Creating New Visions With Art: Redressing Pain and New Imaginings of Black Female Bodies

by

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Class of 2016

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in the African American Studies Program and Music
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Acknowledgements

Writing my thesis was an extremely huge feat. I would like to thank my mentors and advisors, Professors Rashida Shaw, Jay Hoggard, and Gina Athena Ulysse, for their constant dedication and tough love. For the continuous support and nurturing, I would like to thank the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, Professor Krishna Winston, Dawn Piscitelli, The Staff and Faculty of the Music Department, and the Staff and Faculty of the African American Studies Program. Thank you to the many black female artists that continue to inspire my work and Jamilla Okubo, for granting me the usage of her art pieces. To the musicians and artists I had the opportunity to collaborate with for my musical recital, thank you for helping my vision come to life. I would also like to recognize the amazing friends and family on and off of Wesleyan’s campus who continue to remind me of the importance and maintenance of my self-care, work ethic, passions, creativity, self-love and intellectual capacities. Without all of these individuals, and administrations, I would not be the individual, scholar, activist, and creator I have come to be today.
Abstract

This thesis analyzes traumas of chattel slavery associated with the enslaved black female. Highlighting sexual violence and the manipulation of science, performance, and philosophies used to subjugate black women, I argue that the black female body continues to be a site of slavery, even after emancipation. Focusing on some of the myths established during the era of minstrelsy and accompanying these stories with actual slave narratives, I discuss how these tropes have been shifted from the plantation to modern day and often leave the black female body “captured” by these representations. These tropes render the once enslaved black female body an inescapable scene of subjection. Using a multidisciplinary methodological approach of gender and feminist theories, African- American studies, music, psychology, and history, I analyze the tropes of stereotypic images that manifested in the performance form called minstrelsy. These minstrel caricatures continue to be addressed in African American art and music performance traditions. I assert art as a way to intellectualize the pain that the black female body carries, remembers and was often denied of feeling. By examining the work of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Kara Walker, and Jamilla Okubo, I engage with counter narratives that female artists of the African diaspora have created in order to heal or redress the violence and histories that the black female body continues to remember after the legal abolishment of slavery.
Prologue

My love for the arts existed long before I encountered academia. Art motivated me to put my feelings into words. At first, I thought that my musical interest was simply based on my vocal abilities. It was not until college that I realized that there was theory behind what was really resonating within me. The ability for an artist to voice my own narrative was because that artist was navigating the world with the same epidermis\(^1\) that I had. We may have chosen to navigate this world differently, but we were both tackling the same world with the same “fixed/marked body\(^2\).”

My fixed body, which history has marked as other, was constantly dealing with the effects of slavery that continue to racialize and gender my body. These effects directly correlate with images established before and after emancipation. Images of the jezebel, mammy, pickanniny, Venus Hottentot, etc., were identities associated with my black body, before I was born. I was unaware of these caricatures and characters that were established long ago. As Audre Lorde states in *Sister Outsider*, “for to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings” (42). In other words, I was not meant to survive as a black female in America. These caricatures were supposed to emphasize my supposed subordination. The apparatus, that is the very foundation of America, is based on the subjugation of black men and women. The

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\(^2\) In my thesis, I discuss how the black female body is a site of subjection, and is marked as such by gender and race. For more information pertaining to defining a “marked body,” refer to (Putzi, Jennifer, and Inc ebrary. *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. Web.) In Putzi’s book, she asserts that to be a marked body is to signify non-personhood and to be considered grotesque/ beastly (2).
stereotypes that helped to instill the degradation of black men and women continue to permeate the consciousness and psyche of America.

In the classroom, these stereotypes and misconceptions were evident and constantly in play. How I was treated by my peers, and sometimes even educators, often made me feel insecure in my abilities. The ways in which my body was marked often led individuals to question my intelligence and capabilities. I was often the only black female in my advanced courses and, therefore, my presence was doubted. Yet, I had to work twice as hard to gain the knowledge of my white counterparts who had been learning white patriarchal structures since birth—something I was unfamiliar with and could not truly “name” until college. My points of reference were often assumed to be the same as my white counterparts, which undermined my hard work and often led me to play catch up. Being in a classroom was like me looking in a mirror—facing my race, my gender and my history everyday. I often questioned my own abilities because of it. During my high school education, my advisors often told me to lower my standards. If not for my pipeline college-bound program, Legal Outreach, I would be at a lower ranked University and unaware of the other opportunities and goals I am capable of achieving.

Majoring in Music and African American Studies at Wesleyan University, I have had to balance learning about European structures (both in music theory and African American history) and also understanding the importance of learning these structures in order to create new structures of my own. During my education, I had to learn and see through hegemonic epistemologies. It was a challenge to decipher, which battles were internal and which battles were external. I quickly realized that the discomforts I felt most of my life were more of a reflection of the society/world I lived in, than my own
personal feelings. I looked to the very artists that resonated with me since birth. Some of my inspirations, like Nina Simone, Etta James, Billie Holiday, Arethra Franklin and Kara Walker, have dealt with similar internal and external battles. It’s their experiences, demonstrated through their musical and artistic works that help me see the ways I can navigate the historical traumas and markings of my black body. Through their words and art, I began to learn more about myself.

Having the opportunity to engage in this material, I realized that the personal could be political. Remembering passages from Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, I realized that the personal was the art I had been studying. Being a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, I decided to study the black female body in multiple mediums of art because I wanted to find out how art, performance, and music could be used as a way to navigate and address negative representations of the black female body in order to demonstrate how art can be both a healing tool to historical traumas and a form of resistance. My research is the psychoanalysis of the complexities of black art.\(^3\) Black art aims to intellectualize the pain that manifests, resists and heals the traumas and effects of slavery. This makes the art produced by black female bodies intentional, purposeful, and analytic as it actively resists and heals the black female body that has been a site of markings, slavery, stereotypes, and fixation.

Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*, “...the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (25). I truly understood what that meant when I arrived at Wesleyan University. Initially, I wanted to become a lawyer so I could change the world through the judicial system. However, I realized that there were other avenues I could take to change the world I live in. With my current education, I have been exposed to so many

\(^3\) For the purpose of my research, “black art” refers to the art created by those of the African Diaspora.
scholars that try to dismantle the *master's house* through challenging the way that we (as consumers and cultural producers) view popular culture, black feminism, and black epistemologies. Evoking bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and Saidiya Hartman, my project is part of a wave of research that teases out the many layers of slavery and the effects of the horrors and obsessions that mark the black female body pre and post emancipation. The analytical work I have encountered has opened my eyes to the wide spectrum that is the “black experience.” There are numerous points on this spectrum that have yet to be engaged, challenged, analyzed or developed.

My music recital, the performance portion to my thesis, is an external manifestation of the theories and images I engage with in this written portion. Singing works from Jill Scott, Nina Simone, Erykah Badu, Alice Smith, and a few others, I use my vocals and arrangements as an apparatus to discuss the pains and pleasures I have outlined in this thesis. There is a history and intentionality in both the vocalization and analytical work I engage with. So often, the works of black artists are considered as being unintentional, primitive, random and uncritical. My current research challenges the misconceptions of black art by shifting the lens in which black art is studied. I question black aesthetics and how a Western lens does not embody the point of black art—to intellectualize pain. I have learned that there is still space to define black art, black aesthetic, black authenticity, and the gaze in which we analyze these topics.

History continues to be imaginary, conceived, and real. I hope to continue to challenge the histories, memories and collective consciousness that reaffirms social hierarchies, built slavery, and silenced many narratives.
Chapter 1: Remembering Traumas of Slavery: The Black Female Body as a Site of Subjection, Subjugation and Violence

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
May be refin’d and join th’ angelic train.

Imagine being forced out of your home, separated from your family, and constantly degraded. For dark bodies, this was a reality of the forced labor system. Dark bodies were perceived as chattel. Chattel is defined as capital, property, livestock, and goods.5 This concept, along with science, religion, violence and philosophies, acted as the telos of slavery. Black men and women were considered to be animals, and therefore, treated as such—to be used however their white enslavers thought convenient. To reinforce the system of cheap labor, Africans and African Americans were thought of as chattel—not capable of feelings and inherently inferior. Many of the violent and negative stereotypes attached with blackness stem from the justification of the violence and


5 As defined by the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED).
oppression of dark bodies. With all of these foundations for slavery, the black body was forced to inherit traumas generation to generation—without any real justice pre and post emancipation.

There is this misconception that once slavery ended, black individuals were completely freed. However, I posit that some of the ideologies established pre-emancipation, that were used to justify slavery, still permeates the psyche of America. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman, a Professor in African American literature and history, engages with sentience, black identities, and forms of resistance. This particular book plays a vital role in my research because it discusses the many forces that have rendered the black female body as a point of erasure, site of subjection and therefore slavery. Hartman states that, “emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection” (6).

Specifically, the narratives told during slavery switched from justifying the labor of blacks to the social order and hierarchy that placed blacks as inferior. This history of slavery repressed the culture, identity, and humanity of Africans that were forced out of Africa and into a foreign land, to work as free labor. The negative archetypes and violence projected onto black bodies informed the apparatus that serves the foundation of America’s development.

Michel Rolph-Trouillot, a Haitian anthropologist, discusses these social orders and deems them as a “grand-narrative.” In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production*
of History, Rolph-Trouillot states, “at best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won” (5). I assert that the history that continues to make the black female body a scene of subjection is a narrative that enforces the philosophies of those in power—white men. Robin Kelley, a professor of American history and author of Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, similarly emphasizes that the history of society is “real and imagined” (Kelley 16). Putting Kelley and Trouillot in conversation with each other, I am stressing how history is a grand narrative that is imagined, yet consumed as truth. In a similar manner, the abjection of the black female, signifies a point in history that was also conceived, and thought to be fact. Narratives that have deemed the black female body as incapable of feeling pain and as victims of sexual violence are linked to the dehumanization of black female bodies before and after the abolishment of slavery. The conceived histories and ideologies that continue to mark and encapsulate the black female body affect America’s collective consciousness.

In this chapter, I first discuss the many adaptations of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and how the racial caricatures developed during minstrelsy were used to degrade black men and women. Secondly, I assert that the performance of these racial caricatures by white performers directly justifies and correlates to the mistreatment, abuse, oppression and subjugation of black women on the auction block, on the slave plantation, and in the system of slavery. Third, I discuss the steps and importance of redressing these tropes associated with the black female body. Fourth, I outline Patricia Hill Collins’s ‘Black Feminist Theory’ as a methodology to study how black aural and visual artists intellectualize and redress the sufferings of black women.
Revealing Subjugation Through the Adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on the Minstrel Stage

To perpetuate the power dynamic of slave and master, racial caricatures were fused with America’s entertainment. For the purpose of my research, I am choosing to highlight one platform that was used to perpetuate the subjugation of blacks—minstrelsy.\(^8\) I hope to display how these grotesque and peculiar performances were acts of violence, erasure, and trauma. Having these caricatures as the persistent grand narrative for centuries, the history of African Americans was limited to these negative notions, and the black body was forced to exist within these narrow identities. From the minstrelsy stage to the present, these tropes continue to make the black female a scene of subjection, a “painless” body—identities that are inescapable. Linking the minstrel showings of these caricatures to the plantation, Hartman illustrates the ways white enslavers instilled their dominance. She states that, “when one is considering the crimes of slavery, the popular theater is as central as the courthouse…” (27). In other words, the minstrel stage plays an essential role in studying the horrors and philosophies of slavery. This is where the shift of blacks being defined by their servitude, shifted to blacks being defined by parodies performed on the American stage. On this stage, the consumption and entertainment of the degradation of black bodies was persistent and prompted lasting effects.

