other related theories such as necropolitics, social death, and bare life. Hence, my analysis combines critical theory and visual analysis to address the provocative strategies embodied in works by Black women contemporary artists. I begin my analysis by focusing on the various theorists with whom Black feminist theories of flesh are necessarily in dialogue. In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye outlines Agamben's bare life, Foucault's biopolitics, Patterson's social death and Mbembe's necropolitics as theoretical frameworks that exist in the same arena as Spillers' conceptualization of the flesh. Weheliye criticizes Agamben and Patterson for their privileging of social context above the corporeality of the homo sacer figure (this figure is the subject deprived of all rights to self-possession and, as Mbembe notes, is ultimately killable). Spillers' and Weheliye's expansions on these frameworks note a possibility for an analysis of racialized minority populations that attends to the materiality of their embodied experiences. In addition, Weheliye interrogates bare life and biopolitics discourses for not positioning race as a central tenet in their theorization of the construction of the human. These discourses are central examples of approaches to the processes by which hierarchies of human difference are theorized and mapped onto subaltern populations. Most fitting to the theoretical implications of my current research is biopolitics. Biopolitics as a concept is born from Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, which analyzes the social and political power over life in state formations. Foucault's concept of biopower references a segment of social theory in which the state is viewed as improving the lives of its occupants through disciplinary politics that supposedly serve the welfare of the population. To Foucault,

WKH VFLHQWLILF IRUPXODWLRQ RI 'UDFH' DV DQ REMHFW F
genocide, are examples of modern biopower.

Biopolitic V WKH WHFKQRORJ\ RI ELRSRZHU LV FRQQHFWH
its focus on how human life is valued differently based on levels of conformity to normative citizenship. Biopolitical discourses coordinate with anatopolitics to form the context in which Foucault writes. Anatompolitics is the disciplining of individual bodies in the modern state in order to purportedly maintain the general welfare of the population. History of Sexuality,)RXFDXOW GHVFULEHV ELRSRZHU DV DQ ELRSLDWH DQGLVWHUHQW RI WHFKQRORJ\ DV 'RS optimized, efficient bodies and at the intersection of bodies and populations: as individualizing DQG VSHFLI\LQJ OLIH' 7KHUHIRUH KLVWRULHV RI UDF biopolitical discourse because of the prevalence of disciplinary tactics in relation to the body that are taken up by Western institutions against Black subjects. Scientific racism is a function of a biopolitical state that is fundamentally anti-Black.

While Foucault does address racism as a technology of power that the modern state takes up, he does not privilege histories of racial slavery as essential to biopolitical discourse in the ZD\V WKDW %ODFN VWXGLHV VFKRODUV VXFKHU 6SROOHUHV 0EHPEH ZULWHV 'SQ\ KLVWRULFD DFRXQW RI WKH ULVH ZKLFK FRXOG EH FRQVLGHUH G RQH RI WKH ILUVW LQVWD 0EHPEH\ V FRQVLGHU DWLRQ RI biopolitical discourses in Black studies with Weheliye, who also maintains a theorizing of biopolitical discourse to recognize the FHQWUDOLW\ RI UDFH 7KHUHIRUH , RSHUDWH RQ)RXFDXC its inadequacy to fully capture a Black feminist theory of the flesh. Weheliye elaborates:

+RUWHQVH 6SROOHUV\ GLVWLQFWLRQ EHWZHHQ ERG\ corrective to these approaches by highlighting the embodiment of those banished to the

zone of indistinction and by showing how bare life is transmitted historically so as to become affixed to certain bodies. Which is to say, Spillers interrogates the visual, fleshly distinctions that comprise the nexus of racialization and/as bare life, which Agamben labors to render inoperable in this field, and Spillers does so because she deploys the middle passage and plantation slavery in the Americas as the nomoi of modern hierarchical governance (38).

In accordance with the work of Achille Mbembe, the possibility posited by Weheliye and Spillers is what can be theorized through placing Blackness and racial slavery as central to biopolitical and bare life discourses. The centering of Blackness in these paradigms is consequently a refusal of academic politics that allow European male thinkers to theorize the

universal man without properly attending to the foundational nature of Blackness to that

Two are posited as the core of a locale in which we can analyze the homo sacer figure. By considering the 19th century plantation and the colonization of the global South within this discourse, Black studies theorists such as Spillers and Weheliye endeavor to consider the utility of placing Blackness in these discourses, but without falling prey to politics of comparison that

body/flesh distinction:

, QGHHG WKH VODYH FRQGLWLRQ UHVXOWV IURP D WU...
his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity together)....

The slave is therefore kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantomlike world of
KRUURUV DQG LQWHQVH FUXHOW\ DQG SURIDQLW\ 7
PDQLIHVWHG WKURXJK WKH RYHUVHHU\ Vnteroperable
PDQQHU LQ WKH VSHFWDFOH RI SDLQ LQIOLFWHG RQ W

\$V HYLGHQFHG E\ 0EHPEH\V ODQJXDJH D QHFURSROLWLF
XQGHUVWDQGLQJ WKH VXEMHFW\V SRVLWLRQDQD slave\ DQG F
SHUVRQ 3IOHVK' LQVWHDG RI D ERG\ 0EHPEH SRLQWV WRZ
DV WKUHH RI WKH ZD\V LQ ZKLFK WKH HQVODYHG ZHUH UR

concept of social death delivers a similar message. Patterson writes:
to describe the ways in which enslaved Africans were denied access to formal familial bonds and
as a result, were restricted from tracing their genealogies. The emotional and social implications
of this are horrific, given that families of the enslaved lived with the looming possibility of a
forcible separation. Patterson writes:

...natal alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending
generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It
was from this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the
master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master. The slave was the
ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the machine (7).

Natal alienation is useful within a discourse on social death and necropolitics because it attends
to a primary way in which racial slavery divorced Africans in the New World from the status of
the human. Even while the enslaved were still physically alive, a discourse on death maintains its
usefulness due to how grave the social implications of enslavement were. Thus, Mbembe and
Patterson emphasize the brutality faced by those who were enslaved at various social levels. This
is because it names the social context in which Spillers suggests that some humans become flesh
instead of bodies.

...on the plantation and beyond in a way that simultaneously recognizes the sociopolitical
...the social totality of the human as an object of knowledge we must understand the workings of
...of the human, but it is foundational in thinking of the construction of man itself. Blackness

is central to constructions of the human in western philosophical thought of the enlightenment. As can be noted from the history of the 19th century plantation, the experiences of the enslaved and that of those who are living in their afterlife (under continued state violence and surveillance) are apropos elements to emphasize within biopolitical discourses

+RUWHQVH 6SLOOHUV¶ GHILQLWLRQ RI WKH IOHVK LV S
ZRPHQ¶V SK\VLFD O H[SHULHQFHV DV-human The Movie of KR DU
narrativization found in the flesh is essential to a critical analysis of Black HPLQLVP¶V
relationship to visual culture because of the nuances it presents regarding embodiment. Writing
RQ WKH ERG\ IOHVK GLVWLQFWLRQ LQ 30DPD¶V %DE\ 3DSD

Spillers asserts:

I would make a distinction in this case between captive and liberated subjects. In that
VHQPVH EHIRUH WKH 3ERG\ WKHUH LV WKH 3IOHVK ' WK
that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of
iconography (67).

To Spillers, a theory of flesh recognizes that certain subjects do not have the sovereignty
UHTXLUHG WR EH IXOO\ FRQVLGHUHG D ERG\ 'HSHQGLQJ R
hierarchies, some will have flesh and others will have bodies. Flesh necessarily attends to the
materiality of a body before discursive treatment. Thus, flesh precedes embodiment. Flesh is the
human form that is divested of the authority we associate with humans who have bodily
DXWRQRP\ %ODFN ZRPHQ RQ WKH WK FHQWXU\ SODQWD
analysis in order to critically mark their juridical non-human status in hierarchies of human
difference. In the first chapter of the Wake On Blackness and Being Sharpe writes:

Living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what passes for
SXEOLF GLVFRXUVH DERXW WHUURU ZH %ODFN SHRSO
embodiment, and not the primary objects of WHUURU¶V PXOWLSOH HQDFWP
WHUURU¶V SR\ (15) LELOLW\ JORED OO\

Sharpe examines the utter destitution in Black experiences during our contemporary period, which Saidiya Hartman has named the “afterlife of slavery.” During the afterlife of slavery, Black subjects grapple with their exclusion from the category of the human. Like Sharpe’s, my work addresses ontological claims in regards to Black life through an analysis of visual and expressive culture. The contemporary Black artists whose work I engage are invested in a mode of resistance that privileges the visual as a site in which alternative conceptions of Black women’s embodiment can be represented.

The atrocity and unspeakable violence historically experienced by Black women leads me to a complicated navigation of the archive. As I approach histories of figures such as “hottentots” and “mammies,” I am faced with instances of Black women appearing in the archive with names given to them by white men, explicit racist and sexist theoretical formations about Black women’s bodies and sexualities, and unimaginable violence that they endured. Artists such as Carrie Mae Weems, Nona Faustine, and Renée Cox offer alternative constructions of personhood through embodied techniques that contend with the placement of en fleshed people in the hegemonic social order. Their self-portraiture and performances of embodied subjecthood offer rerouted ways of analyzing the visual politics of Black women’s particular embodiment. Much of their work involves a laying bare of some of the most intimate and violent parts of Black women’s histories. This uncovering leads to complex notions surrounding intention and impact in their work in relation to voyeurism, the risks of visibility, and surveillance. My investigation of Kara Walker’s work echoes these concerns and brings critical issues about audience and impact to light within Black women’s contemporary artwork in general.

Contemporary art, by definition, indicates a cultural dialogue about the present. The zeitgeist of the 21st century has contributed to an environment in which Black contemporary

artists are gesturing towards history while simultaneously staging critical interventions about the present. That the hieroglyphs of the flesh persist beyond the plantation is evident in contemporary art. Spillers, in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, says this about the hieroglyphics of the flesh:

These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that represent the initiating moments (5).

The woundedness and ripped-apartness of the flesh that Spillers describes is tethered to the violent narratives in the archive that artists in the 21st century are grappling with. The iconography of figures such as Saartjie Baartman indicate that there is an everlasting presence of these 19th century racial problems in our contemporary moment. I am intrigued by the temporal politics of contemporary artists signaling the past through an articulation of visual theory that pushes forth a conceptualization of a different future. I examine the ways in which contemporary artists negotiate histories of racial violence through embodied techniques that respond to matters of the flesh. A critical analysis of works by Black women artists are my entry points for an investigation into embodied interrogations of historical narratives of race and science, Western art, and enslavement. These artists perform and evoke an embodied selfhood that is positioned against the grasp of white supremacist and patriarchal histories.