In “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” Eric Lott, an English professor and social historian, discusses the absurdity that was displayed on

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\(^8\) According to scholar, Eric Lott, a white man, by the name of T.D. Rice, was fascinated by a “negro” man in a hotel. Rice asks this man to undress and give him his clothes. Wearing this black man’s clothes, Rice then began to embody a “negro” persona through performance, marking the beginning of minstrelsy (24). (Lott, Eric. “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” *Representations* No. 39 (1992): 23-50. JSTOR. Web.)
the minstrel stage. The portrayal of characters and caricatures was based on racial fear and desire (Lott 27). Lott asserts that during the development of early minstrel shows (1843 to the 1860s), minstrelsy “underscores the white fascination with commodified ‘black’ bodies” (Ibid.). In other words, minstrelsy was based on the captivation of black bodies. As a result, black characters were portrayed in ways that were most desirable to a white audience and protected the alleged superiority of white spectators (Lott 28). In these moments, the transgression of whiteness was based on the subjugation of black bodies. In particular, the black female body portrayal on the American stage was based on the emasculation of black men.9

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin,*10 an anti-slavery novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, stands out as a prime example of the perpetuation of minstrelsy due to the ways in which black characters/caricatures within the novel were consumed and later performed in theatrical adaptions across America. Although this novel created social change and is said to be the catalyst for the Civil War, in many ways, this book was also used as a tool to perpetuate stereotypes that were used to justify the enslavement and oppression of black men and women. In “Uncle Tom’s Women,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader,* Judith Williams, a professor of African American studies, states that Stowe was unaware of the many adaptations (and peculiar performances) that would come from her novel (19). Even though it was labeled as an

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9 Lott states that, “on the most immediate level, collective white male violence toward black women in minstrelsy not only tamed an evidently too-powerful object of interest, but contributed (in nineteenth-century white men’s terms) to a masculinist enforcement of white male power over the black men to whom the women were supposed to have “belonged” (35).

10 This novel is essential to discussing some of these caricatures because of its popularity at the time. It was one of the first anti-slave narratives that humanized and dehumanized a lot of these caricatures because of its many interpretations and adaptations on the American stage.
abolitionist text, Stowe’s novel, and subsequent performance adaptations, attracted whites to a form of entertainment that was dear to their hearts: minstrelsy. Within the confines of minstrel performance, mainstream America was introduced to three caricatures of the black female—the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the Topsy figure (Williams 20). Williams reminds us of the significance of these figures.

The mammy was a favorite of sentimental literature, and her appearance, typically fat, black and kerchiefed, linked her to the minstrel stage. A second figure that gained currency through the nineteenth century was the tragic mulatto: the near-white, genteel heroine, depicted as a beautiful and articulate woman, whose virtue was threatened by her Negro status. Stowe added a third type of black female character: Topsy, the disrespectful child who “never was born” yet became an icon of the American imagination (Ibid.).

The pickaninny, or Topsy in the novel, is defined as a “black child of African origin or descent (OED).” During the 19th century, images of the pickaninny were of a dark body with braids that stuck out. This child was often depicted eating watermelon and was believed to be criminal, and “adult” like in behavior. The origins of the mammy caricature, embodied by Aunt Chloe (a character within Stowe’s novel), stemmed from stereotypical perceptions of the older and overweight black women who were the wet nurses and nannies of white children. Many whites viewed them as being asexual and de-gendered. Tropes of black female bodies became crucial images for American popular culture. In fact, Williams states that the black female stereotypes formed by this novel, acted on tropes that already permeated America’s consciousness. She asserts that these images, that went from the novel to the minstrel stage, were nothing new to white
On stage, the way that these three tropes were depicted painted the black female characters as unredeemable characters and personas. In Stowe’s novel, Topsy is depicted in rags, as rugged, and Little Eva, is depicted as angelic. On stage however, Topsy, who was the foil to Little Eva, was oftentimes portrayed by a grown white woman, or man in blackface, while Little Eva was portrayed as an actual child, and as white passing (Williams 22-23). In this instance, Topsy, who is written as a child, is robbed of her innocence once an adult portrays her. In these moments, there is a point of erasure because white men and women are personifying a body that is not their own (Ibid.). This “displacement and absence” of the black female emphasizes the falsified and imagined persona that was portrayed, and yet consumed as entertainment (Williams 23). Yet, this is only one example of how the portrayal of these characters influenced the perception and message of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The three mulatto figures in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were all characters that were presented through the loss of motherhood. Stowe’s depiction of Eliza, Emmeline and Cassy, engaged with the complex forms of agency that black women had to act on. These mulatto characters dealt with issues of escape, familial separation between child and mother, sexual advances, and even murder (Williams 27). Hartman states that on these white American stages, black characters were not portrayed as heroic unless these characters appeared in anti-slavery plays (Ibid.). However, even in these instances where the stage had the opportunity to paint these characters as heroic, they were still used to

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11 Blackface is an exaggerated style of face painting, commonly worn by a white actor playing a black person. The use of blackface makeup in American performance is rooted within the history of minstrelsy (OED).
perpetuate fantastical negative perceptions of black men and women. In other words, blacks were still considered as objects.

The depiction of black women on the minstrel stage embodied the seemingly psychotic fixation on black bodies by white audiences. These mythical images often launched the careers of white men and women. The better these white men and women could embody this “negro” persona and all the absurd tropes associated with that specific character, the better actors these white performers were.\textsuperscript{12} The real issue, however, is that these conceived portrayals were consumed as being factual. The points of erasure discussed earlier are just as violent as the physical violence inflicted on black bodies during this time. Those that watched these shows believed that this was how black men and women really were. Lott posits that “minstrelsy's joking focus on disruptions and infractions of the flesh amounted to a kind of theatrical dream-work, displacing and condensing those fears, imaged in the "black" body, that could neither be forgotten or fully acknowledged” (31). In other words, the images that manifested from obsession continued to be consumed subconsciously as fact, and could never really be separated from performance. The absurdity depicted was never recognized as such and, yet continues to be a part of America’s memory and racial unconsciousness.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} See Williams and Bean for more information on how minstrel stage was used as a catalyst for the careers of white actors and actresses.

\textsuperscript{13} In “Love and Theft…” Eric Lott discussed how blackface performance was used to create and embody “racial unconscious.” Lott asserts that the “racial unconscious” is structured and based on anxieties, which make these insensible performances and ideologies more legitimate and logical (Lott 23). As previously discussed, minstrelsy revealed the underlying prejudices of white spectators. Similarly, racial unconsciousness is what essentially underlies America’s collective memory.
The Relationship between the Minstrel Stage, Auction Block and Plantation

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long ways from home
A long ways from home
True believer
A long ways from home
Along ways from home

--Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child (or Motherless Child)\textsuperscript{14}

Blackface minstrelsy helped to create social and racial constructs and boundaries (Lott 23). These performances helped make light of the horrors of slavery, while circulating the romanticization of that system. White performers and white spectators profited from the negative portrayals of black female bodies as a facilitator and justification of notions of white supremacy. It made the subjugation and mistreatment of black bodies seemingly “natural” (Ibid.). The minstrel stage was used to reproduce the black body as abject (Hartman 29). The minstrel stage allowed white bodies to portray the pain of black bodies, while erasing this pain at the same time (Hartman 32).\textsuperscript{15}

Particularly, white individuals used the stage as a platform to explore and commoditize black bodies, their own identities, enjoyment, and entertainment (Hartman 26).

\textsuperscript{14} Original scores of “Motherless Child” are by William E Barton (1899).

\textsuperscript{15} In Scenesc of Subjection, Hartman states “minstrelsy and melodrama (re)produced blackness as an essentially pained expression of the body’s possibilities” (32). One can insinuate that the possibilities that Hartman references shows the pain that the black body can endure.
Nevertheless, offstage these same points of abjection were present. The black body was considered as incapable of feeling and bore the weight of the enjoyment of whiteness (Hartman 22-23). At the coffle and auction block, moments of dance, song and laughter were interpreted as blacks being able to tolerate the horrors of slavery.

…Blacks were envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment, in all of its sundry and unspeakable expressions; this was as much the consequence of the chattel status of the captive as it was the excess enjoyment imputed to the other, for those forced to dance on the decks of slave ships crossing the Middle passage, step it up lively on the auction block, and amuse the master and his friends were seen as the purveyors of pleasure (Ibid.).

To paraphrase, even during moments of pain, white spectators viewed the pain and resistance of enslaved blacks as pleasurable entertainment. Saidiya Hartman analyzes some of Lincoln’s work while on the steamboat Lebanon and reveals how Lincoln associated the song and dance of slaves on the ship as happiness instead of as a form of resistance (34). In this instance, the black body is only considered a site of pleasure for whiteness and not for the black body itself. These moments of ‘unspeakable expressions’ were used to justify that blacks were able to deal with these harsh conditions, which in turn undermined declarations of pain. The scene shifts from one of despair to that of contentment—that the enslaved are emotionally empty and only needed the necessities of an animal (food) in order to be happy (Hartman 35). As in Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s comical depiction of the pain carried by its black [female] characters, emphasis of the pain associated with the black female body is a given; it is pleasurable and yet irrational. This
perspective revealed that blacks were pleased with being bonded and servants (Hartman 37).

In addition, trauma was not only enforced through myths and racial stereotypes. It was also enforced through rape, forced reproduction, and forced separations within black families. In chapter three, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” Hartman discusses the sexual advances and violence that the enslaved black female endured. Black women were not thought of as persons who were able to consent to sex and, therefore, were not capable of being victims of rape (Hartman 79). This means that the enslaved black woman was never seen as having the agency to resist sexual advances, instead the black female was always “willing” (Hartman 81). Hartman describes the slave sales of women and how their future masters bargained for them. Prospective white male slave owners often looked at black women with a sexual gaze: lifting their skirt. Men often looked for women on the auction block with the intentions of having them as future mistresses (Hartman 38-40).

It is important to note that the law did not protect enslaved black females. The law only recognized an enslaved black woman once she had taken justice into her own hands. In the case of State of Missouri v. Celia, Celia, a fourteen-year old slave killed her slave owner, Robert Newsome—presumably because of the constant trauma of sexual violence that she had to endure (Hartman 82-83). She was raped the same day she was purchased and this violence continued every day during her servitude. As a result, she had two of

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16 It is important to note that again, history is imagined. It is important to recognize the gaps of Celia’s story in the archive when reading Celia’s case. Evoking Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts,” Moten discussed the narrative of another slave named Betty and pointed out that we (as scholars and a society) do not have the words to discuss or interpret slave narratives. For more on his point, refer to the latter half of Moten’s talk on “Blackness and Nonperformance” cited in my works cited.
Newsome’s children. She had a partner named George, a fellow slave, who was allegedly uncomfortable with her forced relations with her master and threatened to leave the relationship. While pregnant with her third child and unsure of the father, she was still forced to have sexual relations with the owner of the plantation. Celia was found guilty and hung for protecting herself from the sexual violence and advances of her master. To be certain, rape was used as an apparatus to control slave women, and assert authority over his female slaves. Because the law did not protect black women from sexual violence, it fed into the myth that black women were the seducers (Hartman 87).

This narrative, often swept under the rug, is nothing new to the history of enslaved black women on plantations. Because black women have consistently been portrayed as not capable of feeling, their humanity is often denied to them. These racialized and gendered myths have been expressed for centuries from Sally Hemmings, Harriet Jacobs, Thomas Thistlewood and many, many others. Sally Hemmings, an enslaved African American woman, had sexual relations with her master Thomas Jefferson, also known as America’s forefather. For years, her story was silenced and not believed to be true until 1998. Harriet Jacobs, a once enslaved African-American woman who published her story of freedom, was also discredited because of the many risks she took to escape her master’s sexual abuse. Jacobs hid in the walls of her grandmother’s house for several years and watched her children grow up through the cracks of these walls. Ironically, it was within the very small confines of her hiding place, a garret, that Jacobs felt the

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17 In Salamishah Tillet’s chapter, “Freedom in a Bondsmaid’s Arms: Sally Hemmings, Thomas Jefferson, and the Persistence of African American Memory” in Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination, she discusses the ‘myths’ and ‘amnesia’ associated with Sally Hemmings, an enslaved black woman, the sexual relationship with her master, Thomas Jefferson, and how the descendents from Hemmings’ lineage were discredited for so many years (19-51).
The papers of Thomas Thistlewood, a Jamaican slave owner in the 18th century, provides another view of the horrors done to slave women as he boldly documented the thousands of sexual acts, (rapes), he committed with the local women near and on his plantation. Yet, this violence of silencing the suffering associated with the black female body does not remain on the slave plantations. The violence lives on in the present because of the institutional memory that has continued to question the black female. For example, more recently, Anita Hill, an American attorney, professor of social policy, law, and women’s studies and former employee of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, accused Justice Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment in 1991. She was similarly devalued and discredited for her accusations, even though her alleged victimizer, the judge, was a black male. These instances speak to the same reasons why black women are treated as criminal, always considered as “willing,” and not thought of as being able to consent because their bodies are not valued, and are often considered guilty.

How then do we deal with these untold, silenced and disbelieved stories? With the black female body as a scene of subjection, how can the black female begin to escape their captivity? Trouillot describes the need to legitimize mini-narratives left out of history. He indicates that, “to state that a particular narrative legitimates particular

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19 For more information on the story of Thomas Thistlewood, refer to Burnard and Hall cited in my works cited.

20 In chapter 3 of Hobson’s Body As Evidence, she discusses Hill’s story and how the black body, specifically the female body is considered guilty before ever being considered innocent and truthful (65-87).

21 In this statement, I am incorporating the 18th and 19th century as well as the #blacklivesmatter movement.
policies is to refer implicitly to a “true” account of these policies through time, an account which itself can take the form of another narrative” (Trouillot 13). The grand narrative that is history reinforces, validates, and preserves this white, supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy apparatus that we live in. That said, black women or specifically the oppression of black women is a vehicle through which whiteness is extolled and maintains value. The illusory hierarchy that has historically condemned black women for their race and gender can be rectified through the mini-narratives created with art. While history paints one picture, art can imagine another. The history and ideology embedded within the trauma of slavery is what artists of the African Diaspora directly recognize. Hartman posits that, “redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and the counter-investing in the body as a site of possibility. In this instance, pain must be recognized in its historicity and as the articulation of a social condition of brutal constraint…” (51). To rephrase, to relieve some of the agony, is to unveil these pains that occurred in the past. One step to redressing these wounds is through acknowledging the pain that the black female body never had the opportunity or privilege to express.

**The Redress**

Martina Kopf, a professor of cultural theory perspective, recognizes the trauma of slavery and how art repairs these effects of trauma in her chapter “Trauma, Narrative and the Art of Witnessing,” from *Slavery in Art and Literature* (Haehnel 41-42). Art is needed for survival; it manifests thoughts into a tangible form. I posit that art redresses social sufferings of the past, because it addresses and acknowledges the sufferings of the

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22 This term is coined by bell hooks and references the hegemonic white male dominated society that is America’s foundation.
black female body. According to Hartman, there are three stages of redress. First, redress is a ‘re-membering’ of the social body specifically during the acknowledgement of damage, confinement, and enslavement. Here, the misconception of the black body as ‘just flesh’ is questioned. It humanizes, highlights, and illustrates the ways in which the black body is a site of subjugation. Second, the redress is a narrow form of agency that mends the pained black female body by creating counter structures (or narratives) that redeem, reclaim and restore the black female body as more than flesh. Third, redress holds the expression of pleasures and the work needed to meet those desires (Hartman 76-77). To redress these traumas, is to also remind America of its collective moral conscience and its racial unconsciousness.

In the previous section, I described some of the ways that the black female body was rendered incapable of feeling. In these moments, opportunities for subjection and abjection are present. The obvious step to dismantling this perception and redressing these pains is to first acknowledge it. Hartman states,

Thus the significance of the performative lies not in the ability to overcome this condition or provide remedy but in creating a context for the collective enunciation of this pain, transforming need into politics and cultivating pleasure as a limited response to need and a desperately insufficient form of redress (51-52).

To paraphrase, the performative, in this case—art, serves as a platform and medium that restores the personhood/humanity to the black female body. In these moments of recognition, the black female can speak to the minstrel images and caricatures that were linked to the suppression of black women. History has held the black female body captured within the narrative of sentience. Speaking to these memories and silenced
histories gives opportunity to “interrupt” the persistent make-believe grand narrative that white domination has used to restrict the black female body.

Art serves as a way to intellectualize the pain that the black female body carries, remembers and was often denied of feeling. Art is essential for creating space for black female bodies to define themselves for themselves—outside of the grand narrative and histories that have defined them as other. In fact, art is the epitome of the soul and mind joining together to deliver a message. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde, poet, feminist, and scholar, discusses the misconception of having to choose between the soul and mind (9). I aim to blend soul and mind by intellectualizing pain in my research. For the purpose of analyzing these works, I have decided to use Patricia Hill Collins’ “Black Feminist Theory” outlined within her book *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins, a professor of sociology and African American studies, explains that Black Feminist Theory emphasizes the importance of empathy and being emotionally connected to scholarly work. She suggests a methodology that aims to blend intellect and emotion. With Collins’ methodology in mind, I assert that in order to redress a black female body that was often denied expression of suffering we have to engage with the horrors of slavery that were ignored. I seek to create empathy with the stress put on the black female body. This is the way my readers will understand the importance and the complexities of art produced by women of the African diaspora. The black female body inherits the memory of slavery; the effects of which are articulated in every expression produced by this body. There are remnants of bondage—bondage to violence, narratives, identities, and fables that restricts them. Within this genealogy—chattel slavery, constant displacement, rape, forced labor,
and forced breeding are a part of the history that continue to make the black body a site of trauma and a scene of subjection.

My project engages with how black female artists use music, performance, art, and poetry to navigate the historical allegories projected onto the black form. According to Collins, “methodology refers to the broad principles of how to conduct research and how interpretive paradigms are to be applied” (252). Interpreting the paradigm of the black community means using a methodology that includes and values the lived and remembered experience of the black body. This idea is often considered non-academic according to western standards of epistemology, and is devalued. Yet, the personal can be political, which will be evident in my research. The female musicians and artists that I study use their bodies, performance, and lyrical testimonies as a technique and alternative history that radically challenges the apparatus that confines them. Collins asserts that, “…the significance of a Black feminist epistemology may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice” (Collins 269). In other words, there is no specific blueprint on how black feminist knowledge is acquired and for this very reason, the scope in which we define black feminist epistemology should be broadened in order to understand the different ways that knowledge is obtained. It is important to recognize that the acquisition of knowledge can exist both inside and outside academia. This fact is made evident by black female artists who are sometimes not formally educated, yet able to express the same knowledge that black feminist scholars have acquired.

I would posit, even further, that these women legitimize experiences and thoughts that are often considered unreliable and unscholarly. Robin Kelley asserts that “freedom
and love” are revolutionary ideas that are the most accessible to us [as a society] and yet, we continue to discard these intellectual, political and analytical concepts (2). There are limited spaces where new conceptions and feelings are considered as social powers (Kelley 7). To simultaneously evoke Hartman, Kelley, and Collins in this discussion, is to emphasize that redressing the black female body is to also expand the ways that we (as a society and a collective memory) relearn, interpret, conceptualize, and intellectualize our history. To do so, is to conceive new pedagogies and ‘spaces’\(^\text{23}\) that angle away from [western] epistemological constrictions that have served as the telos for slavery and oppression. My project asks: who is better at describing and envisioning black female experiences than black females themselves?\(^\text{24}\)

Collins states that women are able to obtain knowledge from experience and that the most efficient way of finding this information credible is through empathy (259). I posit that intellectualizing pain and being empathetic complement each other because in order to understand the history of slavery we must use black feminist epistemology as a lens to study this history. Similar to Collins’s analysis of black feminist theory in her chapter, my project should be analyzed and observed within a method that aims to include and value the many experiences black women have faced. How can one study a topic or group of people within an epistemology that has historically and implicitly

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\(^{23}\) I propose Patricia Hill Collin’s “black feminist theory,” which emphasizes the intellectualizing of pain, as the new revolutionary space Kelley refers to as scarce.

\(^{24}\) Kelley states that, “as one might expect, the best answers generally came from the Negroes themselves, the very objects of the question who even today are rarely given their due as radical theorists” (38-39).
excluded the very topic that is being discussed? This seems to only reinstitute the very systematic forms of oppression that exist within academia and outside of it.\textsuperscript{25}

Artists who engage with these many different representations of black females in history will have different responses. Although respectability politics\textsuperscript{26} are unavoidable because of the hierarchy established by race and gender, female artists of the African Diaspora use different mediums to engage with different identities and narratives. Musicians like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Janelle Monae, and multimedia artists like Kara Walker, Renee Cox, and Jamilla Okubo use different mediums to interact with histories that both document and suppress the black body. While it is true that there is no real guideline for what resistance and healing traumas should be, it is also correct that these often controversial forms of healing should be considered forms of agency specifically because they address pain.

In Lisa Gail Collins’ book, \textit{The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage The Past}, she states that art “helps to reveal, dismantle and alter the course of these still visible legacies” (12). These visible legacies render whiteness as the genesis and forefront while concurrently branding the black female body as a scene of subjection.

\textsuperscript{25} As Audre Lorde states in \textit{Sister Outsider}, “for to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings” (42). “We” references black men and women, whose bodies were never meant to live alongside whiteness as equal counterparts. The system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy was not made to sustain black bodies as anything but chattel and free labor. With this in mind, choosing the right epistemologies and methodologies are essential when engaging with this material. Looking at blackness through the lens of western epistemology would only recreate the trauma that black bodies continue to battle. Western epistemologies have always excluded these very bodies that they attempt to engage with in an “unbiased” matter. Yet, western epistemologies will always be biased in the ways that they view black bodies because they have always considered these bodies to be others or outsiders. It is important to recognize that this grand narrative also operates within a western epistemology that is flawed and intentionally divisive.

\textsuperscript{26} Respectability politics occur when minorities or oppressed groups police their own members to fit into hegemonic hierarchies and values, rather than accepting the differences amongst their specific marginalized group. This term was coined in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s 1994 book titled \textit{Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920}. 
and site of slavery. Lorde reminds us that we, as a collective, are more fearful and hesitant of revealing our suppressions, than articulating new languages and ways of understanding (44). Lorde and Kelley stress that poetry\(^\text{27}\) (art in general) acts as a language and provides a platform for people to realize their dreams or desires, so they can act on their vision. In the following chapters I will prove how art interrupts the erasures of our histories, dismantles the legacies of slavery, and questions the inability and ability of the black female body to exist outside of this eradication. Analyzing works from Kara Walker, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Jamilla Okubo, I discuss how their forms of art places black individuals [women] at the forefront of each narrative depicted in their work—an act that was denied during minstrel performances.

Specifically, in the chapter that follows, I examine the Blues and Kara Walker as specific examples of how art can begin to remedy the subjugation of black female bodies through the repetition and redirection of the grand narrative that is history.

\[^{27}\] Kelley states that poetry is more than a formal ‘poem,’ it is an “emancipation of language and old ways of thinking.” He describes how what black social/ideological movements resist (Kelley asserts, against western patriarchal structures) often take precedence over the ‘spaces’ I indicate earlier in this section. In this regard, Kelley and I assert that we must recall past horrors, and also imagine new ways of thinking (9-11). The black scholar and artist’s recollection of the past and construction of new understandings have and continues to rupture the silences of our past.
Chapter 2: The Blues and Kara Walker: Using The Master’s Tools To Dismantle

The Master’s House

It is a discourse made up of the horrific accounts of physical, mental, and sexual abuse that were left unspoken by former slaves as they related their narratives, the nasty and unfathomable bits of detritus that have been left out of familiar histories of American race relations. The ‘unspeakable’ may be understood as a traumatic site, what literary historian Cathy Caruth has called ‘unclaimed experience,’ and it is the temporal nature of the slave narrative and its painful history that art historian and literary critic W.J.T. Mitchell has argued must be rememoried in order to be reconciled (7).

–Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Seeing The Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker

Blues: The Soundtrack to Emancipation, Freedom, The Individual and Possibilities

When slavery was abolished, the remnants of this system still penetrated America’s psyche. The black body was seen as unable of using the mind to create, express or invent any forms of art. However, black individuals were able to create a culture and narrative that rebelled against the norm. Blues music was a marker of this transition from body to body and mind after emancipation. The Blues also represents a moment when blacks emphasized the individual, desire, strife of slavery and various identities that were once denied to them. Now black bodies could move physically, psychologically and philosophically without the overt system of slavery. Analyzing Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith’s musical works (with a particular focus on Ma Rainey), I theorize that these narratives illustrated in the Blues, were a manifestation of these newly acquired freedoms.

28 This title references one of Lorde’s passages in Sister Outsider (25).
The Structure and Aesthetic of The Blues

The Blues provided a moment of social commentary after the emancipation of enslaved black peoples. Blues signified mobility (especially financially) in many ways. Enslaved black peoples were placing themselves at the center of the narrative when creating or singing the Blues. The Blues also provided a platform for black entertainers to reap some of the benefits of minstrel shows. Black bodies now had access to a platform that was once denied to them. According to Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, the Blues was still a “predominant post-slavery African-American musical form” (5). Davis engages with the idea that during slavery, slave music was based on the community and that it was a way of survival. With the abolition of slavery, music shifted from the community to the individual. This opened up a lot of interpretations of social, economic and political freedoms (Davis 45).