3. Self-Portraiture

Through embodied interventions, these artists address the Blackness that is foundational to the history of science and Western art. Accordingly, I examine the photography of Carrie Mae Weems, Nona Faustine, and Renée Cox because of the ways in which they use their own bodies in their artistic practice. If we, as Black feminist thinkers, are to understand the history of the camera as often linked to self-portraiture? What are the risks and possibilities tethered to Black women inserting themselves into the history of photography on their own terms? My investigation of theories of flesh and Black feminism led me to self-portraiture and photography because of its historical relationship to performing and narrativizing the Black body, a medium that has been historically linked to projects of racialization and criminalization such as the conceptualization of the mugshot and scientific inquiries about finding an essential biological truth to Black inferiority, the camera is a technological advancement that has often worked for and with racism in various ways. While Western scientists sought to capture an essential truth about the Black body, the camera became a method by which one could collect data of truth. I begin my analysis with Carrie Mae Weems because of the ways in which her self-portraiture interrogates the fundamentally racist nature of images in the archive of the history of photography in the West. Cox returns to photographs in the archive of white supremacist scientist Louis Agassiz, as well as a lineage of white male artists in Western art, in order to stage an intervention that transforms the image of the Black body and repurposes the use of the camera. In this way, she defines her work through a replication of imagery tied to the history of scientific racism. As such, the lens through

which I read these works does not suggest that to replicate is always to repurpose or repair. These works, in their relative realism, offer images that directly allude to particular histories of violence. It can be argued that to replicate is to re-traumatize, even if a Black woman is willingly a subject and controlling the camera, because there is no control over the impulses behind the gaze of the racialized looker. Despite this, I am uninterested in a comparison of the political utility of realism versus abstraction, photography versus painting and sculpture, or replication versus reimagining. Instead, I am intrigued by the experimentation, formal strategies, and the potential risks and moments of empowerment that can be critically encountered while reading the work of Black women contemporary artists.

Carrie Mae Weems is an African-American photographer whose work explores racialized and gendered motifs in the history of photography. Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, 1995-1996* includes 33 toned prints that share various narratives of Black trauma and oppression. The photographs in the series are appropriations of daguerreotypes of enslaved people that were discovered in Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Photographer Joseph Zealy of Columbia, South Carolina captured the images upon the request of Agassiz. These photographs were commissioned by Harvard zoology professor, Louis Agassiz, in the mid-1800s as evidence for his theories of the Black body as distinctly different from white bodies even when born in different geographic areas. The subjects of the daguerreotypes are identified in the archive as Drana, Jack, Renty, and Delia. They were enslaved subjects of different generations. Understanding the daguerreotype as a pre-photographic form, it is necessary to recognize that the history of racism and visual culture does not begin with photography. It is also important to note that Harvard had initially threatened to sue Weems for her use of the images, although they eventually demurred and Weems has since had her works

shown at Harvard's Cooper Gallery. Weems' work has challenged the institutional nature of scientific racism through her appropriation of Zealy's daguerreotypes.

I have taken an interest in Carrie Mae Weems' piece that is titled *You Become a Scientific Profile*. It alludes to the fact that the images taken were for the use of a scientist to then map Black flesh into a hierarchy of (in)humanity based on African-born enslaved subjects in contrast to American-born enslaved subjects. Specifically focused on an attempt at rationalizing Black subjects as of a different species than whites, Agassiz studied these portraits as evidence of purported Black inferiority. Other photos in the series identify the Black figures as an anthropological debate, a mammy, and a negroid type. Those titles indicate the processes by which white ethnographers classify Black subjects into categories such as mammy or a negroid type which implicates science and dominant culture's grammar of Black representation. Another one is *You Become a Photographic Subject*, which suggests criticism of the risks of photography as an art form even while it is Weems' chosen one. Within the context of the other works present in the rest of the series, becoming a photographic subject is viewed as harmful alongside the other racist tropes. Photography poses a risk for Black subjects because the white gaze has been historically one of voyeurism, fetishization, and violence. Weems is repurposing the camera as a tool to capture Blackness in photography, which sheds light on anti-Blackness as an intervention instead of a continuation of oppression.

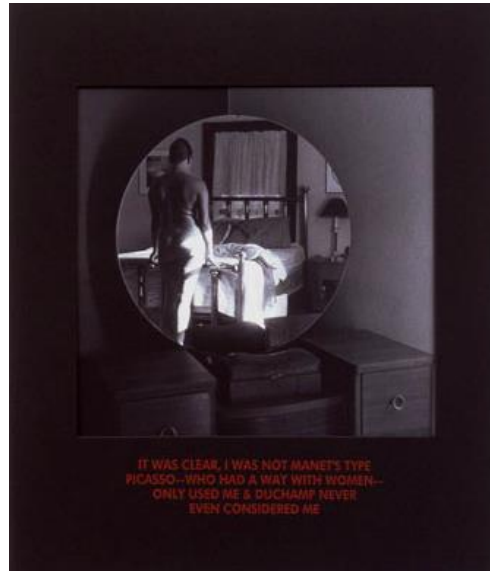


Carrie Mae Weems. *You Become A Scientific Profile, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996. Photograph.

Thus, Weems' photograph of the African woman places biopolitical discourse in conversation with photography. The biopolitical nature of the photograph has a historical background of enslaved women being experimented on, exhibited, and abused for the foundations of modern fields such as comparative anatomy and gynecology. The camera, which is able to capture the visual representation of a Black body, is an uncomfortable technology in white hands when we consider the violent histories I have noted. Visual media are a site at which Black bodies are vulnerable, such as on the auction block or on display for white scientists. In contrast, Weems is attempting anti-racist work with the camera. She uses photography to expose the ways in which photography has worked for and with projects of racialization.

While Weems has a diverse body of work that addresses the history of museums, modernity, slavery, and family in profound and creative ways, her other series that I focus on is *Not Manet's Type* from 1997. While my analysis has criticized scientific disciplines for foundational ties to anti-Blackness, I must note that art history is not safe from that criticism.

That is to say, *Not Manet's Type* exposes the anti-Blackness and sexism at the root of artists who are championed as the greatest in the West.



Carrie Mae Weems. *IT WAS CLEAR I WAS NOT MANET'S TYPE. PICASSO - WHO HAD A WAY WITH WOMEN - ONLY USED ME & DUCHAMP NEVER EVEN CONSIDERED ME*, 1997. Photograph.

Like the photography by Faustine and Cox, the *Not Manet's Type* series is another example of the photographer and the subject becoming one. With humor and a wittiness that those with a knowledge of canonical Western art history would understand, Weems uses her own body as material and subject in her photographs. Performing quotidian gestures such as standing in front of a bed and then lying down, we are reminded of Manet's painting *Olympia* (1862), which shows a white woman lying on her bed with a Black woman behind her. The iconography of white women lying on beds in European paintings is widespread, but Manet is of special interest here because of Weems' assertion that she would not be his type. Manet, who painted bourgeois white women in luxurious positions, often accompanied by Black female servants, would not have painted Weems in this way. That Picasso has "a way with women" echoes historical gossip about Picasso being a heartbreaker and passionate lover of women. Despite its sexual

connotations, Weems' word choice also signals the history of Picasso's use of classical African aesthetics, such as masks, in his work. For Duchamp to "think" of Weems is tied to Duchamp's history as a canonical white male conceptual artist, as the foundation of conceptual art constitutes thinking of a concept to provide meaning for a work. Overall, Weems is using art-historical humor and sarcasm to riff on the specific ways in which Manet, Duchamp, and Picasso are known as canonical artists. Ultimately, Weems is asserting that in the history of Western art, when she is represented it is under circumstances of being scripted into narratives of Black women's supposed excessive sexuality and inferiority. And at other moments, Black women are not considered at all. She is illuminating the particular ways by which Black women do and do not appear in the canon of Western art.

The more prominent suggestion here is of Black women's exclusion from the canon of Western art history. That is not to say that Black women's bodies or aesthetics were not used within canonical Western art. Reading Weems' *Not Manet's Type* alongside Sander L. Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," allows for consideration of the ways in which Black women do figure in canonical Western art. Gilman writes about the visual presence of Black servants in 19th century paintings by artists such as Manet and the implications of their inclusion. In the same historical moment at which the hottentot was born as the symbol of the supposed essence of Black sexuality, Black female servants were considered inherently sexual by nature and painted behind white women to suggest a power dynamic that is sexual in nature. In Manet's *Olympia*, the Black female subject is painted in such close proximity to the nude white woman that there is a suggested intimacy, yet the Black woman's position behind the bed relegates her to the background of the painting. Her dark skin is painted against a dark green

background, which further relegates her to the background of the painting as the nude white woman is positioned as the center of it. Black women exist at the margins, yet their proximity transforms and produces white women's gender and sexuality. This is the 19th century equivalent of painting that is meant to be provocative through the use of sexuality. The Black figure represents a sexual licentiousness even while standing clothed next to the naked white woman lying on the bed, as is the case with Manet's *Olympia*. The supposedly extreme sexual appetite of Black women is represented and implied through the visual lexicon of 19th century European art. As Gilman notes, "The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the Black" (231). The medical model, as evidenced by Cuvier and Baartman, sought to find observable proof of an existence of excessive sexuality and absence of beauty in Black women. This discursive mindset on race, gender, sexuality, and beauty is foundational to biopolitical discourse. Overall, reading Weems' *You Become a Scientific Profile* next to *Not Manet's Type* necessarily puts ideas of aesthetics, sexuality, and science in dialogue with each other within the canonical annals of art history.

Renée Cox is a Jamaican-American artist who is well known for her photography and films that address issues of race and gender. With lighting techniques and digital technology, Cox works at the level of form to create portraiture that outlines provocative sociological criticism. I am focused specifically on Cox's 1994 photograph, titled *Hot en Tot*. Pictured below, *Hot en Tot* shows Cox herself wearing a padded costume, which enlarges her breasts and buttocks.



Renée Cox. *Hot en Tot*, 1994. Photograph.

The image is a reminder of the body and life of Saartjie Baartman, who is popularly known as the “Hottentot Venus.” Hottentot is a derogatory term for the Khoi people of South Africa, while Venus is the goddess of love in Roman mythology. Fully grasping the visual politics of *Hot en Tot* requires a knowledge of Baartman’s story. Saartjie Baartman, born in 1789, was from the region that is now known as the Eastern Cape in Africa. Saartjie was a mother of a child whom she outlived, the wife of a Khoikhoi man, and a servant on a colonial farm. At sixteen, her romantic partner was killed by Dutch colonizers. Soon after, she was sold into slavery, then held in captivity by an English man who required that she perform domestic labor and be put on exhibition for entertainment. Within the historical moment of the rise of scientific racism, Europeans were fascinated by her fleshy buttocks and vulva. Saartjie’s naked Black flesh was put on display for white crowds to marvel at the supposed visual representation of African biological inferiority.