Eileen Southern, a Musicologist, engages with the origins of ragtime and the Blues in *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. As previously stated, minstrelsy is a vital moment in America’s history. Southern states, however, that once enslaved peoples now had the opportunity to be a part of America’s entertainment—a place that was once a point of erasure. Black individuals could now actually be seen on stage and did not have to be imitated by white performers in blackface (Southern 231-232). Minstrelsy became a predominant lifestyle for black entertainers after the Civil War (Southern 237). Although white minstrel shows discriminated against black performers, it still provided opportunities for black entertainers to be financially stable and to also become
professionals (Southern 254, 237). Ironically, an *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*[^29] company was the first show to use black performers. White performers performed this novel from 1852-1876. By 1876, black performers were finally being given these roles (Southern 254).

Blues singers and performers were the voice and represented a part of the working and middle classes and the freedoms that were gained since abolition (Hale 251). In *African American Music: An Introduction*, Mellonee V. Burnim, a Professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology posits that, “the body of poetic literature that emerged from the horrors of slavery documents the creativity and intelligence of a so-called illiterate people” (Burnim 508-9). In other words, “the poetic literature”[^30] that is the Blues came out of the traumas of slavery and illustrated that the black body is more than just chattel. Because black people were never thought of having the ability to create, the Blues demonstrates the creative and intellectual capacities of past enslaved peoples and the capacities that were not seen as indigenous to black bodies by white enslavers.

Historically, slaves were primarily called upon to entertain guests in the “big house” (Southern 175). As previously discussed in my breakdown of Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, white observers misinterpreted the singing and dancing of slaves as a signifier that slaves were incapable of feeling the oppressions that came with slavery and limited blacks to the enjoyment of white spectators (Southern 177). However, with freedom, formerly once enslaved peoples could have access to music and notions that were once denied them. They could create their own music, at their own leisure. Southern states that black musicians could buy organ and keyboard instruments after emancipation, Companies like this one acted as training centers for black entertainers (Southern 255).

[^29]: Interestingly, Burnim is also in conversation with Robin Kelley’s interpretation of poetry and its emancipatory and revolting nature, which Kelley declares as being new and envisioned theories (Kelley 9-11).
which was limited to them before (Southern 315). With freedom, came the accessibility of music and finally being able to express their pains and suffering.

Although some of the first recordings and tracking of the Blues are from around the early 1900s, the development of the Blues had been occurring a few decades before the turn of the century. As a result, the Blues has a specific format and vocal aesthetic. According to Grace Elizabeth Hale’s chapter, “Hear Me Talking To You: The Blues and the Romance of Rebellion,” there are many variations of the Blues—classic, country and delta. It can also take AAB, AAA, or a twelve bar form lyrically and instrumentally (Hale 241). However, sometimes, the structure of the Blues was either eight measures or bars of sixteen (Southern 336). The oral aesthetic of the Blues has moans, howling, melisma, and screams (Hale 241). Melodically, the Blues played with variations of the third, seventh and sometimes sixth chord. The singer would manipulate the scale and “scoop,” “swoop” or “slur” with his or her voice (Southern 336). A Blues vocalist could also participate in a call and response between the instrumental improvisation and the singer (Southern 336). Evoking African traditions,

The early Blues had three lines that often had identical texts. The later forms had two identical lines and the third line answered a question raised in the first two lines or offers a philosophical comment upon situation (Southern 335). This repetition of text, like many other African-American performance traditions, is a vocalized storytelling of themes and suffering. As for accompaniment, most of the instruments used in Blues are European but there are unconventional instruments like kazoos, washboards and African-inspired zithers. The melodic structure is built on the
chord progressions of I, IV, and V (Burnim 81-82). This genre was mainly performed in juke joints, clubs, house parties and saloons (Burnim 83).

The melodic and harmonic structure of the Blues provided a platform for blacks to discuss the battles that came along with liberation. Although slavery was over, I would are that the violence and injustices that stemmed from slavery were still pervasive. The Blues emphasized a plethora of expressions and feelings by blacks who were “freed from the bonds of slavery but still bound to the lands they worked yet could not own” (Burnim 509). With emancipation, came lynching and segregation. This genre served as a way to get black people through the understandings of what the daily life of a “free” black individual truly meant. Burnim asserts that this transition signified the end of the “American Dream,” which no longer seemed achievable for black individuals, even after post-emancipation. In this regard, the Blues emerged as an oral documentation of different dreams. For this new generation that actually saw freedom, it was necessary for them to create “new responses to its realization of the American situation” (Burnim 80). There was now a shift in ideology—blacks could seemingly acquire the freedoms that were not necessarily the “American Dream” and that were so often reserved only for white Americans. Davis states that the three major “dreams” that emancipation unlocked for black Americans, because of their autonomy, were: free individual travel, education, and sexual agency (8). Yet, black Americans may have had freedom, but at what cost? And, with what restrictions on its accessibility?

**Lyrical Content: Tales of Freedom, Desire and Travel**

As stated earlier, the Blues discussed a lot of topics that were not usually addressed in American popular culture. Ranging from topics on poverty, sex, love,
addiction and migration, the Blues provided a vehicle for newly freed people to address their problems, and finally begin to redress their pain. Particularly during the creation of the Blues, black bodies were subject to the restrictions legalized through Jim Crow laws. In many ways, Jim Crow laws perpetuated a system that was considered over once slavery was abolished in the mid 1800s. These laws justified the violence that was inflicted on black bodies. It also denied blacks access to work contracts, education, due process, and voting rights (Burnim 98). The stories told in the Blues gave an alternative narrative to white hegemony or control (Ibid.). 31 In fact, most composers of the Blues genre were “musically illiterate” and not aware of European art music. Black composers were separated from the larger white communities and the “emancipation of the slaves did nothing to change this situation” (Southern 314). Because of this, black artists and entertainers could create a culture that aligned to their needs; one that was made without consideration of white spectators (Southern 314).

The Blues, which is considered a highly secular music because of the topics that it addresses, rebelled against the negative representations of black bodies that permeated American history. In Hale’s chapter, she posits, “if Jim Crow treated blacks as a mass, as a collectively inferior people, the Blues resisted, asserting black individualism in a stylized and increasingly commodified form” (Hale 239). In other words, the Blues served as a tangible medium that addressed and resisted cultural, political, economic, and social matters. It served as an oral recording or documentation of how freedom really manifested in the black community. Southern states that “the blues reflects the personal

31 While Kelley describes a similar shift in relation to the music of the Civil Rights movement, his conclusion around this movement is applicable to the decades surrounding the Blues. Music created during black social movements [in this case Blues] challenged America’s culture while also promoting love and respect for the black community and black individuals. The music challenged white capitalist patriarchal structures and ideals (Kelley 7,11).
response of its inventor to a specific occurrence or situation. By singing about their misery, the Blues singers achieve a kind of catharsis and life becomes bearable again” (Southern 334). In other words, the repetitious text of the Blues did recognize, relieve and purge the sufferings that black bodies endured pre and post emancipation. Kelley illustrates forms of radical expression, like the Blues, as an abolishment of four-hundred-years of slavery during the Jim Crow era (7).

Particularly for black women, the Blues served as a place to discuss sexual abuse, sexual desires, and domesticity—all issues that played out on minstrel stages, in legislation, and on plantations. Before the abolition of slavery, black women had limited sexual agency and were often sexual targets on the plantation. Women were valued based on their ability to procreate and were forced to bear children in order to sustain free labor in America. Black women being able to speak out about this commodification promoted a shift of the black body from abject and object, to subject.

Ma Rainey, also known as the Mother of the Blues and one of the first professional blues singers, and Bessie Smith, also referred to as the Empress of the Blues, explore the many social commentaries within this music. It is important to note that black women were the first to record the Blues and therefore, these women are the earliest documentarians of the Blues (Davis xii). The recordings of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith give us insight on “the prevailing perceptions of love and sexuality in post-slavery black communities in the United States” (Davis 41). Although Ma Rainey was one generation

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32 As previously nuanced, Kelley discusses various black radical imaginations as ‘freedom dreams’ meaning that it is able to imagine new dreams, utopias, and old horrors (7, 9). I declare the Blues as a form of this radical imagination and therefore, a representation of freedom dreams.

33 As stated by Southern (332).

34 Ma Rainey toured with the Rabbit Foot minstrels and is said to have remembered the first hearing of the Blues in 1902 when she heard a local girl singing (Southern 332, 334).
removed from slavery, she addresses the traumas of slavery that also affected the
generations after (Davis 9). Bessie Smith, who Rainey mentored and most people
consider as Rainey’s protégé, carried on these newly formulated musical traditions.

In Davis’s chapter “I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and
Domesticity,” she discusses how both Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith reveal black
feminisms through their lyrical content. Smith and Rainey’s work often tackled sex,
domestic life, sexual abuse and relationships. The rejection of sexual autonomy directly
correlated with the denial of freedom for working and middle class black women (Davis
44). In fact, regardless of the sexual orientation that Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith
identified with at that time, both artists challenged what the relationship between a man
and a woman should entail. According to Kelley,

Radical feminists taught us that there is nothing natural or inevitable about gender
roles, male dominance, the overrepresentation of men in positions of power, or the
tendency of men to use violence as a means to resolve conflict. Radical feminists of
color, in particular, reveal how race, gender, and class work in tandem to subordinate
most of society while complicating easy notions of universal sisterhood or biological
arguments that establish men as the universal enemy (5).35

Similarly, in Davis’s analysis of Smith’s “Safety Mama,” and “Young Woman’s Blues,”
she discloses that Smith creates a ‘musical caricature’ that displays a transition and
opposition to patriarchal structures (18). Specifically, Smith’s work rebelled against
representations of black women, constrained concepts of femininity, and the assumed

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35 As Davis evokes in her chapter, while Rainey and Smith were not necessarily acknowledged as black
feminists in that time, they still evoke radical feminist theories, especially for that time.
role of a black woman in a relationship. Ma Rainey often talked about monogamous marriages, which was considered to be an attitude for a male (Davis 15).

Fig. 1. The Lyrics of “Trust No Man” (ELyrics)

I want all you women : to listen to me
Don't trust your man : no further than your eyes can see

I trusted my man : with my best friend
But that was a bad bargain : in the end

He'll say that he loves you : and swear that it's true
The very next minute : he'll turn his back on you

Just feed your daddy : with a long-handled spoon
Keep showing you love him : morning night and noon

Sometimes your heart will ache : and almost bust
That's why : there's no daddy good enough to trust

He'll stay with you in the winter : whilst your money is long
Come out in the summer : you'll find your pig will be gone


In Ma Rainey’s “Trust No Man,” she challenges the trustworthiness of men. According to her lyrics, men will use you, leave you, and cheat on you (Figure 1). Even your daddy can’t be trusted. In this song, Rainey engages with the importance of independence for black women. She shows that a relationship with a man is never stable. Once again, this may be a commentary on her sexual orientation—especially because of the lyric regarding a man seemingly sleeping with her “best friend.” However, this also may be a commentary that identifies the only person a black woman during emancipation can truly rely on: herself. In other words, your husband, boyfriend or daddy cannot save you or provide you comfort—only you can. Davis states that “normative representations
of marriage as the defining goal of women’s lives blatantly contradicted black social realities during the half-century following emancipation” (18). In Ma Rainey’s time, there was a shift in philosophy that continued in Smith’s generation—black women had more to achieve than settling for marriage. Black women finally had options and could assert an agency and independence that was denied on the slave plantation. Marriage, and life with any man, was not important to the black working class woman’s identity or success. Independence was now a prominent theme of the time—for all.

The Blues were also very reflective of migration. With this new liberation that often existed outside of marriage, men and women were no longer confined to one place. Men often traveled to get jobs, leaving them estranged from their partners. This left black women without men (Davis 18). Davis posits that these women were going to other cities to assert their agency and to also find other companionship—an option that was not accessible to enslaved black women on the plantation (67). Black women now had the opportunity to move around and find new love. However, women were limited sometimes because of their jobs. Working for white families, or having children of their own, limited their abilities for travel. Men, however, did not always have these restraints, and because of that they could travel. In fact, male travel is one of the reasons for southern country blues. These men often carried their instruments while traveling when they were searching for jobs (Davis 69). Travel based narratives in the blues was a unilateral theme that represented both black men and women. So often, the narrative for travel, articulated by both genders, was based in a spiritual context during slavery. One was either going home, to Jordan, or to Egypt (Davis 70). The travel narrative now

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36 Although in many ways, slavery still manifested in Jim Crow legislation, as we learn from Kelley, freedom and love are still revolutionary ideas.
existed on a wider spectrum. As a free black person of either gender, one could travel to have other options, to escape mistreatment or abuse (Davis 74).