To remain critical of my own intention in handling Saartjie Baartman’s narrative, Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in 2 Acts” is essential. Hartman discusses the limited ways in which enslaved Black women appear in the archive. She mentions the difficulty that exists in fully capturing Black women’s narratives because historians are faced with an absence of their quotidian

experiences and their inner thoughts beyond the violent circumstances that place their names on the historical record. Hartmann writes that “the archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history” (3). Hartman continues to reflect on this limitation in the archive, and asserts the impossibility of refashioning disfigured lives or listening for what has not been said. She asks, “how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?” (4). Thus, Hartman finds herself at the nexus of critically reading the archive to form a narrative while accepting the impossibility of fully building the narrative or of finding a present-day remedy for the suffering of the enslaved women in the archive. This reckoning with the archival remains of the enslaved requires substantial narrative restraint, which Hartman defines as “the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect Black noise: the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man” (12). To respect Black noise is to allow what was (un)spoken by the enslaved to be protected instead of fundamentally erased. As one reimagines a history of Black life on the plantation, it is impossible to know everything, and one must not take part in guesswork that obscures critical possibilities of illegible moments of fugitivity. While situating ourselves in relation to the archive, with Black feminist ethics in mind, we may reframe the history of the plantation, but it is necessary to adopt a mindset of restraint that does not allow the historian to obscure and reimagine history in ways that disregard

moments of intentional illegibility. Correspondingly, those who are living and theorizing in the afterlife of slavery are unable to adequately provide a remedy for the enslaved who exist in the archive. Cox's photograph does not salvage Baartman's legacy, nor does it purport to fundamentally convert the history of Baartman into a narrative devoid of unspeakable violence and permanent silence. The content of the works I engage herein is rife with allusions to the past that engage and interrogate racist and patriarchal histories while articulating a politic that is essential to the contemporary moment.

The performance, gesture, and impact of Cox's photograph is representative of a critical approach to embodied Black feminist theory. *Prima facie*, the artificial fleshiness of Cox's embodiment is apparent. Both the title of the photograph and the fleshy costume direct our attention towards Saartjie Baartman. This explicit reference is indicative of Cox's political intent. Cox, a Black woman working within a white supremacist and heteropatriarchal climate, returns to the image of Baartman in a moment in which Black women's bodies are under continued surveillance. The imagery of the Hottentot Venus represents themes of voyeurism, spectacle and fetishization in relation to Black women's bodies. That an artist would return to the imagery of the Hottentot Venus in 1994, hundreds of years after Baartman has died, is indicative of the continued presence of these themes. The self-portrait is militant and focused. The militancy and focus can be read through the photograph itself as well. Cox's gaze is fixated outward. It is impossible to view this photograph without making eye contact with Cox. Her gaze is not only present, but it is also intensely fixated on whoever is looking at her. Cox's interest in returning the gaze can be read as a radical act of "looking," towards the past to address the hegemony of the present. While that is Cox's intention, Hartman's analysis on the archive reminds us that we are unable to fully achieve a remedy or reconciliation. In addition to recognizing the inability to

refashion disfigured lives and recuperate after unspeakable violence, Hartman understands the desire for recuperation as a longing caused by a lack of knowledge of the personal narratives and interiority of women who survived the middle passage. Despite this, Hartman does not consider critical readings of the archives of racial slavery to be divorced of all utility; rather, she posits that the work we do in the archives is necessary to engaging our present and working towards a liberated future. In Hartman's words:

If this *story of Venus* has any value at all it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers. A relation which others might describe as a kind of melancholia, but which I prefer to describe in terms of the afterlife of property, by which I mean the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril (14).

As evidenced by Hartman's words, part of the knowledge that the archive holds is a narrative of enslavement that can help those of us living in the afterlife of slavery to understand the workings of carcerality and the anti-Black state in our contemporary moment. Black temporalities are marked by the cyclical time of domination, as captivity shifts forms from enslavement to segregation to the current functionings of the carceral state. A recognition that our present is tethered to events in the archive indicates the current precarious state of Black life in the afterlife of the unspeakable violence in the archive. Moreso, Hartman identifies this tension between recuperation and narrativization as ultimately productive:

The necessity of recounting Venus's death is overshadowed by the inevitable failure of any attempt to represent her. I think this is a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved (12). Cox, as well as the other artists I engage, are invested in a project of returning to historical images and events in order to produce provocative contemporary art that is deeply relevant to current Black feminist conceptualizations of the world. That these historical images and symbols are applicable to the contemporary moment signals the necessity of engaging the past in order to analyze the ways in which systems of race and gender oppression have transformed over time.

The gaze present in *Hot en Tot* can be understood within Cox's wider practice of "looking" at history. In conversation with Dr. Farrington at Spelman, Cox often makes references to whitewashed histories. At one moment, Cox indicates that she became interested in African history after traveling in Europe. While studying photography at Syracuse University, Cox visited Florence, Italy to further immerse herself in her studies of art history. She quickly noticed the ways in which the African presence in Europe was erased. Encounters between Africa and Europe are of great interest to Cox. Her other works, such as the "Flippin the Script" series, insert Black bodies into the mainstream art historical narrative through including Black figures in iconic European masterworks such as Michelangelo's 1499 *Pietà*.



Renee Cox. *Yo Mama's Pietà*, 1996. Photograph.

Yo Mama's Pietà is an embodied intervention in the historical narrative of Western art history that provides a helpful context for Cox's work. Cox's wider interest in revisionist histories is evidenced by *Yo Mama's Pietà* and *After Hot en Tot*. In *Yo Mama's Pietà*, Cox is urging us to reimagine narratives of motherhood and loss with a Black mother at the center. The original *Pietà* is a striking sculpture that evokes feelings of sadness and loss through the imagery of Mary holding a deceased Jesus. It is a work that captures emotion and mourning. Given the proximity of Black boys and men to premature death, Cox is rescripting the narrative to capture Black

motherhood. Part of the challenge of this photograph seems to be a provocation about whether or not a Black mother will evoke the same emotions from lookers. Cox uses the tools of self-portraiture and photography to cause a rupture in European histories of art. Thus, it is clear that *After Hot en Tot* is a part of a theme in Cox's wider body of work in which she produces imagery that is disruptive to Western visual culture and white supremacy.

One of the most notable aspects of *After Hot en Tot* is the fleshiness of Cox's costume, which signals the history of Baartman's own corpulent flesh. Baartman's life is a prime example of the intersection between scientific racism and notions of fatness as a primitive trait in indigenous African women. In the chapter titled "Fat and the Un-Civilized Body" in her book, *Fat Shame*, Amy Erdman Farrell writes:

"At the very bottom of the scale of civilization were the Hottentots, which was the Western, denigrating name given to the Khoikhoi people of South Africa. Ever since the 17th century, travel writers and naturalists had focused on the Khoikhoi as the possible "missing link," to the connecting "species" between apes and humans. Thus, not only were the Khoikhoi described as the bottom of civilization, experts also studied them for evidence of animal-like traits and behavior" (64).

Saartjie Baartman, being the most famous of the Khoikhoi women, is part of a history of scientific racism and eurocentric constructions of Black women's gender and sexuality. Historical records reveal endless speculation about Baartman's supposedly enlarged labia, which is often referred to as the "Hottentot apron." Baartman's genitalia was compared to that of white women who were sex workers or lesbians. Scientific communities in Europe identified Black women's vulvas as visually similar to the vulvas of white women who existed outside of white middle class bourgeois standards. This reveals the ways in which Blackness is inextricably tied to constructions of eurocentric gender, sexuality, and class. What is Black is demarcated as unruly and primitive. When purportedly Black physical features are present in white women, that white woman is constructed as unruly and non-normative due to her body's supposed proximity

to Blackness. Christina Sharpe writes that “Those black and blackened bodies become the bearers (through violence, regulation, transmission, etc.) of the knowledge of certain subjection as well as the placeholders of freedom for those who would claim freedom as their rightful yield”(4). Sharpe’s evocation of “blackened” is indicative of this history of certain physical traits being conceptualized as emphatic of a Black subject, which results in a blackened non-Black subject when a white body is supposedly marked with the inferior nature of a Black one. Black genitalia is blackened as it is conceptualized as connected to Western science’s ideas of what Black genitalia looks like. As such, it is a non-viable approach to disentangle Blackness from standards of white normative gender embodiment because those who are white and do not fit societal standards are signified as such because of suggested shared traits with Blackness.

Much of this research was conducted by Georges Cuvier, who became interested in Baartman after observing her naked flesh in the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle in Paris, where she was on display among other “exotic humans.” Cuvier was a French naturalist and zoologist who is known as the “father of paleontology.” That Cuvier was instrumental in establishing contemporary fields such as anatomy and paleontology is further evidence of the role of race as foundational to constructions of modern scientific thought. After Baartman’s death, Cuvier’s autopsy on her body resulted in more racist and sexist theories about the shape and fleshiness of her buttocks, breasts, and labia. Cuvier’s theories on Black women’s bodies are part of the racist, imperialistic, sexist discourse that became particularly fixated on “steatopygia,” which is the scientific term for the excessive development of fat on the buttocks of a woman. Cuvier’s dissection of Baartman resulted in her labia being preserved in a jar of formaldehyde at the Musée de l’Homme until the 1970s, when pressure from activists forced the museum to return Baartman’s remains to South Africa. This further exemplifies the ways in which science

as a discipline has historically been constructed through the degradation of Black flesh even post-mortem. Reading *After Hot en Tot* in light of an understanding of the interplay between race and science within the foundations of modern biology, Cox's performance of Baartman necessitates an engagement with the extent to which the image recreates or transforms. The main difference between Cox's photograph and the visual archive of Baartman herself is that Cox's intention is to reroute a gaze and dominate the looker which she conceptualizes as empowering. The artificiality of Cox's excessive flesh is indexical of the nature of her willful embodied performance; Cox has chosen to don the body which Baartman herself was born into. That Cox's buttocks and breasts are in a costume might symbolize the invented nature of Baartman's body. Baartman was scripted into a narrative of embodied Black womanhood that is as artificial as Cox's costume, as we recognize these particular constructions of race and the body as fabrications.

Nona Faustine's work, like the oeuvre of Cox, presents provocative criticism. Faustine is a photographer from Brooklyn, New York. She is most well known for her self-portrait series titled *White Shoes*, which visualizes the meaning of being a Black woman in the United States existing in the afterlife of slavery. Using performance, self-portraiture, and photography, Faustine's creative process for *White Shoes* began with meticulous research on New York's historical relationship to slavery. Throughout the five boroughs, Faustine uncovered the locations of ancient African-American burial grounds, slave markets, plantations, and the ports where slave ships docked. At each place she encountered, she is pictured standing naked with only a pair of white high heel shoes on. Her fat, Black, female body stands exposed and vulnerable, yet poised and strong. It is apparent that her self-portraits constitute more than an evocation of the history of slavery; they are also poignant calls to rethink the afterlife of slavery, to remember

those who were enslaved, and to embody the history of slavery through a performance and intervention. The ways in which Faustine incorporates herself into a landscape reminiscent of slavery and its afterlife makes her work deeply tied to Spillers' conceptualization of the flesh, because it embodies a specific vulnerability that is unique to Black female subjects.



Nona Faustine *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth*, 2013. Photograph.

From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth is an explicit reference to the ways in which global capitalism is predicated on Black women's wombs. At the core of *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Spillers reflects on Black women and motherhood. The Moynihan Report, released in 1965, is a sociological study which suggests that the poverty and oppression that exists in African-American communities is a result of single mother households. What was intended as a defense of increased welfare for African-Americans was actually a racist and sexist account of Black womanhood that suggested that their households are the downfall of the Black community. Rather than citing police surveillance, income inequality or racial discrimination in hiring and housing, single African-American mothers were considered the root of the problem.

The welfare queen trope has emerged from this notion. The way the state began to pathologize Black motherhood has had lasting effects on mainstream perceptions of the Black family. Various Black feminist thinkers and artists have responded to this trope in order to reimagine Black motherhood. While Spillers cautions us against equating gendered reproduction with motherhood due to the condition of the enslaved women who were not allowed the autonomy to raise their children, it is clear that Faustine's work is also gesturing towards a different theory of Black motherhood. Due to the legal framework of racial slavery requiring the position of the child to follow the mother, Black women's reproduction became a means of capital for the slave economy. When considering the ways in which the generational wealth of the white American elite has foundations in the transatlantic slave trade and in plantation economies of the new world, it is clear that the forced reproductive labor of Black women is what facilitated a system of unpaid labor, allowing for the white upper classes to have what Faustine rightfully identifies as "their greatest wealth." The significance of Faustine's portrait is stretched further when analyzing the space in which she is posing, on Wall Street.

Wall Street figures as two important sites when one interprets this photograph: it is both a symbol of the current operations of global capitalism, and an African-American burial ground. Thus, *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth* is part of a wider discourse on theories of flesh and necropolitics, as Faustine is posing on top of a burial ground where Black flesh has since decayed, once part of bodies who were ultimately killable. To extend Mbembe here, "Racial capitalism is the equivalent of a giant necropolis. It rests on the traffic of the dead and human bones." Faustine's photograph exposes New York City, and the nation state in general, as the necropolis that it is. Wall Street, both the world's largest site of global capitalism, and a

burial ground for the enslaved, is a material and fleshly symbol of a true necropolitical project, in which racial capitalism is predicated on Black death, and in this case, literally Black bones.

Although I have encountered Faustine's photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Museum of Sex in New York City, most people know of her through various social media platforms. Thus, since Faustine's work is so prevalent outside of the gallery space, a wider discourse is able to occur with a diverse group of people because of the accessible nature of social media. Faustine's portrait on Wall Street comes two years after the genesis of Occupy Wall Street, in which working class people were demanding accountability from the capitalist elite. This, paired with the provocation of standing on an auction block while being a naked woman who is both Black and fat, is a recipe for public outcry. In various publications, Faustine was described as a living monument to American slavery for taking a stand at sites related to slavery, and as a reminder to New York City of its slaveholding past. Speaking about victims of the transatlantic slave trade in a 1989 interview, Toni Morrison stated, "There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath or wall, or park or skyscraper lobby," and "There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road." Morrison wrote her 1987 novel *Beloved* as a monument to those who were lost during the middle passage and were victims of the institution of racial slavery. To conceptualize Faustine as a living monument is in a tradition of Black women's creative production that seeks to memorialize those who were enslaved.

That Faustine is standing on an auction block at a former slave auction site, but is considered an artist for a gesture in which so many enslaved women were forced to partake, leads to discussions on performing and embodying slavery. In "Slavery and the Theatre of History on the Auction Block," Jason Stupp tackles the controversy of interpreting slavery through dramatic performance. While Stupp is working with the specific incident of a 1994

reenactment of a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg, his analysis is relevant to Faustine's photograph. His first step in analyzing the performance of slavery is locating the performance within its historical context. For Faustine posing on Wall Street, the historical significance, as I have noted, is that of a space that is simultaneously a historical slave auction site, the birthplace and current symbol of global capitalism, and an African-American burial ground. The photograph becomes a way to embody the history of slavery in the wake of discourses on slavery that disembody the Black subject from the history. Stupp provides an example of this by mentioning the focus on white abolitionists that displaces the focus on the enslaved subjects themselves.

In essence, Stupp theorizes the auction block as a type of stage, in which the enslaved body becomes the spectacle for white economic and social uplift. Faustine's act of posing on the auction block in a populated city in the daytime echoes the history of slavery, especially as her vulnerability is still apparent today in a world that is anti-Black and misogynistic through its hypersexualization of Black women's bodies. Stupp describes the Black body in a contemporary performance at the auction block as being a "vessel onto which is projected the anxieties and contradictions of those living in a historically white-supremacist nation." Hence, the clear intervention in *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth* produces anxiety for those who live in ignorance about the state's anti-Black foundations and for those who believe performing the history of slavery in this way is insensitive to those who lived through it. Stupp references two other important aspects of the auction block: that the auctions were a performance due to the ways in which Black bodies were expected to pose in order to give possible white buyers a glimpse of their strength, as well as the common and normalized nature of the auctions, which means they can be considered ritualized. Imagining the slave auction as a ritualized performance

embodies the history of slavery in such a way that attends to the corporeal nature of enslaved people standing on the auction block and waiting to be bought. That the auction block was a stage for a ritualized performance is all the more resonant once Stupp elaborates on the history of whites who attended the auctions. There were poor whites who attended the auctions in order to experience the thrill of their racial supremacy and to be entertained. Ultimately, *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth* stages an intervention into the slaveholding past of the North, while also signaling towards the performative nature of slave auctions themselves. In effect, Faustine's intervention is another embodied approach at theorizing Black womanhood. Because of their similar embodied fleshiness, there is space to imagine parallels between Bartman being displayed in European museums alongside the Black women who were put on auction blocks to be sold. Both contexts are fueled by voyeurism and inquiry about an essence of Black bodies.

Furthering the analysis of Faustine's re-enactment of the auction block requires delving into the historicization of the auction block as a particular space and time. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick engages the auction block as it pertains to the corporeal nature of the narrativization of Black enslaved women. She describes the auction block as a site at which hierarchies of embodiment are scripted and reified, such as varying shades from quadroon to darker skinned women. Black bodies on the auction block were scrutinized for particular requirements that the buyer was seeking whether it be for a particular type of sexual violence, bodies who could reproduce, and other corporeal identifiers. McKittrick writes:

The scaled body thus, in part, also particularized different kinds and types of blackness vis-a-vis very precise white demands, which differentially placed and differently valued black people within the bounds of captivity and sale. Noting these differentiations, and turning specifically to black femininity and womanhood, I suggest that the racial-sexual codes produced in conjunction with the auction block distribute and redistribute uneven geographies that are particular to black women and continue, at least in part, to inform

their contemporary politics. That is, while the auction block sites the objectification of black femininity through sale, the bodily consequences of transaction invoke spatial processes that organize the places of womanhood across and beyond transatlantic slavery (80).

Through the site of the auction block, Black women's bodies are scripted into a particular narrative of public auction, purchase and reproduction. This narrative includes classifications, measurements, and hierarchies of profitability imposed on Black flesh. The mapping of these identifiers on Black women's bodies on the auction block works to concretize the ways in which blackness is narrativized for its usefulness to producing whiteness. For example, Black femininity is particularly narrativized as laboring for whiteness, whether this is about sexual violence, work on the plantation, or reproduction of enslaved subjects. Black women's hypervisibility on the auction block is linked to the scrutiny under which their bodies are placed. Faustine's photograph is a re-enactment of that site; the realism of the photograph mirrors the hypervisibility of Black women on the auction block. The realism of the shot is not only what links it to a particular politic of memorialization, recognition and commentary on the afterlife of slavery, but it is also striking. In *Camera Lucida*, French philosopher Roland Barthes writes:

The second element will break (or punctuate) the studium. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the studium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive point; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the studium I shall therefore call punctum; for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me (26-27).

For Barthes, the studium is the general hum of the photograph, while the punctum is the aspect that strikes the looker. For me, the punctum of the photograph is that the setting is on

contemporary Wall street. It is not Faustine's corpulent Black flesh that strikes me, it is the setting that jumps out of the photograph and pierces me. The stark contrast between New York City's Financial District and Faustine's body is shocking. Recognizing Wall Street as an extraordinarily white area that is marked by Black death and labor, to see Faustine in that setting is uncomfortable as I consider the voyeurism, surveillance, and scrutiny that her body is prone to in a predominantly elite, white, and male dominated space. This is the essence of the risks of the setting, and the fact that Faustine is in such a position on Wall Street in the daylight in our contemporary moment emphasizes this. That her setting is the punctum for me in this photograph illuminates the importance of embodiment as politicized in particular ways based on space and time.

The implications of my work include an intervention that conceptualizes Black women's bodies as foundational to the birth of numerous fields of study, including art history and the biological sciences. I posit that the representation of Black women's bodies in art and science works for and with eurocentric masculinist narratives of Black women in general, and that there is a dialectical relationship between art, science, and the American grammar at large as it relates to conceptualizations of Black womanhood. In the next chapter, I expand my primary sources to include works by Kara Walker and Wangechi Mutu while using theories of abstraction, grotesquerie, and voyeurism as a critical lens. The flesh, as the mode in which one can theorize the physiological matter of a non-sovereign subject, continues to be deeply applicable in my analysis of other Black women contemporary artists whose work adduces alternative representations of Black women's embodiment. Mapping a theory of the flesh onto the work of Weems, Faustine, and Cox has transformed my analysis on visibility and its use as an embodied mode in which critical interventions can be staged.