The Blues Marked Freedom and New Identities

Kelley states that, “[black artists, scholars, and activists] knew the West and its culture; they knew modernity and its limitations; their dreams of freedom could overturn a market-driven, warmongering rationality and give birth to a new humanity” (56). Therefore, the Blues is an alternative narrative that shifts views of the black community (within and outside of the black population) because it asserts individuality and articulates the strife and futures of the black community. Operating, resisting and expressing the limitations of the Western world, acted as a powerful force and starting point for the black body to humanize itself. Sex and womanhood, perfect topics for the blues, acted as an allegory for the music, and affirmed the identity of the black individual (Hale 247). With the Blues aesthetic, whites and blacks were seeing black individuals outside of many negative tropes. It gave great insight on the surplus of individual narratives that challenged negative stereotypes established since slavery and also gained new expressions that the black population may not have been exposed to otherwise. The new music that manifested during these times served as a catalyst and guide for black struggles for “freedom, justice, and equality throughout most of the twentieth century” (Burnim 80).

Even further, the Blues served as a “model of individualism” (Hale 248). The Blues exists outside of questions of authenticity. This is not an expression of the “negro” or the “voice of Africa”—it is about liberation (Hale 249). Hale emphasizes the Blues as a

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37 In Kelley’s paragraph and section, that references this quote, he is referring to an analysis of Paul Robeson, a musician, athlete and activist, who redefined and challenged America’s culture during the Civil Rights movement (51-56).
public performance of psychological rebellion, the assertion of “I” against the weight of the social, political and economical, and the plights of the world (Hale 253). This ability to reclaim and declare the black body was progressive and emancipatory. As a result, black performers now had the opportunity to publicly rebel, purge and redress. In many ways, the Blues humanized the black community that was once considered only chattel. It showed that black people could feel these various emotions and survive the trauma, the effects of slavery and slavery itself. (Hale 242). With all the legalized violence, and systems that challenged black individuals and their acquired freedom, they were able to persevere. Blues is an oral documentation of that persistence and tenacity.

Yet, while the Blues helped to redress a point of erasure, images and myths established in minstrelsy, continue to be a part of America’s history. In the 21st century, these images are constantly being remembered through the work of Kara Walker.
Kara Walker: Evoking Postbellum Narratives

Kara Walker, an African-American visual artist and recipient of the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant in 1997, directly engages with race, sex, and gender in a similar manner to the blues. Dealing with the caricatures introduced in the adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Walker engages with the violence and erasure that developed in minstrel shows, played out on plantations, and was addressed by artists of the Blues. Walker’s process involves the manipulation of French silhouettes that convey post-antebellum images. She creates a narrative that includes a historical perspective of black bodies as a site of slavery and violence. Using images of slave, master (captor), overseer, and fellatio, Walker depicts images that are considered to be of the past—and are yet just as jarring to look at “post-slavery.” While Walker’s work redresses these historical images and representations by acknowledging the subjection and suffering of the black community [specifically the black female], interpretations and criticism around her work pendulates between her work as a reclamation or as a perpetuation of these minstrel images. Analyzing a few of Walker’s works, I propose that it encourages an anti-narrative or a counter-narrative challenging spectators to deal with these negative images. Walker’s art speaks to the grotesque and unspeakable that continues to treat the black body as abject. Her envisioning of old images, questions the past and the present conditions of our peculiar institution. Walker’s most known aesthetic is this manipulation of French silhouettes, which usually takes form in the colors grey, black and white. With these colors, her work leaves racial identities ambiguous, and often leaves much to be interpreted and/or imagined.

38 French silhouettes, which dates back to the 1700s, are created with an outline that depicts different forms of humans, animals and landscapes. When I refer to Walker’s manipulation of these silhouettes, I am simply indicating this art aesthetic and tradition.
The Art of Remembering

In Seeing The Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker, Gwendolyn Shaw discusses the idea of remembering slavery. Walker, born in 1969 in Stockon, California, often faced the concept of not being black enough for her black friends and not being white enough for her European American peers. She was exposed to the deep South, the KKK and Jim Crow legislation throughout her adolescence (Shaw 12). She was forced to discuss racial and sexual topics while pursuing her art (Ibid., 13). For Walker, engaging with these tropes was a way for her to defeat them. She states,

For me they become characters the moment I start working with them. Because they become mine in a way. So that when I encounter the much-contested African American tchotchkes and derogatory images, they don’t have the power over me that they used to... Being an artist in control of characters that represent the social manipulations that blacks have undergone in this country at least, puts me in the position of being the controller of the puppet master of the imaginary black people (Ibid., 18).³⁹

Walker places herself at the center of the narrative and repossesses derogatory images. She takes the role of the victor and creates a story that is her own.

Through the analysis of Walker’s The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven, Shaw emphasizes the importance of creating a counter-narrative. Shaw indicates that Walker gives voice to the characters of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and redeems some of the controversial characters that were ridiculously portrayed and conceived on the American stage. While this analysis is extensive, Shaw

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³⁹ Excerpt from Capp Street Project: Kara Walker, exhibition brochure, interview with the artist by Lawrence Rinder, 24 February 1999. (Cited in Shaw’s Novel)
mainly reveals that in Walker’s work, “this unclaimed discourse of the unspeakable continues to impact the ability of many European Americans and many African Americans to confront the terrible impression that the legacy of slavery continues to have on our individual and collective psyches” (Shaw 7). In other words, Walker’s work tackles issues that are troubling, often ignored, and express a collective memory of the horrors of slavery. Her art evokes America’s moral consciousness. She speaks to the unspeakable and even unreachable parts of America’s “collective memory” that continue to psychologically repress the historical violence and subjugation of black men and women (Shaw 36). Inciting ‘remembering’ and ‘rememory,’ she forces the audience to engage with wounds, images, and emotions that are thought to have been lost (or even resolved) since slavery (Shaw 36, 39). Walker challenges “hegemonic codes of repression and representation” when referencing these images (Shaw 36). She forces the black and white community to face the pictures that they deal with everyday. It is impossible to disassociate from slavery or to desensitize it because it has laid the social, political, and economical foundations of America. Walker, then, reminds us of where we are, where we have been and where we (as a collective and society) have yet to go.

**Walker’s Spectators: The Uncovering and Complexities of America’s Collective Memory and Racial Unconsciousness**

In Kim Wickham’s "‘I Undo You, Master’: Uncomfortable Encounters in the Work of Kara Walker," in *The Comparatist*, she discusses the many different perceptions of Walker’s work. According to Wickham, “for many [critics], Walker’s work is a minstrel show, betraying the African-American community and the progress so many have fought for” (340-341). For example, in Walker’s piece titled *An Historical Romance*
of A Civil War as It Occurred b’ tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart, the images show young black girls within a sexual gaze that is similar to that of minstrelsy. In one of the images, the silhouettes depict a girl who has a white man up her skirt, and inside of her (Wickham 340). This image alludes to a similar image of female slaves on the auction block, as previously mentioned. Yet, to think of these images as a betrayal is to also overlook and forget who has historically, theatrically, and theoretically birthed these negative images. It also insinuates that to re-explore these images, is to invalidate the progress that black radical thinkers, activists, scholars, and artists have achieved.40

One aspect is being lost here—a consideration into why these images stir up so much discomfort and pain despite all of the progress the black community has made. I question what Walker’s work truly speaks to; the answer of which lies deep in the subconscious of America’s collective memory—more specifically, within the collective memory of the black community. While many critics contemplate whether her work re-appropriates or mimics trauma, Walker’s work evokes the pains of the black community that was once silenced for white enjoyment. Wickham asserts that, “Walker’s work speaks directly to memory and history... She purposefully draws on the mythos of the slave era, as well as narratives like Uncle Tom’s Cabin...” (346). Drawing upon racist stereotypes, it is necessary for Walker to engage with white, supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal ideologies that have shaped and influenced views of American history and perceptions of black identity. In Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love Walker, Walker is quoted as saying that these images are her

40 I posit that these black radical thinkers and black movements are the same thinkers and social movements that Kelley declares as cultural producers and visionaries. I have made mention of this in previous sections (38-39, 55).
personal “slave narrative” (Walker 19). She relates to her gendered and racialized body through her minstrel images. Using these black silhouettes, Walker is able to present the ‘master, mistress, overseer, pickaninny and buck’ in ways that analyze issues of race and gender (Shaw 26). Pulling from Romare Bearden and Richard J. Powell, Walker evokes an “African American tradition” of interacting with blackness and confronting negative stereotypes created by white legacies (Shaw 27).

Walker interacts with unspeakable representations of black bodies that are both realistic and mythical. In Amy Tang’s piece, “Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma and the Case of Kara Walker,” Tang discusses whether Kara Walker’s images reiterate stereotypes or resignify them (144). While some critics have the same mixed feelings about Walker’s art. Some state that Walker’s art is her selling out to be famous, other critics believe that her art finally puts the black individual as the subject of the image and in full control of the image she is creating (Tang 150-151). In one respect, Walker’s work “destabilizes” these negative images that are familiar narratives. Wickham emphasizes that replacing negative stereotypes with positive ones is important, but only exists within this binary. However, this disruption acts as a point of redress and allows the viewer to move on from the horrors of these images (Wickham 346). In another regard, Walker is also reiterating a myth that is assumed to be extinct. The feelings and discomfort of these still seemingly unspeakable images are enforced with and without Walker’s work. The

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41 It is interesting to put Shaw’s assertion in conversation with Kelley’s argument—that so often legacies of oppression that are supposed to be resisted, result in the marginalization of the articulation of the ‘free spaces’ (which I assert to be synonymous with black art and Patricia Collin’s black feminist theory) (Kelley 11). Because Walker’s radical imaginations and depictions coincide with Collin’s and Kelley’s theories, I inquire whether the same oppressive legacies marginalize her work and thereby render her revolutionary work hyper visible and simultaneously erased.

42 In many ways, the unspeakable representations of black bodies evoke the history around the ‘stagnant’ mobility of black bodies which Kelley describes as both real and imagined (16).
same structures that imagined black female bodies as abject, continue to reap the benefits of that subjugation—with or without Walker’s depictions.

In chapter six of *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, Michael Harris, an artist and art historian, describes reclaiming an image through three strategies—inversion, recontextualization and reappropriation (191-192). Walker’s work on the surface repeats a myth, but understanding the roots of this myth is a way for the black community to know themselves (Tang 155). It is important to unpack these controversial images/narratives in order to understand the identity that was established for black individuals (specifically females) before they could establish their identity themselves. Images of the pickanniny, jezebel, and mammy defined black female bodies, in particular, during slavery and continue to feed the stereotypes and negative views that perpetuate the black body as a site of subjection.

In *After The Deluge*, a social commentary on the Hurricane Katrina Disaster, Walker exposes that the times have not changed as much as we think. She states that, “I created this book because I was tired of seeing news images of (Black) people suffering presented as though it were a fresh, new thrilling subject.” Because of Walker’s constant engagement with post-bellum images and narratives, she posits historic perspective concerning black bodies as sites of slavery and trauma. For her, this contemporary Katrina disaster was no different than the images she was used to creating. With the art Walker curated, she left the titles and artists of each work until the end of the

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44 This excerpt is taken from the inside sleeve of the novel, *After the Deluge*.
book. While flipping through these pages, the reader cannot tell which works are Walker’s, and which are of another artist. I assert that this further blurs the lines between traumas of the past, and traumas of present. This book also serves as a response to those critics who engage with her work, as though they are evoking a history that no longer exists.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that these images resonate with black audiences because although the images are meant to be “absurd,” they are equally representative of stereotypes that remain today. This same absurdity is what pre-Civil War America, consumed and commodified as American entertainment. In reference to Walker’s book and social commentary on Hurricane Katrina, Walker states,

The book is the result of thinking like a Black Woman, perhaps absurdly so, because to be “Black” in the context of the book means broad sweeps of types of representation: stereotypical, archetypal, Negro, African, the color of nighttime, the color of cut paper, the feeling of engulfment, the sense of humor, the style of outrage (Walker, *After The Deluge*).45

Walker touches on the points of erasure that are associated with her work and the work of many black radical thinkers. Her work is bizarre and grotesque, but to interpret, criticize and engage her cut out silhouettes seems to bury and marginalize her work. Kelley argues that so often legacies of oppression that are supposed to be resisted result in the marginalization of the articulation of the “free spaces” (11). If one were to consider Walker’s work as a “free space” that leaves the spectator alone to imagine, understand, and decode her work on their terms—why is it continuously considered as a perpetuation?