My work has investigated the ways in which a Black feminist theory of flesh is in conversation with other philosophical theories of biopower. That critical lens provided a key background to the visual culture I engaged. The works I analyzed are in dialogue through motifs such as embodiment, self-portraiture, photography, and the history of Western art and science. While I do not intend for my research to conclude with an absolutist binary of realism and abstraction, I do propose that one notion my project can offer is a dialectical relationship between realism and abstraction as formal approaches to theorizing Black women's embodiment. While I am utilizing the terminology of realism and abstraction in this essay, I must posit that these formal techniques are still on a spectrum. For example, the self-portraiture of Renée Cox, Carrie Mae Weems, and Nona Faustine is only realist to the extent that there are visible human figures that are represented, but there are still elements of abstraction in these works (including unrealistic qualities and non representation) because they are intentionally performing the visuality of a historical moment. Cox dons an artificial, fleshy top and bottom, while Faustine is performing the scene of the 19th century auction block in our contemporary moment. As such, it is necessary to be transparent about my own struggle to place these contemporary artists on a binary of realism and abstraction, although they do fall in different points on that spectrum, which is relevant to my conceptualization of how they approach embodiment through formal techniques. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes:

While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience (6).

Sontag is critical of the idea of photography being the always credible and veracious medium as which it is often conceptualized. An art historian can only genuinely conduct an analysis of a photograph if there is an understanding that there is a space-time and existing power dynamic between the photographer and the subject in every photograph. One cannot ignore the history of the purported veracity of the photograph being exploited by white photographers who were seeking a biological essence of blackness. For example, Carrie Mae Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* series is specifically based on the practices of the scientist Louis Agassiz, who had photographs of Black people commissioned in order to study their biological essence as both different from and inferior to white people. As such, the general realism of the photograph must not result in positing that it is objective or that it always reveals a veracious understanding of the subject.

What Cox, Faustine, and Weems offer the viewer is a performed posture that resembles a realist representation of a historical moment/image. Despite that, it is not always apparent that there is a distinguished and conscientious breakaway from the original representation. The risk of a performance of this nature is that it is a posture that intentionally resembles the original. If the original representations are intended to wound, how do these contemporary illustrations transform and reroute? The notion that these images are reimaginings instead of reproductions of the original is due to the knowledge of the artist's intent, their contemporary nature, and the response from the arts world which outlines their utility in terms of disrupting original representations of the body. Instead of defining the utility of these photographs in terms of their ability to recreate or reroute images, what is notable and clear is that they represent a moment marked by Black women artists being called to revisit the visual archive of racial slavery and the colonization of Africa. I return here to the title of Cox's work, *After Hot en Tot* to focus on the

“after” in the title. To me, the “after” in *After Hot en Tot* signifies that Cox’s embodiment of the hottentot venus trope is about more than a performative self-portrait that re-enacts the past, it is about the articulation of a politic through visual culture that is deeply applicable to our contemporary moment. To live in the afterlife of the transatlantic slave trade and colonization of the African continent is to live with everlasting cultural fictions built from the biopower of race. Cox, Faustine, and Weems are working through historical symbols of Black embodiment in a moment of Black women’s continued oppression. To conclude, it is apparent that an articulation of a politic of Black women’s visual representation today requires a return to images of the past.

3. Female-ish Form

Wangechi Mutu and Kara Walker are both known for their provocative and seductive representations of the Black female body. I place them in dialogue with each other here because of the ways in which their visual artistic practice approaches Black women's embodiment in relation to biopolitics. I am focusing on Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* because of its use of abstraction for a sculptural formation of Black female embodiment. Despite my unique interest in this large-scale sculpture at Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Factory, the analysis from scholars and critics of Walker's famously provocative silhouettes informs the ways in which I conceptualize the political, artistic, and historical significance of her sculpture as well. As for Wangechi Mutu, I am primarily interested in her collages as they relate to Black women's bodies. Her collage style provides a space in which I can examine scientific racism and embodiment through maximalist aesthetics and fantastical worlds. These works by Walker and Mutu come together through their abstraction of the Black female form in a way that addresses sexuality, the legacy of slavery, and theories of flesh.

Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu has been trained primarily as a sculptor and as an anthropologist. Mutu's work explores embodiment, and as such, her creations incorporate issues drawn from scientific racism, pornography, and popular culture. Mutu's collage practice includes the piecing together of magazine imagery with the use of paint. These assembled images feature corruption, violence, glamour, atrocity, and other themes. Her works often include concepts that are both ancient (essentially, many of her works reference indigenous traditions) and futuristic (Mutu is connected to cultural projects such as AfroSurrealism and AfroFuturism). The divergent temporalities in her work complement the essence of the racial and gendered violence with which her works are at war. In an article published in the *NKA Journal of Contemporary African*

Art, Trevor Schoonmaker describes Mutu as a “creator of fantastical worlds: primal and futuristic, lushly tropical and post apocalyptic.” Schoonmaker’s essay analyzes Mutu’s first survey in the United States, *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*; this multimedia presentation included more than fifty works dated from the mid-1990s to the present day. The works shown in the exhibition were collages, drawings, sculptures, installations, and videos. The imaginative kingdoms in Mutu’s work have become sites for critical scholarly analysis of profound questions about race, gender, sexuality, and the Black female body. Her work is not bound by conventionally known modes of representation. It blurs the lines between figuration and abstraction. Additionally, her lack of adherence to cultural stereotypes allows for a more nuanced and rigorous navigation of questions of Black women, colonialism, patriarchy, and representation. Mutu samples from media as diverse as African cultural traditions, high fashion, international politics, and science fiction. Schoonmaker writes that Mutu’s “maximalist aesthetic seeks not to define the world but rather to explode its delimiting classifications and representations and reconfigure them to emphasize humankind’s inherent complexity and interconnectedness.” As such, female figures take center stage in most of her work; they are disfigured and distorted, and are ultimately depicted as otherworldly, as they are situated against a landscape that is thoroughly disfigured.

Some of the women whom Mutu creates are pieced together from parts of humans, animals, plants, machines, and monsters. A common question or doubt harbored by those interested in Mutu’s work may be, what is the political utility of these provocative collages with post-human aesthetics? This question might be answered in one stroke by the fact that the disfigured female bodies that Mutu creates so radically become metaphors for both the multifaceted identities and the somatic violence experienced by Black women who do and do not

survive colonialism, displacement, hunger, and consumption. Mutu's treatment of the museum in exhibiting *A Fantastic Journey* reveals her engagement with the gallery space as a fantastical world of its own. The physical domain that Mutu creates, even bound by gallery walls, transcends conventional notions of the exhibition space. *The Fantastic Journey* is not merely an experience allowing for passively viewing and examining Mutu's work, but is also distinguished by an immersive sensation of being enveloped in the aesthetic and creative landscape of the works on display, through which the material presence of her work builds an atmosphere that transports gallery patrons from the world they are accustomed to into a realm designed by Mutu herself. This emphasizes a mapping of the artworks in the exhibition, and allows the physical movement of viewers through the space to feel like an exploratory process. Mutu's work not only transforms space and time, but causes a metamorphosis of culture and origin stories as well.



Wangechi Mutu. *Family Tree*, 2012. Mixed-media collages on paper.

Mutu's works are not a search for an "authentic" African aesthetic or experience; rather, they are representations of the hybridity of culture and identity. One prime example of this theme at work is in *Family Tree*, which is a complex collage installation of thirteen works on paper that tells a feminist mythology of the origin of the universe. This female-dominated narrative of creation shows a couple in an extraterrestrial union and supplementally depicts a surreal

visualization of a matrilineal family line. Here, *Family Tree* is in dialogue with Spillers' *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, as Spillers writes about the uniqueness of African-American family formations being matrilineal because of the history of slavery. Mutu herself has said, perhaps in reference to *Family Tree*, "When I complete any body of work, I feel like it's very much like a family of ideas and form." That parallel becomes apparent as she thinks through the matriarchal family as the genesis of the universe. Through Spillers and Mutu, Black women's flesh is not only about individual subjects themselves, but they are in a genealogy of Black families in which entire ancestries are traced primarily through them. Schoonmaker writes, "In cutting the world apart and then piecing it back together to make it whole, Mutu is nurturing and accepting of our fractured identities and adulterated cultures. Her powerful and sensual women are hybridized as survivors and futuristic transformers who keep us grounded in and connected to both natural and supernatural realms" (53). Mutu's practice of pulling found material from magazines such as *National Geographic*, medical journals, and pornography, cutting them up, and painting them, reveals that her work aims to be a piecing together of the world. Her formal strategies can be read as a metaphor for her hybrid identity as a Kenyan woman.



Wangechi Mutu. *Second Snake Spawn, Family Tree*, 2012. Mixed-media collage on paper.

One of the collages within *Family Tree* is *Second Snake Spawn*. *Second Snake Spawn* is an example of Mutu's work that pulls material from National Geographic, art history, and pornography. Starting from the top of the image, there is an image of a Black person's head that appears as if it could be an ethnographic photograph of an indigenous African in a National Geographic magazine. There is a snake that has a bird-like face, with a cut out of human lips in place of a beak. There is a black feather hanging off of the configuration of the bird, snake, and Black face. In a similar fashion as the composition of the feather, there is another image of a Black person's face and torso that could be an ethnographic photograph from National Geographic. At the center of the collage is a portrait of a white man, deep in thought, with a skull on his desk. The skull is a reoccurring theme in Western art which symbolizes mortality. There is a Black arm with visible muscles, which is phallic in nature; the arm has a snake where the hand would be. Next to the phallic arm is a gun. To the bottom right hand corner of the gun there are

two white legs. The entire collage seems to form one figure that is sitting down with crossed legs. We see Black flesh, animals, a weapon, and a white man thinking. *Second Snake Spawn* represents the body, sex, and violence as entangled with Western thought, ethnography, and violence. The surrealist and nightmarish qualities of the work parallel the chaos of these objects and what they represent. *Second Snake Spawn* uses abstraction and surrealism to represent the interconnectedness of violence, Western thought, mortality, ethnography, and the pornography through the symbolism of the gun, the man deep in thought, the skull, the ethnographic photograph, and the phallic limb.



Wangechi Mutu. *Pretty Double Headed*, 2010. Mixed-media collage on paper.

Pretty Double Headed takes the shape of a woman's side profile through collagic form. There are body parts represented messily as fragments throughout the face, such as dark black lips, a small ear, and a medium sized almond shaped brown eye. Among these human features, there are scattered representations of animals, including a cheetah's tail and hind legs and a turtle shell. The animalistic qualities amalgamate with human features, resulting in a collage that merges nature and ecological environment with the human body. Parts of the face and neck

appear flesh-like, as if they may be pieces of organs, with splatters of blood over them. The bloodiness and fleshy exposure of organs contrasts with the “forehead” of the figure and the back of its head, which shows a beaded and bright design that might be the “pretty” of this double headed figure. At once, Mutu combines shine and beaded, textured decoration with exposed flesh and blood in a hybridized human and animal form. As has been noted, Mutu’s works mainly center the female figure. Sarah Jane Cervenak’s article, “Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu’s Resistant Harvests,” explores feminist and anti-colonial themes in Wangechi Mutu’s art. Mutu calls the process that she uses to create art “harvesting,” most likely because she is extracting imagery from the outside world and then transforming it into something deeply personal and otherworldly that brings forth a conversation on race, gender, and the body. *Pretty Double Headed* is a collection of images of snake skin, brown limbs, black lips, and floral arrangements that blossom in paint. In Cervenak’s language:

Pretty Double Headed, in some ways, ponders this elusive meaning by querying what happens when one’s blackness gets mediated at the mythical interface between thighs that double as mouths and uncaged snakes and floral blossoms. Powerfully, the insistent multiplicity at the heart of the collagic form at once indicts the dualities she’s forced to endure - the disfigurement and blurred vision engendered by the endless symbolic labor blackness is tasked with - and also operationalizes resistance itself” (393).

Mutu’s representation of the Black female body here is torn apart, disfigured, and marked by the mythical creatures and beautiful flowers that adorn the work. There are tensions between these representations. *Pretty Double Headed* is a manifesto of sorts; as a whole, it defines the multiplicity of identity that Mutu represents. One of Mutu’s primary concerns is a notion that Cervenak maps, which suggests that “Mutu is interested in and concerned with representing the primitivizing, racializing, and sexualizing disfigurements that come with being enfolded into another’s tapestry of who they think you are” (393). With this in mind, Mutu is simultaneously citing that being placed into someone else’s tapestry has long been a place of violence for Black

women, even though her formal practice resembles this. At the same time, she is a Black woman herself, so the process of playing with representation in this way is more consensual. Similarly to how Weems, Faustine, and Cox refashion and repurpose the self portrait, Mutu uses the body in innovative ways. In an interview with Deborah Willis, Mutu explains:

I was always interested in the power of the body, both as an image and as an actual mechanism through which we exist and find out who we are. I was interested in what goes on inside, but also what people see you as. I was also looking at the history of the body, questioning issues of representation and perception. The body became the mechanism with which I was able to move my mind around all of these issues of otherness, of transplanted-ness as a young woman, my *blackness* as an African-raised black woman in New York City. It became crucial to me to use it as a pivot, you know? But then I realized that it's also a trap. There's something about the body that confines us, that disables us, and that prevents us from being immaterial" (394).

Mutu's words reflect many realities in her work. To begin, she expresses that while the body is the root of many of the ways Black women experience an anti-Black world, representing the body becomes an obstacle as she seeks to create art that is other-worldly. Representing physical bodies grounds her work in the real, physical world, so she disfigures it and tears it apart to allow it to be injected into a different world, which is both surreal and futuristic. Furthermore, the body becomes a site at which she can work through various political issues, yet she must make it complex and futuristic to make it resistant. As a result of this process, her work becomes a critical site for Black women to work through their identities, especially when a Black woman is not represented through realist formal techniques. This artistic and political endeavor regarding embodiment connects back to the self-portraiture work that Weems, Cox, and Faustine participate in. Whether it is Faustine posing at the auction block, Cox dressing as Saartjie Baartman, or Weems appropriating images of Zealy's daguerreotypes with her words printed on them, all of these artists turn to the body as a tool to interrogate histories of violence to the body. Yet for Mutu, she considers the realism of direct representations of the body to be limiting. She

finds it necessary to disfigure the body to disengage from the realism of reproducing the exact world we live in. The risk of realism is a reproduction of the original image that caused harm. Mutu's turn to abstraction indicates a hope to move away from reproduction and towards a reimagination.

There is a tension between Mutu's work as a reparative and resistant force that also has horrifying and shocking elements, and many of her pieces could fall prey to voyeurism in certain gallery settings. On the other hand, the tearing apart and drastic refiguring of these images in a collage disrupts the elements of voyeurism that could occur; this further disrupts the gaze, as it is not a realistic rendering of violence against Black women. Here, I am considering the contemporary relationship of visibility to misogynistic and anti-Black violence. For example, liberal responses to police brutality have often advocated for police officers to wear body cameras or for people to film the police in general. As a result, we have hours and hours of footage of dead and dying Black subjects at the hands of police officers. Mapping this analysis onto the violence of the 19th century plantation, it is clear that Mutu's abstraction disrupts the voyeurist gaze in ways that other forms of realist representation and proof do not. Due to the traumatizing effects of widespread Black death shared on social media and the news, many scholars and activists have criticized the notion that visual proof always leads to liberation. Mutu uses abstraction to address the violence of the 19th century plantation. Cervenak cites Rachel Dudley's use of Petra Kupper's concept of the "medical plantation":

I assert that the space of the medical plantation was an integral feature in the use of black women's bodies to transform a condition representing an impediment on the slave plantation into a kind of medical entrepreneurship and a discrete branch of medicine... In making this argument, I draw from performance studies scholar Petra Kuppers' concept of the "medical plantation" to refer to a locality spatially separate from the cotton, rice, coffee, sugar, wheat or tobacco plantation and specifically designated for medical practice on enslaved women" (6).

For the most part, Mutu's work that pulls elements from medical journals is reminiscent of these histories of the white supremacist medical industry experimenting on Black bodies. Beyond the fact that she is pulling images from medical journals, this is evident in the viewing of her work. Additionally, it is clear that the limbs across the canvas may signify an aftermath. The style of these works appears to be post-apocalyptic, as if there has been an explosion and all that is left are the limbs of Black bodies. In another sense, the random body parts might be read as a testament to the dissection of Black bodies, while metaphorically tearing apart Black people's self worth and human value physically, emotionally, and mentally. The post-apocalyptic collages, both chaotic and deeply horrifying, are what Cervenak considers an "anarchy of form" (397) and "precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance" (397). Cervenak also ponders whether or not these works might be a mourning project. The reparative aspects of processing these traumas also stand in as a display of mourning for the lives that were lost, as they are refigured and blurred and abstracted into these futuristic images, throughout which the colonial gaze is disrupted. While there is a shocking element of representing the remains of the dead, the remains are part of an abstract image that figures them as other-worldly. This effect further gives the dead the power to shield themselves from voyeuristic gazes through the obscuring of their bodies, as they are broken apart and assembled into collages. This oppositional deployment of their bodies becomes known in Cervenak's article as "catachresis," which signifies the "queer opening made between the thing and its representation to simultaneously suggest a loss and unknowable fullness" (397). This "queer" opening represents Mutu's playing with time and purpose to reappropriate these images to provoke and to shift the gaze in a representation of Black women's embodiment. Furthermore, the bodies are figured as

queer in her work as they are existing in queer time that is marked by precarity and proximity to death.

The Black women in these collages represent histories of scientific racism and chattel slavery which at times sterilized Black women, and at other times forced them to reproduce. This paradox of white supremacy reveals the transformation of racism from slavery to its afterlife, where global capitalism is then predicated on Black women's wombs and their reproduction of unpaid labor, which transitions into practices of eugenics and forced sterilizations. The queerness of these collages is manifested not just as the gap between history and representation, but also as a testament to the queer lives lived by these Black women. I use the term "queer" here not in the sense of our liberal/identity politics understanding of "queer" in the West, as in describing individuals who are identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but instead to describe a reproductive time that enslaved Black women were forced to live in. My thinking here is influenced by Jack Halberstam's "Queer Temporalities and Postmodern Geographies," in which Halberstam offers a Foucaultian analysis to suggest that queerness is not merely marked by a way of having sex, but also by a mode of living. Due to social issues such as the AIDS crisis, homelessness, and homophobic discrimination, queer subjects do not live lives associated with the nuclear family and capitalist, heteronormative notions of a sociological clock. Enslaved Black women, and Black women facing medical racism in the afterlife of slavery, lived in queer time, as their reproduction was regulated by the capitalist system instead of by their own desires for family or by the right to mother their own children without harm or state surveillance. Ultimately, Mutu is representing those queer figures who live in queer temporalities.

Moreso, there is a queering of the representation of the female figure itself. In conversation with Deutsche Bank, Mutu stated, "People simplify my work and always see these

figures as Black women, when it could very well be a purple insect.” Her assertion further shines light on her engagement with the post-human. The Black female forms in her work cannot be read merely as Black women but instead as women who have been morphed into unidentifiable and uncontainable beings. This complicates the figuration/abstraction binary because it is clear that the human form is present in her work, but it transcends the traditional figure. Mutu calls this the “female-ish” form, which indicates that elements of femaleness are present, but it is not fully a female figure. The female-ish form subverts the male gaze, as it becomes unruly due to its ungovernable aesthetic. In other works, the images have splatters of blood across them. At first glance, the splatters of blood appeared Pollock-esque and I considered them within a history of particular history of Western abstract expressionism. Mutu uses some of the same gestures of Western abstract artists such as Pollock's drip paintings. Ultimately, they represent the blood from the violent experiences of the female-ish forms in the works. Still, the figures in Mutu’s creations often look more triumphant than weak, despite the fact that they are abstracted and often torn apart. The blood stands in as a symbol for violence while showing the survivalist power of the female-ish forms. In addition, Cervenak quotes Denise Ferreira de Silva’s thoughts on the post-Enlightenment era:

Black women exemplarily figure as a “disorderly array,” embodying a “double affectability... a dangerously unproductive will.” As such an imagined disarray fictionally, and terribly, renders Black women ideal candidates for post-Enlightenment settlement and theft in the form of everything from the Moynihan report to the forced sterilizations in North Carolina” (418).

These chaotic depictions of the Black female-ish form are resistant to the dominant gaze because they exist outside the sphere of white patriarchal control. As Black women’s desire exists outside of heteronormative understandings of society, it is viewed as chaotic, and therefore as grounds for control and disciplinary action in the form of scientific racism and other forms of violence.

These themes hold true from sterilizations of African-American women in North Carolina to colonizing genocide in the global south.