45 This is a quote taken from the inside sleeve of Walker’s *After the Deluge*. 
A Never Ending Story: Addressing the Horrors of Slavery

In Walker’s piece titled *Freedom, a Fable: A Curious interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times* (1997), she directly engages with negative images surrounding black women while questioning the emancipation of black women. This book combines some of Walker’s signature silhouettes, but in a form of a popup book. Narrating the story, Walker recites the life of a 19th century emancipated negress. Discussing religion, forced reproduction, the sexual prowess of the slave master, and yearning for Africa, Walker evokes the complexities of being a once enslaved black woman who continues to participate in the cycle of slavery—by birthing future slaves. In one of her narrations she reveals the sex and violence that simultaneously manifests within the black female body. She writes,

This ship, with its uncertain destination is much like this woman’s sex, she begins pointing to a spot just below her navel… This woman’s body is like our history, starting from places of darkest mystery and capable of bringing to light new worlds (Walker, *Freedom, a Fable: A Curious interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times*).

The image that accompanies her narration depicts what seems to be a pregnant black woman with a mammy-like headpiece, on her back with a pipe in her mouth. Underneath her body, there is one little boy who is immersed in this water that flows underneath this mother. In-between the legs of the mother, there is a protruding second child pointing at this third child, a little boy, in front of it. A fourth child, another little boy, is next to a slave ship, and is walking on the same water that is spewed out underneath the mother. This particular pop-up, has a tab that, once pulled down, causes more babies to spew out
of the pregnant mother in an assembly line. On the next page, the reader can see the end of this flow of water that started underneath the black mother, and at the edge, there is a fifth child, another boy, who seems to be zombie-like and drifting.

From the images and text descriptions, one can insinuate that Walker is commenting on the black female body as a site of reproduction of life and the peculiar institution that is slavery. In one instance, it is an amazing trait for a woman to be able to bring light or life into a new world. However, in Walker’s piece, this light comes from a dark place. This dark place, or dark mystery, as Walker states, represents the womb, but also the darkness, violence, and hopelessness of the black female body. Walker continues,

And our history is now like the death of the father, whose deaths we fear more than our uncertain lives. Our father, that peculiar institution, has left us here to rebirthour own bodies without benefit of conflict, love or land (Walker, Freedom, a Fable: A Curious interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times).

Walker insinuates that the black female body continues to rebirth its own marked body. This body that has been marked by the victors of history, as previously mentioned by Rolph-Trouillot, continues to be reproduced or recovered. This stamp of subjugation continues to echo the ‘peculiar’ institution, regardless of the imaginings of Walker’s work. In many ways, this comments on the social and radical movements that are needed to emancipate the black female body. For Walker to state that we [presumably as a collective] fear the death of this institution, is to also question whether or not we would know how to exist outside of these patriarchal structures.

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46 In this picture, this fourth child, a boy has hands out in front of him, and has one leg drastically placed in front of the other.
More Than A Redress

Overall, the Blues and Kara Walker act as new narratives that purge, mimic, and trace the images and narratives that continue to make the black female body a scene of subjection. As proved in this section, the Blues lyrically embody this new independence for black women who could now escape the sexual abuse of their slave masters. While the Blues allowed blacks to relieve themselves of repressed emotions, Kara Walker’s work takes minstrel images and allows spectators to engage with representations that have been a site of amnesia in America’s memory. As I have outlined thus far, the oppression of black men and women continued even after emancipation—and I posit persists still. It manifested on the minstrel stage that erased black bodies, in the Jim Crow legislation that Blues singers chanted against, and the interpretations of Walker’s work that continues to marginalize her imaginings. While redressing the suffering of the black bodies is in within itself a revolutionary act, it is not the only act that is needed or necessary to break the reproductions of the black female body as abject.

In the next chapter, I discuss the importance of art creating new images that occur outside of the constrictions of white supremacy and enjoyment. It is essential to address the world we live in, but it is also essential to imagine the new worlds we hope to create and have never seen. Engaging once again with Robin Kelley’s Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, I discuss Jamilla Okubo, a contemporary artist who uses silhouettes in ways that are reminiscent of Walker. Differently, however, Okubo’s silhouettes, presented within her original print-making, highlight the importance of self-love and the positive representation of black bodies.
Some black people still don’t know about it because they don’t want to face our past, but they want to live in the present or future, but they don’t know how to live in the present or future because they do not know who they are or where they come from—what they are trying to do—who they are trying to be. They are just trying to take from what they see being portrayed in the media. Some people just

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47 With permission, all of Jamilla Okubo’s work was taken from an online publishing platform called Collective Cargo. On this site, Okubo has published a portfolio of her work and this is further cited in my works cited.
want to face who they are and are trying to create new identities for themselves, but they run into situations where they are reminded that they’re black and people see them differently—that’s traumatizing too. And that’s something that I struggle with in my work. Going back to me telling stories—it’s because I am still learning about my history and who the important people are. I still feel empty or not really knowing how to navigate throughout this world. Yeah I am going through these experiences present time, but I feel like I don’t know fully where I come from or who I am or how to go about being confident in these different spaces. ..Now, I’m figuring it out while I’m in college. I feel like that happens for a lot of people. It takes [time] for them to grow up to start going on that journey of figuring out where they come from or who are the greats of the black community.48

Jamilla Okubo, a 22-year old Washington D.C. and North Carolina native, is currently an undergraduate senior at New York City’s Parsons School of Design majoring in Integrated Design with a focus in Fashion. As an illustrator, painter, and textile designer, she is an artist who is reinventing silhouettes with her printmaking. Okubo states “I’m confident through my artwork.”49 She creates the pictures and narratives she desires to see. In my interview with her, she revealed how Tumblr50 first inspired her. After discovering new images of beautiful and empowering black men and women on this social platform, Okubo created similar images of her own. She began to develop her aesthetic and her voice when she attended an all-black arts high school, Duke Ellington

48 (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, January 2016)
49 (Ibid.)
50 A microblogging platform and social networking website.
School of the Arts, in Washington, D.C. With this education, Okubo took inspiration from well-known contemporary artists such as Hank Willis Thomas, Mickalene Thomas, Nick Cave, and Wangechi Mutu. Often engaging with her Kenyan, Trinidadian, and African-American backgrounds, Okubo uses her art to explore her identity and self-worth while expressing and empowering herself. Okubo’s (who identifies as a black female artist) work speaks to her race and gender—both concepts that mark the black female body.

Okubo asserts that her work, which incorporates silhouettes and prints, main focus is to tell stories. While listening to the music of black artists, she is constantly exploring new ways and techniques to convey a message and story. In addition to Tumblr, her influences come from different fashion magazines. She looks at these images and then studies the ways each model poses. She then uses those poses to inform the silhouettes she creates. These silhouettes, that are painted black, also take influences from Mickalane Thomas, an African American artist known for her portraitures. The only colored images placed on these silhouettes are the prints that Okubo makes using Wacom and Photoshop. Taking inspiration from the fabrics that are popular and indigenous to Kenya, Okubo began to make her own print designs. She uses them in the illustrations and collages them onto her painted silhouettes.

51 (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, January 2016)
52 (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, January 2016)
53 Wacom is a tablet that allows users to create images with the use of a pen.
54 Photoshop is an Adobe software program that allows users to edit and create images.
55 (Jamilla Okubo Personal Communication 2016)
In this last chapter, I will focus on Okubo’s revolutionary works that Robin Kelley would consider as radical in nature. I assert that Okubo’s work references traumas of America’s peculiar institution that is white supremacy, while illustrating new forms of liberation for the black community—but more specifically for black women. First, I focus on two of Okubo’s series that display black culture, Kenyan Traditions, and black love. Second, I will discuss Okubo’s views on Kara Walker, and the role of black art. Third, I analyze Okubo’s visual performance in “Summon The Storm” and outline the importance of her alternate depictions.

**Okubo’s We The People of the Diaspora—Black Culture Exploration Series: Evoking African Traditions, Black Love and Empowerment**

Jamilla Okubo has created two projects for her high school and college assignments. One of these works, *We The People of the Diaspora-Black Culture Exploration* created in 2013, incorporates significant civil rights moments in American history. Creating her own kangas (a popular Kenyan fabric), Okubo creates colorful images and portraits. The title of this piece is a reference “We the People of the United States,” which are the opening lines to the American Constitution. Changing this iconic line, and putting those of the African Diaspora as the center of this line, and even possibly the Constitution, evokes a reclaiming and a new imagination of the Constitution. It also relates the black body to the equality described in the Constitution—an equality that black radical movements fight for. The prints that permeate this particular series emphasize points of pleasure, pain, success, and perseverance that the black community has faced and also needs to celebrate. With these notions in mind, Okubo created three Kangas for this
particular series, *When There's A Will There's A Way, We the People of the Diaspora*, and *The Alphabet is an Abolitionist* (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective).

The print, *The Alphabet is an Abolitionist*, highlights the importance of the black community and the accomplishments and successes of the black community (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). This particular print references Ruby Bridges, the first African-American girl to attend an all-white school in the South in 1960 (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective). This print is predominantly black and white. It has a white silhouette of a little girl who is wearing a black dress. This silhouette is placed within a background of what appears to be a newspaper. In this newspaper, there is the headline stating “SEGREGATION BANNED.” There is also a black silhouette of a little girl. She wears a colorful flowered dress and stands in the opposite direction of the white little girl. This black silhouette, with braided hair, is Okubo’s interpretation of Ruby Bridges. In figure three, Okubo uses this kanga as a blouse for the black female silhouette. In this portrait, Okubo comments on the struggles the black community had to endure to gain equal education in America. In this image, Ruby Bridges, an icon of this struggle, is depicted in opposition to a white silhouette, or girl. Dressing this black female in this pattern provocatively evokes Bridges and the struggles she represents as being an occasion worthy enough to wear it. In many ways, wearing this pattern signifies a celebration of this moment in history, and also a history that protects, or continues to “clothe,” the black community.
Fig 3. From *We The People of the Diaspora—Black Culture Exploration* Series (2013)\(^{56}\)

Fig 4. From *We The People of the Diaspora—Black Culture Exploration* Series (2013)\(^{57}\)

\(^{56}\) (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective)

\(^{57}\) (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective)
In these same images, Okubo’s *When There’s a Will There’s a Way* kanga, evokes the history of black culture and the many plights that black individuals have endured to find resolutions and to have created legislative change in the world (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective). This pattern used as the purse in Figure 3, and the border of Figure 2, is predominantly red, black, and blue. The background of the print has a blue zig zag that breaks the red block by forming red triangles. There are subtle flowers, and black, seemingly male, silhouettes all over this background. The black male silhouettes appear posed in a stance with their hands folded together below the waist in front of them. They also seem to be wearing berets and suits. These male figures, I assert, suggest iconic images of the black panthers—specifically because of the berets. Okubo is engaging with the past. But placing these images on fabric and then on the silhouettes or bodies of these black figures, she is making these histories palpable, provocative, and new. These images have black figures literally wearing their history in an innovative way.

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58 There are also some color variations of this print in this series as well. In some of the portraits, this print acts as the pants or bags, for example, for the attire that male and female silhouettes are dressed in.
Fig. 5 and Fig 6. From *We The People of the Diaspora* Series (2013)\textsuperscript{59}

Even further, the *We The People of the Diaspora* kanga is a print that commemorates and addresses black culture and history. Okubo states that, “we [the black community] has so much to celebrate” (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective). As shown in Figures 5 and 6, the kangas are displayed in the attire of two black female silhouettes. The suit jacket and shirt illustrate dancing/moving bodies placed over a checkered background. These dancing silhouettes have hair flowing.\textsuperscript{60} In a similar manner as the kangas that were described earlier, Okubo is drawing from the past to create celebratory

\textsuperscript{59} (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective)

\textsuperscript{60} It is important to note that these silhouettes depict black “natural” hairstyles such as locs, afros, and braids.
images. To illustrate a celebration, is to also illustrate the achievements that the black community has struggled to obtain through civil rights movements.