Beyond the grotesque and the resistant, I am interested in engaging with Mutu's work as being surreal. Surrealism is a cultural movement from the early 1920s that is best known for visual artworks seeking to inject dreams into reality and to create a supernatural and fantastical reality. The "Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black - a 21st Century Manifesto," by Scott Miller, articulates the politics around the aesthetic movement of Black artists crafting their own form of surrealism. The first president of Senegal, poet and African surrealist Leopold Senghor, once stated that "European Surrealism is empirical. African Surrealism is mystical and metaphysical." Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that African Surrealism (and Negritude) is an aesthetic movement that is "revolutionary because it is surrealist but surrealist because it is Black." Their words point to the political power and aesthetic rigor attached to Afrosurrealism. Afrosurrealism posits that beyond our visible world, there is another world that is striving to show itself, and as such, Afro Surrealist artists seek to excavate that world through their art. In thinking about a world in our current moment that needs excavation, I find myself considering Wangechi Mutu's training as an anthropologist. It is likely that her anthropological training informs her artistic process, especially in the case of her practices of excavating new worlds by transforming found material. Afro Surrealists distort reality for emotional impact, which is a key facet of Mutu's work in the genre of grotesquerie. Mutu's work engages in notions of Afrosurrealism alongside grotesquerie, using Black feminist assembling methods as she pulls shocking and beautiful images from the world around her and refashions them into a finished product that is explosive and radical.

Mutu's collages depart from a history of European collage and abstraction. Post-War Abstract Expressionist artists in Europe and America turned to abstraction in order to respond to the catastrophe of World War II and the paradoxes of modernity as technological innovation that comes with mass death and genocide. Western histories of art privilege World War II as *the* war to which abstraction responds, despite the reality of Jim Crow segregation and decolonization struggles in Africa happening in the same historical moment. If abstraction in the history of Western art is in part represented as a response to catastrophe, then Wangechi Mutu's work is an intervention that seeks to address what exactly counts as catastrophe. Mutu is also responding to catastrophic moments, which to her are (de)colonization in Africa and the 19th century plantation, as well as to racist and sexist formations of Black women's genders and sexualities.

Kara Walker's approach to Black women's embodiment has thematic ties to that of Wangechi Mutu. As a painter, silhouettist, print-maker, installation artist, and filmmaker, Walker's work considers race, gender, and sexuality in provocative ways. While Walker is mostly known for her shocking and evocative silhouettes, I am more specifically focused on *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, which was Walker's large scale sugar sphinx sculpture at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York from the Spring of 2014. While my analysis is primarily focused on *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, I engage this sculpture's cultural significance through some of the theoretical analyses of Walker's silhouettes. Enriched by an understanding of the silhouette as a pre-photographic form, my focus on the transition from silhouettes to large-scale sculpture parallels my move from photography and self-portraiture to the abstract and maximalist aesthetics of work by Walker and Mutu. Like Mutu's collages, *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* contains vivid allusions to the history of scientific racism, the 19th century plantation, the white male gaze/voyeurism, and abstraction.

Although it is a sculptural formation, *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* is an abstracted figure that combines a sphinx and a Black female figure. Like Mutu's collage practice, Walker pulls from more than one visual register to render the Black female-ish figure in this sculpture.



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. Sculpture.

A sphinx is a mythical creature that has the body of a lion and the head of a human. In Greek legends, the sphinx is mythologized as a treacherous, merciless, and deceptive figure. This sculpture takes the general form of a sphinx most prominently in the way the figure is sitting. However, the face of the sculpture is a representation of the mammy archetype. Within the iconography of the mammy archetype, the head scarf reveals this visual connection. The protruding behind on the sculpture reminds us of Saartjie Baartman, the figure who Renée Cox evoked in *Hot en Tot*.



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. Sculpture.

The mammy and the fleshy bottom that alludes to Saartjie Baartman are fused together in the neatly synthesizing form of the sphinx to create this sculpture. To understand this creation requires a grasp of the thematic fullness of the artwork. The complete title is *A Subtlety: 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*. The sculpture is gigantic, measured at 75 feet long and 35 feet tall. Through its vast form, shape, and technical composition, *A Subtlety* raises questions about labor, sexuality, race, gender, and the female figure in similar and different ways to the approaches of Weems, Cox, Faustine, and Mutu.

The significance of *A Subtlety* can be understood partially through themes directly related to Walker's silhouettes. In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe investigates the role of the gallery space, the looker, and the monstrosity of Walker's provocative silhouettes. Like Mutu's use of the gallery space, Sharpe writes that, "To see the black silhouettes of the African American visual artist Kara Walker in a gallery installation is to be caught up in the scenes and therefore in the actions of the figures that populate them" (154). By stating this, Sharpe is indicating that the role of the "looker" is one that is scripted into the

narrative of the exhibition. Due to the provocative nature of these silhouettes, the response from the looker is scripted into part of what the exhibition presents to the contemporary art world. Some of what the silhouette plays on is the absence of a physical body and the role of memory. Although there are Black figures engaged in various types of acts in these silhouettes, it is clear which figures are enslaved subjects and which are white mistresses and plantation owners. What shocks the viewer is that a form as seemingly open to interpretation as the silhouette can portray such a gruesome fact of history, one that we all recognize. Sharpe grapples with this as she writes:

For white viewers this act of looking at Walker's allegories of slavery often entails a seduction by or complicity with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype that resolves in disavowal and projection. For black viewers this looking can mean encountering shame and violence and sometimes refusing this representation or sometimes being seduced into and complicit with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype; it means engaging with the disfigurements of black survival that we would prefer to look away from (156).

Therefore, the gaze of the looker not only produces a certain narrative for the silhouettes and what they represent, but the silhouettes and their significance produce us as lookers. We look, view, and gaze as racialized subjects who have particular reactions based on how we negotiate our own identities in relation to the image, whether consciously or not. Kara Walker's work has ignited controversy among the African-American contemporary art community. The artist and art historian Howardena Pindell has been incredibly critical of Walker's work because she views it as playing into the voyeurism of the white looker. Many others have had similar criticism. To grapple with this, Sharpe turns to the root of the issue, which is how we gaze as lookers of our own racial formations.

The notion of how we observe in the aforementioned ways as racialized subjects is deeply important to *A Subtlety*, and is expressed in the footage of crowds engaging with the

sculpture while it was on display. Those who immediately recognize *A Subtlety* as part of the visual iconography of the mammy and hottentot archetypes will be discomforted by those who take goofy and arguably mocking pictures of themselves for social media next to the backside of the sculpture. As such, the way viewers interact with the sculpture becomes a performance of its own. Walker expects this, as she chooses to have video footage of those interacting with the sculpture released afterwards. Because it is made of sugar, the sculpture will not last, but the footage of those interacting with it will. It is apparent that one of the anxieties surrounding Walker's work is that Black people are scripted into a narrative of looking with those who might be looking inappropriately or voyeuristically. It is one thing to look alone, but it is another to look in a mixed company.

Walker's work is a representation of the narrative subject matter of what it means for Black women to be rendered flesh. To evoke the mammy archetype and the hottentot archetype simultaneously is to gesture towards a history of Black women being robbed of the right to possess an autonomous body. Their embodiment directly signals this reality. Saartjie Baartman, or the Hottentot Venus, is a symbol of Black women's purported hypersexuality and excessive flesh. The mammy archetype alludes to a subject divested of human will and viewed as someone who is happily in service to whiteness. In "Changing the Letter," Hortense Spillers states that "the horror of slavery was its absolute domesticity that configured the "peculiar institution" into the architectonics of the Southern household." The mammy is an example of an imagined archetype stemming from Black women who worked within the home to take care of white children. Mammy embodies the notion of slavery as domestic. Mammy, as a domestic figure, is scripted as an embodied subject who resists all eurocentric beauty standards: she is corpulent and she is dark skinned. Her position in the household is thus imagined as the figure who protects

white women from having white men sleep with enslaved subjects, because it is assumed that the white men would not want someone who is dark skinned and fat. Courtney Patterson-Faye, in “I like the way you move: Theorizing fat, black and sexy,” disrupts this narrative by noting that the mammy as an embodied figure did often have her own partner and children, but she was not able to spend time with them as a mother and wife because of the labor she was relegated to in the white household. Patterson-Faye continues on to make a significant intervention that enslaved women of all sizes and colors were subject to sexual violence from white men on the plantation. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that the mammy is a cultural fiction, not a historical fact. Although there were certainly fat, dark skinned, Black enslaved women and domestic workers who have historically attended to white children, it is not accurate to imagine them as subjects who were safe from sexual violence, or were enamored by their subservient role in the household as a surrogate mother for white children instead of having the opportunity to take care of their own. While the mammy figure is often conceptualized as asexual and docile, we must also recognize the domestic sphere as a violent one in which greater proximity to whiteness does not grant an enslaved subject any sort of sanctuary from racialized and gendered violence.

Returning to Hortense Spillers’ description of slavery’s relationship to the domestic sphere, understanding the mammy archetype calls for a critical engagement with what it means to be an enslaved woman working in a white household and divested of agency through law and everlasting cultural fiction, to be ultimately rendered flesh instead of a body. Spillers directs our attention to the way Black women are collapsed into tropes and cultural fictions. She opens the first page of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” with a list of the tropes Black women are collapsed into. Spillers writes,

Let’s face it, I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar,’ ‘Sapphire’ and ‘Earth Mother,’ ‘Aunty,’ ‘Granny,’ ‘God’s Holy Fool,’ a

‘Miss Ebony First,’ or ‘Black Woman at the Podium’: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have to be invented (1).

Spillers lists many of the names by which Black women appear in the American grammar. She exposes the ways cultural fictions of Black women appear in the narrative of America, often structured as proof that anti-Blackness is necessary through representations of oppressed Black women as happy in their position, or as too unruly when given agency and elevated out of a subordinate position. The hegemonic foundations of the nation-state rely on Black women’s subaltern positions, so cultural narratives and fictions of Western worldmaking are shaped accordingly. Sharpe proffers that the encompassing figure of the mammy must be added to that list. Sharpe writes:

To Spillers’s list of “confounded identities” and nominative properties I add the encompassing figure of the mammy, who “from her beginnings in southern plantation reality and literature... was a sexual and racial symbol that was used by men and women, North and South, white and black, to explain proper gender relationships, justify or condemn racial oppression, and establish class identities (for both whites and blacks) (160).

Mammy’s appearances across advertising, film, literature, and popular culture in general does the work of making her hypervisible and a household name while invisibilizing her true experiences. Images of the mammy proliferate everywhere but we do not know who she is: she is imagined as a figure to comfort, witness, and maintain hierarchical structures of race, gender, and sexuality. Mammy is a fictionalized story built by white society about Black enslaved women and domestic workers who were forced to conduct labor in white households. Through Sharpe’s analysis, we understand that the mammy is conceptualized as the absence of desire and as a placeholder to maintain notions of white femininity as superior. Keeping this history in mind, mammies appear throughout Walker’s silhouettes. One example would be *The End of*

Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven, which contains an image of four girls and women who are suckling each other's breasts, with a baby who is attempting to do so as well but cannot reach her mother's breasts. While the image is undoubtedly provocative and is among many of the images for which Walker has gotten backlash from the wider Black arts community, this piece of art conjures ideas about motherhood that connect to mammy. Thinking of mammy as a subject who has to mother white children instead of mothering her own, we see a Black child who attempts to breastfeed from her mother but cannot. Walker connects this image to metaphorical notions of history and how her artistic practice is continually suckling from history in a loop, but she never gets enough of it. What is most interesting here is that for Walker, the maternal breast is the most apt metaphor for thinking of history at large. Overall, Walker views mammy as an embodiment of history, and for her, the maternal breast represents this historical genealogy of Black enslaved women both metaphorically and in the flesh.

As is evidenced by Walker's silhouettes, she views Black women's bodies as central symbols of history. The conceptualization of mammy, motherhood, and womanhood in general carries over into the significance of *A Subtlety*. One of the most notable differences between *A Subtlety* and *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, other than form and size, is color. In her silhouettes, Walker renders the subjects as Black, but the white space that fills around the silhouettes is representative of the relationship between whiteness and Blackness and how they maintain and reproduce each other. *A Subtlety*, in contrast, is white: it is bleached sugar. Sugar is brown in its natural form, but Walker chose to have it bleached to be white just like sugar historically has been handled when it is sold. In an article for *The New Yorker* titled "The Sugar Sphinx," Hilton Als writes:

Operating from the assumption, always, that history can be found out and outed, Walker's sphinx shows up our assumptions: She has "black" features but is white? Has she been bleached—and thus made more "beautiful"—or is she a spectre of history, the female embodiment of all the human labor that went into making her?

Als draws our attention to *A Subtlety* as an embodiment that is both female and evidence of high levels of human labor. Issues of gender, color, material, and color are deeply important to the significance of this sculpture. Choosing to represent a Black figure with bleached sugar instead of the Blackness of the Black figures of her silhouettes alludes to the importance of labor when considering the history of slavery and who was responsible for bleaching the sugar and harvesting it, as well as to a recognition that the mythologies of Black women's embodiment represented in *A Subtlety* are created by white people, just as the sculpture is built using white sugar. Viewers are prompted to consider the work put into maintaining these cultural fictions of Black womanhood in addition to the history of labor on the sugar plantation.

A Subtlety engages issues of labor in relation to sugar in various ways. The full title, *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*, establishes the context that those who have historically refined sugar for kitchens in the New World are both overworked and unpaid. On the occasion of this factory being torn down, Walker is unwilling to allow sugar's relationship to slavery and racial capitalism to be forgotten along with the demolition of the plant. *A Subtlety*, as ironic as its shortened title is, is an impressive reminder, an aggressive and extravagant intervention into the gravity of sugar production and its role in racial capitalism. In Catherine Keyser's "The Sweet Tooth of Slavery," Keyser writes:

Late nineteenth-century Northerners attempted to overlook the origins of their refined sugar by eschewing molasses (and, implicitly the brown bodies that both produced and consumed it). Walker's installation reminds us that it is still easy in hipster Williamsburg,

for example, to ignore the global labor exploitation and racism that facilitates the circulation of sugar (2).

It is important to note that for Walker, the ethics of sugar production are not solely an issue of the past. The website for *Creative Time*, the gallery that sponsored *A Subtlety*, has links to articles about current sugarcane workers throughout the Caribbean, especially Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, who are overworked and underpaid as they refine sugar for so-called developed countries to consume. From the unpaid labor of racial slavery and the sugar plantation to the unethical and underpaid labor of sugarcane workers in our contemporary moment, it is easy to forget the amount of labor that is put into the food we consume.

At the intersection of the edible nature of the material of the sculpture and its representation of a Black female-ish figure emerges a critical notion of Black women's flesh and this flesh's relationship to consumption and racial capitalism. This is expressed by the video footage of those who visited the sculpture posing for selfies next to the large protruding bottom of the figure that resembles depictions of the Hottentot Venus. The same fears and anxieties about voyeurism with Walker's silhouettes were present for viewings of *A Subtlety*. Keyser extends this theme of consumption and flesh further to connect *A Subtlety* with *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* by Kyla Wazana Tompkins. Keyser and Tompkins note how nineteenth-century literature and culture often depicted black bodies as edible. They trace this idea through advertisements at grocery stores and product packaging. While *A Subtlety* might be read as an embodiment of that cultural trend, as it is a Black figure made from sugar, Tompkins suggests that the molasses-drenched sculptures of children that surround the sculpture carry a strong odor that resists ideas of the installation in general as edible or delicious at all. Consequently, while made from a material understood as delicious, *A Subtlety's* grotesquerie resists that consumption. In Keyser's discourse on sweetness and

slavery, she writes, “fleshiness cannot be undone, even when bodies are no longer treated like human bodies but instead as consumable treats.” I understand this to be a direct gesture towards the potential of reading *A Subtlety* as resistance against racist fantasies more than a replication of these problematic mindsets. At once, the mammy and Hottentot Venus archetypes symbolize cultural fictions that mark Black women in the American grammar book, but *A Subtlety*’s representation of Black women as monstrous, grotesque, massive, and made out of a consumable material resists consumption. As such, *A Subtlety* is not small enough, subtle enough, and well enough understood to be properly consumed by the white gaze.

While Mutu’s collages prompt us to think about embodiment through the lens of ripped-apart flesh and scientific racism on the 19th century plantation, Walker’s works direct our attention towards the ways bodies are scripted into cultural fictions. Both *A Subtlety* and Mutu’s collages approach embodiment through what I am continuing to identify as the female-ish form, in which these two artists take the female figure, abstract it, and turn it into something else that simultaneously appears familiar and otherworldly. Walker views the mammy as the embodiment of history, while Mutu considers her lab to be the female body. Both are grappling with history, Black women’s bodies, and the legacy of slavery and colonization through representing these female-ish figures. Understanding Mutu’s collages and *A Subtlety* as abstraction, I conceptualize these works as moving within the tradition that Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman writes of in “Black Grotesquerie.” Writing in a context of the failed promises of neoliberal representation as liberation for Black people, Abdur-Rahman posits Black Grotesquerie as an aesthetic mode for Black expressive culture to grapple with our catastrophic present without the necessity of conforming to previous representational logics. One of the quotes that “Black Grotesquerie” opens with is, “We need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror”; this is drawn from

Wilderson's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. The female-ish form is the representation of Black women through a language of abstraction. Understanding the history of the Black body in the West as being confronted with voyeurist gazes from lynching photographs to the auction block, a language of abstraction moves away from the realism that has historically made Black bodies vulnerable to the white and patriarchal gaze. Abdur-Rahman writes, "The grotesque is a process of revaluing and repositioning the debased elements of bodily, structural, conceptual, and worldly configurations. The black grotesque discomfits the world, disarranging and reforming the official order of things" (4). I posit that Walker and Mutu are both working within the aesthetic mode that Abdur-Rahman describes as black grotesquerie because of their formal strategies, which severely rearrange the Black female figure. Instead of re-enacting a historical image, they rearrange the body in order to comment on the relationship between visibility and embodiment in our contemporary moment without conforming to the representational logics of realist figural abstraction and linear narrative subject matter.

4. Conclusion

I engage flesh and body as always already racialized and gendered constructions in Western worldmaking in order to query the risks and possibilities of realism and abstraction in Black women's contemporary art. While my work finds some utility in the binaries of flesh/body and realism/abstraction, I endeavor to encourage a critical space for slippages, entanglements and contradictions. For instance, I state that subjects rendered flesh make embodied interventions. The distinction of flesh is essential to my understanding of corporeality and non-sovereignty, yet I analyze enfleshed subjects through a lens of embodiment. The realism/abstraction binary is a fundamental guiding factor in the comparative analyses of the works I engage, although I am always rethinking the applicability of this binary when considering the particular formal strategies of these artists. To suggest that self-portraiture using photography as a medium is realism operates on histories of the camera as capturing the truth of the body, which has been used to violate Black people via the mugshot, the ethnographic photograph, et cetera. To re-enact and perform the past for the self-portrait obscures the realism of the portrait because it is a contemporary photograph, not a historical photograph. If realism is purely truthful and not artistic, how can a photograph be realist when there are various formal techniques employed to produce it in a certain manner? As for abstraction, the history of art often conceptualizes abstraction as a freedom from narrative subject matter and representational logics associated with realism. How do Black artists transform the discourse on abstraction when they endeavor to represent the surreal, chaotic, and cyclical nature of Black abjection? I posit that Black artists turn to a visual language of abstraction in part because of the inability of realism and figural representation to even begin to capture the entropy of Black life and anarchy of Black feminist politics.

I chose to analyze works by Nona Faustine, Renée Cox, Wangechi Mutu, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems because of their innovative and provocative embodied formal techniques. Faustine re-enacts the 19th century American auction block in a performative self portrait. Cox dons a costume to perform the embodiment of the Hottentot Venus. Weems articulates the historical risks of photography and then repurposes the camera to interrogate the iconography of the Black body in ethnography, science, and art. Walker merges a sphinx, the Hottentot Venus, and the mammy archetype into one massive sculpture. Mutu pulls imagery of the Black body from various sources and disfigures it by ripping it apart and adding in other found images, utilizing an apocalyptic and surreal collage practice. There are innumerable ways in which these artists' strategies are in dialogue with each other. Mutu and Weems are both pulling imagery from medical journals in order to reference scientific racism. For Mutu and Walker, the "female-ish" forms they create are not only allusions to histories of racist science, but also to the construction of the category of "female" itself. Western categories of sex and gender in which genitalia is designated as "female" become disrupted by Mutu and Walker's complete abstraction of what is considered female. The economic themes of consumption in Walker's sculpture parallel the facts of consumption on the auction block and on Wall Street (as symbols of global capitalism). Mutu tears apart Black flesh for her collage practice. Cox accentuates her fleshiness through enlarging her buttocks and breasts to mirror the iconography of the Hottentot Venus. Weems articulates the risks of visibility as it relates to scientific photography and the history of art. Faustine further illuminates the risks through her photography, which simultaneously references the beginning of Black women and the white gaze as linked to the performance of the auction block and triggers an anxiety of visibility for Black women living under white supremacist patriarchy in the afterlife of racial slavery. The realism of

the photographed self-portrait and the abstraction of the female-ish form have provided avenues for critical analyses of flesh as a biopolitical formation, and as a framework deeply applicable to Black feminist theory and contemporary art.

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