Although this series speaks to the black community, Okubo’s *We The People of the Diaspora* was a way for her to explore her own culture and self-esteem. In her *Okay Africa* interview, Okubo states,

...I was exploring again, being multiethnic being from America and Africa and bringing those two with the kanga fabric and telling a story through that and I was also talking about how far we’ve come as being brought to America as slaves and where we are now. It’s an interesting journey we have gone through and I feel like we still have a long way to go (Afful 2014).

Okubo’s statement acknowledges the pains that the black community was subjected to. Her work engages American’s peculiar institution—slavery. As earlier asserted, art serves as a medium that intellectualizes and redresses pains of slavery. While Okubo uses this work to explore herself, it simultaneously explores the history of what it is to be a black man or woman in America. Acknowledging these sufferings, Okubo actively engages the histories that have challenged her self-esteem and confidence. One can insinuate that the same histories that have portrayed the black female body as abject, are what Okubo uses to explore her sense of self.

In the same *Okay Africa* interview, Okubo reveals more about her familial background, learning about her history, and discovering her identity. She states,

I usually call my work an exploration, because I’m still learning about my culture from my dad’s side. I didn’t really meet him until I was 13, so ever since then I’ve

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just been trying to learn from him, but then also just looking elsewhere for
information. [For example,] I have other family members who I ask about Kenya and
I’m trying to see if I can plan a trip to go there, but it’s like I try to take the
information that I can from what I know about Kenya, and Africa and incorporate it
into my art work. And I also like incorporating my experiences being African

Okubo, who again is in her early 20s, is exploring ways to navigate this world.63 For
Okubo, learning about her history is exploring the Kenyan and African-American past of
her family. Illustrating these stories through her print work, Okubo allows herself to
imagine histories she has not experienced, and yet are a part of her and her family’s
identities. Okubo’s work acts as a narrative to histories of her Kenyan culture that she has
yet to learn while simultaneously imagining those histories as a source of empowerment
and confidence.

Fans, however, also see Okubo’s work as a source of empowerment. While her work
is very personal, it also resonates with other black women. People have commented on
her work and use as a source of affirmation.64 Okubo’s work, which comments on black
America’s legacies, also helps her express her own insecurities while addressing the

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62 As mentioned in my interview with Okubo, her father is Kenyan. (Jamilla Okubo Personal
Communication 2016)

63 Mentioned in (Jamilla Okubo Personal Communication 2016).

64 In her interview, Okubo states, “I have gotten a lot of feedback where people say that they feel
empowered by my work—which is very overwhelming for people to say that because I am just creating
what I feel and I don’t know whether it is going to impact people or not. But for me, it’s very personal
because it is coming from me and it’s a way for me to cope with not feeling confident as a black woman
having to always be in these areas where it is predominately white or other races...” (Ibid.).
subjections that have limited her body. Her images reflect the past of her people and manifest what she hopes to see in herself.

Okubo’s images resonate with a particular audience. In her interview, she discloses that some of her audience asks for paintings for their weddings and other special events. Although Okubo’s work was made with seemingly young influences, her audience usually ranges from ages 30-50 and older and are predominantly women. Maybe this highlights that love, freedom and self-love are timeless and ageless. In a similar manner, her silhouettes are also ageless. Sixties and Seventies music, afro-puffs, flare legs, and roller skates have recently inspired her work. It may be safe to assume that her work is nostalgic for the audience she attracts. She also reveals that she does not think her work resonates with her own generation because of the popular culture they are consuming today.

As a result, her art attracts the generations of her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother, who grew up in the South, used to work on a plantation after the abolition of slavery. She states,

I grew up with my mom, and she’s like a single mom, and I grew up in basically a Southern African American household, honestly, Africa wasn’t really talked about when I was going to school. It was just like… it’s a really interesting

65 Okubo’s other series, depicted at the beginning of this chapter in figure 2, entitled Love You Series, celebrates black love (Cargo Collective). In this particular series, there are a lot of portraits of families, during pregnancy and also holding newborn babies. All of the men and women in this series are dressed in colorful patterns and have their hair in natural African/ African-American hairstyles. The men and women are wearing afros, locs, turbans, and funky hats. Each picture displays some sort of intimacy. In one picture, there is a man holding his partner’s pregnant belly and in most pictures, the couples are kissing.

66 In her interview, Okubo states that the music she listens to often influences the aura and vibe that translated onto the canvas or paper, and references the music of Marvin Gaye, an African American musician from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, as an example.

67 (Jamilla Okubo Personal Interview 2016)
aspect, because my grandmother she is very Southern, she’s from North Carolina and she grew up picking tobacco and cotton as a teenager. So, I have two different aspects, that side of my background and family history and the empty side where I don’t really know much about Kenya and my family from that side. (Afful 2014)

Growing up, her grandmother picked cotton at a low wage.68 Her grandmother, who comes from decades of segregation, would constantly talk about the discrimination she faced growing up. She was not allowed to sit in a store and drink her Coca Cola. Instead, she had to walk around the street to finish her drink. Okubo states, “I try to tell her that there is a movement of teaching each other about self-care and self-love.”69 Perhaps for Okubo, to teach self-love is to also understand Africa and slavery—and the traumas of slavery.

**Through Okubo’s Eyes: Recognizing and Defining Trauma in Black Art**

Okubo asserts that people still do not know about the traumas of slavery, that it is hard to face our past, and there is this natural tendency to live in the present or the future.70 As a counter to this, she stresses the importance of knowing who you are, knowing where you come from, and emphasizes that this knowledge can guide you in moving forward. She states that some black people, “just want to face who they are and are trying to create new identities for themselves, but they run into situations where they are reminded that they’re black and people see them differently—that’s traumatizing

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68 (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, Jan 2016)

69 (Ibid.)

70 (Ibid.)
too.”

Okubo acknowledges that she is still learning about her history and still learning how to navigate throughout the world as a black woman.

While Kara Walker’s work deals with reclaiming images, Okubo’s work deals with inspiring herself and others to love oneself and each other. However, Okubo does recognize the importance of addressing issues from the past. In my interview with Okubo, she revealed her opinions and reactions to *Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*. *Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, an exhibition created in 2014 at Williamsburg’s Domino Sugar Factory (built in 1882) that commented on America’s history and overworked, and unpaid [black] workers in America. This exhibition was made in homage to this, since the Domino Sugar Refining Plant was scheduled to be demolished. For this exhibition, Walker created an enormous sphinx-like figure. However, this sphinx bore the face of a mammy, and displayed the breasts and genitalia of this sphinx. The sphinx was made from bleached sugar. Also in this exhibit were little boys made of molasses who carried baskets.

Recalling the memories of her trip to Walker’s *Blood Sugar*... exhibit, she says,

> It’s a very intense experience, and I feel like I need to read more about where she [Kara Walker] comes from as far as why she creates what she creates and the stories that she’s is telling. A lot of people have negative feedback on what her work is about… it is important to bring up the past and remind people that’s where we come from and how situations are because it gives you a way to reflect on how that relates to what is happening now. There are kinda similar situations.

71 (Ibid.)

72 For more information and pictures of this exhibition, refer to Hilton Als and Roberta Smith cited in my works cited.
What she is portraying in her work, and what’s happening now—it’s just a modern version of that. It is very swept under the rug and you don’t really realize that you are going through those same situations.\textsuperscript{73}

Okubo is insinuating that it is important to recognize the traumas, no matter how grotesque these images may be. She stated that individuals like Walker and Hank Willis Thomas\textsuperscript{74} inspire her because of how controversial they are and how uncomfortable they make people feel. According to Kim Wickham, it is important to recognize that there is no “right” way to reclaim cultural images—telling narratives comes in different forms and should exist outside of a binary (Wickham 346). Nevertheless, Walker’s work continues to engage with how people project their own perceptions onto an artwork—it forces people to interact with her work in uncomfortable ways without always recognizing the message that Walker intends. As previously stated, Walker’s work leaves much to be interpreted. Yet, there is much to be said about how Walker’s art does crucial and important work. In the following passage from our conversation, Okubo discloses more about her experience at the exhibit.

I don’t know what she [Kara Walker] was expecting out of it. I went with a group of friends and there was this white woman who posed in front of it [the mammy-like sphinx] and pretended to grab the titties of the sphinx. My friend went up to her and said, ‘excuse me, that’s really not okay for you to do, it makes me uncomfortable and it hurts my feelings’. The woman was just like “whatever.” A friend of Kara Walker’s went up to my friend and asked her what happened and they were recording how they felt about the situation and I guess told Kara\textsuperscript{73} (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, 2016)
Walker about it. But that was also an overwhelming experience too because everyone was able to see that exhibition and it wasn’t only for black people, or white people, or whoever. Everyone could experience this so you got to see how other people reacted to those pieces and it was uncomfortable to see the way white people would pose in front of it or behind it.\textsuperscript{75}

Okubo brings up an important point—that we cannot always control how other people engage with the work of artists like Kara Walker. Her experience speaks to how even in these instances of trying to reclaim images, people/audiences will interact with these images in ways that reveal the historical collective memory of America’s subconscious. In these moments where reclaimed images seemingly continue to be re-traumatized or sexualized, Okubo’s work plays a vital role in expressing traumas of the past, while concurrently presenting new worlds, new freedoms, and new ways to love.

While Kara Walker’s work and Okubo’s work evoke similar African American traditions, my analysis of Okubo’s experience of Walker’s works is not to compare the effectiveness of both artists’ works. Rather, it acts as way to discuss the complexities and different avenues that one can take to address the history of slavery. While Walker’s work engages with the past and questions the systems and thinking that were supposedly abolished, Okubo’s work references the past, while engaging with the future and present in innovative ways that exist outside of these minstrel images. When describing her views on black art, and art in general, Okubo states that for her, black art tends to explore the history of the past, while simultaneously creating its own visions of what its identity is.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, Jan 2016)

\textsuperscript{76} (Ibid.)
This identity is entangled with the identity of the artist who produces it. She states that “art is an exploration or a journey of who they [black individuals/black artists] are, where they come from, or where they are going… or where we are going as a black race.”

Okubo sees black artists as persons who are trying to reconnect themselves, instill confidence, and explore things that they couldn’t imagine.

As Kelley reminds us, “without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down” (xii). I find that Okubo’s outlook on how she perceives her art and the art produced by those of the African diaspora coincide with Kelley’s thoughts on black radical imagination. Black artists can redress, but they can also dream new dreams.

“Summon the Storm:” Highlighting the Importance of New Imaginings

Black artists are cultural producers and in control of shifting the images that were defined for us, before we were born. It is important to redress and acknowledge the pains and horrors that the black female, but it is also just as important to create new worlds and visions that the black female body has possibly never seen. Regardless of the large debate around artists like Kara Walker, who seem to walk a fine line between reclaiming images and perpetuating them, art continues to challenge systems of slavery and America’s collective consciousness. Through my analysis of Okubo’s “Summon The Storm,” I posit a new way to engage with traumas—by imagining outside of the constrictions that continue to marginalize black artists like Kara Walker.

In many ways, Okubo’s work creates a utopia for herself, and the audience that it attracts. Kelley writes, “the idea that we could possibly go somewhere that exists only in

77 (Ibid.)
our imaginations—that is ‘nowhere’—is the classic definition of utopia (2).” Although Okubo was able to see some positive images on Tumblr, she began to create new imaginations for herself. Her self-love and growing confidence manifests in her ability to create these images for herself—to create a space/place where she can see confidence and empowerment. Kelley argues that so often the daily struggles and plights often leave no room to imagine (11). The black community so frequently has to respond “to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present” (Kelley 11). With Kelley’s perspective in mind, I see Jamilla Okubo’s work as an example of new imaginings that exist outside of the present conditions that are often a reaction to the struggles of daily life.

In Jamilla Okubo’s first performance video, titled “Summon The Storm,” (created for a performance class at Parsons in 2014) she collaborated with photographer Dexter R. Jones. Okubo created silhouettes, based on traditional African clothing, that were also inspired by Afrofuturism. While Okubo has yet to define herself as an Afrofuturist, Afrofuturism “offers a ‘highly intersectional’ way of looking at possible futures or alternate realities through a black cultural lens.” Blending the future, past, and present, Afrofuturism serves as a model for black individuals to consider other alternative narratives. By evoking this aesthetic in “Summon The Storm,” Okubo is creating utopias that serve as a new way for black individuals to see themselves. Referencing Kenyan Masais, and the traditional clothing of South African Ndebeles, she created costumes for

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this performance. In this video, Okubo dresses up in layers of her fabric. Her head and face are completely covered in her prints, as well. Okubo emerges from the fields, and is moving and raising her hands to the sky. Because of the darkness of the video, you see Okubo’s brightly colored prints in the midst of the darkness and her movements are sometimes hard to tell. Images of the sun, and the sunset serve as the background to Okubo’s “conjuring.” The video ends with a close up of her masked face in Fig. 6. Okubo states that after seeing this video come to life, her audience compared it to aliens, and remarked on how black people are viewed as aliens in Afrofuturism.

Fig 7. From “Summon The Storm”

In my reading of “Summon the Storm,” I see an imaginary world that exists outside of the scopes of race and gender. Through the manipulation of movement, patterns and wardrobe, Okubo evokes a genderless and raceless body moving through a mystical place. She is displaying this “alter/destiny” that exists outside of binaries, and the erasure associated with the black female body. Tapping into the “utopia” that Kelley

81 (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective)
defines as a “nowhere,” “Summon The Storm” creates a body/figure that exists outside of the images that America has used to subjugate the black female (mentioned in previous chapters.)

Okubo asserts during our interview: “I do feel like art heals and addresses trauma because it really does have to do with our history and the way we think about ourselves.” To think about one’s body outside of the scope of history, is to free and reclaim the subjection of the black female body. It promotes new ways of perceiving the black female for the subject looking at this art piece, and for the larger black and white community. Kelley asserts that his novel, *Freedom Dreams* serves as an:

“…effort to recover ideas—visions fashioned mainly by those marginalized black activists who proposed a different way out of our constrictions. ..my main point is that we must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: dream” (xii).

I assert that Okubo’s work dreams new dreams that continue to provoke change. Dreaming new visions resists the white supremacist structures that have rendered the black female body as incapable of feeling, creating, and having agency.

Regardless of the stories that she tells, Okubo believes that her work should be more than just a pretty image.82 Yet, despite these internal struggles, she creates revolutionary work because of the new worlds she creates. “Summon The Storm,” which I feel distorts perceptions of time and place, is an example of creative and radical work being done to dismantle the remnants of slavery. Kelley posits that, “in the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive

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82 (Jamilla Okubo, Personal Communication, Jan 2016)
maps of the future, of the world not yet born” (9-10). In other words, another way of discussing the oppressions that black people, in this case black women, face is to create new worlds that have yet to be realized, crafted, and introduced. To create images that imagine new worlds and lifestyles is revolutionary work.

Recognizing this important concept, Okubo discussed her place in Afrofuturism during the interview. Although she has not claimed to be a part of this genre of work, she is learning more about this topic and is reading Octavia Butler, a science fiction writer and 1995 MacArthur Fellowship recipient. She has also referenced Afrofuturists, like Sun Ra, for one of her fashion projects. Embroidering one of Sun Ra’s paintings into a French corset, Okubo added a spin to what was supposed to be just a plain corset. According to Kelley, Sun Ra’s vision was about an “alter/destiny” which is the idea that producing new parables gives dominance to ‘redirect the future’ (31). The words to Sun Ra’s poem titled “Imagination”:

Imagination is a magic carpet
Upon which we may soar
To distant lands and climes
And even go beyond the moon
To any planet in the sky
If we came from nowhere here
Why can’t we go somewhere there?

83 It is important to note that Afrofuturism was not a concept in Sun Ra’s time. However, his work is now considered to be a part of this tradition.

84 Robin Kelley also references this poem in his book (31).
Regardless of whether or not Okubo identifies as an Afrofuturist, she seems to evoke these Afrofuturist traditions—presenting and interacting with images that beg for alternative narratives, dreams unspoken, and imagined futures.

Overall, Jamilla Okubo is creating images with her manipulation of silhouettes, costumes and prints. Evoking African and African-American traditions, she uses her art as a way to express the empowerment of her black female body, and those who identify similarly. Using fashion, kantas, collages, and historical events, Okubo is a part of a generation that sees the importance of dreaming. Kelley states, that there are limited spaces where love and imagining are considered and valued as social movements (4). While it is important to understand historical traumas of slavery, it also is essential to recognize the power of creating new, innovative, positive images that exist outside of the boundaries of race and gender—two categories or markings that enforce hierarchies.
Fig. 8 Clip from “Summon The Storm”\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{85} (Okubo, Jamilla Okubo Art, Cargo Collective)
Conclusion: Further Research of Trauma In Art

Poetry, therefore, is not what we simply recognize as the formal ‘poem,’ but a revolt: a scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking (Kelley 9).

While the effects of slavery continue to be questioned, black female artists continue to redress these effects that have rendered the black female body a site of subjection. Anyone who dares to dream, and create new visions has a black radical imagination. Black female artists continue to create alternative narratives to the narratives that have been used to degrade and subjugate black men and women. Within these counter narratives, black female artists reclaim, recreate and dream new and old worlds. Yet, it is important to note that subjection is not the only place that creativity can come from. Black artists do not ‘inherit culture’ but are cultural producers, and in charge of shifting the images that dominate the main stream (Kelley 2.)

In further research, I’d like to engage with other young artists like Cecile Emeke, Loza Maléombho, and Solange who are influencing pop culture in many ways. These female artists are getting a lot of recognition on different social platforms for their work. In a similar manner to Okubo’s experiences with Tumblr, these artists are producing positive and diverse images of black men and women. Cecile Emeke, a director and writer from London, is developing a short film series called “Strolling,” aimed to connect the ‘scattered stories of the black diaspora.” In this particular series, Emeke is documenting personal stories of different individuals of the black diaspora and mainly focuses on the experiences of millennials. Each episode presents a different person

86 This description is taken from Emeke’s site “Strolling Series.”
discussing issues of race, gender, class, feminism, relationships and identity. It would be interesting to discuss how media and social platforms play a role in the power of Emeke’s work since all of her series is accessible through Youtube.

Similarly, Loza Maléombho, born in Brazil and raised in the Ivory Coast and the United States, has a lot of recognition on Instagram, a similar social platform to Facebook or Tumblr. She is a fashion designer and visual artist. Creating this trend called #alienedits on Instagram, Maléombho takes selfies and edits unique images onto it. These edits range from placing fruit, baskets, and flowers, on the top of her head—evoking African traditions of carrying items on the head when traveling. Her work also speaks to representations of Africa and African-American culture. More recently, her fashion line has been featured in Beyonce’s controversial and politically charged “Formation” video. In further research, I would engage and analyze Maléombho’s #alienedits, the #alienedits that she has influenced other individuals to make, and the significance of Maléombho’s fashion pieces in this “Formation” video.

Lastly, in further studies, I would discuss Solange Knowles, an art director, musician, model and songwriter, who has created a record label titled Saint Heron in 2013. Compiling the work of various underground and more well-known artists around the world, Saint Heron, I would assert, is influencing the R&B and soul music scene. While Knowles is influencing the culture of music, she is also influencing the fashion scene. With her Afro appearing on high-fashion runways and her artists appearing on the

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87 For more information on her work refer Maléombho’s site.

88 Selfies are photographs that are taken with the camera, usually a phone, facing the person holding this digital device.

89 For more information on Saint Heron refer Knowles’ Saint Heron site.
top charts, I posit that Solange is shifting the images of black beauty, black music, and therefore black culture.

This project has taught me the importance of producing new images, recognizing past histories, and creating new futures. Along with Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Kara Walker and Jamilla Okubo, Knowles, Maléombho, and Emeke are a part of the same lexicon that engages with representations, identities and culture of the black community—more specifically women. In a similar manner to my usage of a multidisciplinary approach, black female artists have an intersectional approach to oppressive systems. From generation to generation, black female artists’ work acts as a social commentary on these oppressive systems that manifested on the theatrical stage and continue in the present.
Epilogue

My written thesis, which analyzes the important work of art and the art that is produced by black women, is accompanied by a musical performance. This thesis, which is a partial fulfillment for Wesleyan’s Music Department, served as a theoretical framework for my actual performance titled “Art As Resistance.” Learning about the history of slavery, the dehumanization of the black woman, and the role art plays in intellectualizing the experience of black women, I developed a musical project that took compositions from various artists. I decided to arrange a diverse set list that illustrated the pains and pleasures of black women. Pulling from the repertoire of the folk, blues, jazz, soul, funk and hip-hop music, I created a musical journey that depicted the trials and tribulations of the black woman. Throughout the performance, I incorporated other art forms. For example, I had a visual artist draw to the music with charcoal on three different canvases that were placed behind me on stage. She remained on stage for the entire performance. My set list included arrangements of:

“Summertime” by Ella Fitzgerald

“I Put A Spell On You” by Nina Simone

“Don’t Wake Me Up” by Lianne La Havas

“Fool For You” by Alice Smith

“Bag Lady” by Erykah Badu

“Tell Me Something Good” by Chaka Khan and Rufus

“What You Won’t Do For Love” by Bobby Caldwell (Phyllis Hyman’s Rendition)

“He Loves Me” by Jill Scott
“Four Five Seconds” by Rihanna, Kanye West and Paul McCartney

For “Summertime,” a jazz standard describing the hardships of daily life, I chose to sing this song acapella because I wanted the lyrics of this song to only resonate with my voice. In the pauses, vibrato and intonations of this song, I wanted to evoke an eerie, yet powerful effect on my audience. Inspired by Joss Stone and Nina Simone’s renditions, in my performance of “I Put A Spell On You,” originally written by Jay Hawkins, I chose to have a solo guitar as my accompaniment and sang this song in a high register. To visually accompany this song, I had a dancer choreograph a striking routine for this performance. For “Don’t Wake Me Up,” (my personal favorite) three other vocalists and I arranged harmonies for four parts, including myself. This song was also acapella and was a strong rendition of Havas’ song. For the songs, “Fool For You,” “What You Won’t Do For Love,” and “He Loves Me,”” a live band accompanied me. The live band included guitar, bass, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, and drums. Additionally, for “He Loves Me,” I had a spoken word poet perform her poem over a section of this song. Her poem discussed concepts of love, and relationships—which served as a great supplement to the lyrical content of this particular song.

In my performance of “Tell Me Something Good” and “Bag Lady,” I decided to have an instrumental track, which allowed me to demonstrate my solo performance aesthetic. These two songs were personally challenging for me, because I am so used to singing with a live band. Yet, I still gave the lyrics of each song life and delivered a great show. For the last song, I chose solo guitar to accompany “Four Five Seconds.” This more recent tune referenced folk traditions and was a fun song to end with.
Overall, the process of putting on this performance was a challenge. When I first came to Wesleyan, I knew nothing about music theory. However, with all of the classes I have taken, and the amount of practices I have had in and out of the classroom, I was able to use my performance as another way to explore experiences of the black female. Having this recital was a great way to not only challenge myself as a vocalist, composer, and arranger, but also a way for me to combine both the scholar and musician of my identity.
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Appendix

Jamilla Okubo’s Interview 2016

M: Describe your art.

J: I guess the visual art that I do is an expression of how I feel and my experiences of being a black woman—I guess you can say and just really.. it’s about me exploring my cultural identity and figuring out who I am because I am half American and half African. But that whole African American. So, My dad’s from Kenya, my mom’s from North Carolina, DC. I’ve been trying to figure out who I am and where I come from, and learning about that, you know. Just like how everyone else is trying to do all these readings.. all these authors.. learning about the culture that you come from. So I would say that my art is an exploration of that through different mediums.

M: I resonate with that because my parents are Ghanaian—both are from West Africa. I was born here, but I’m also African, but I was not born in Africa so I’m not quite African—it’s a weird place to be. So, how do you define art, or black art?

J: I always think about the readings I have read and how they describe it. But for me, I would say a lot of black art tends to explore the history and the past, you know? But then, also create their own visions of what their identity is and whatever they are focusing on. So I feel like, it’s like an exploration or a journey of who they are, where they come from, or where they are going.. or where we are going as a black race. I feel like people
are trying to reconnect with themselves—the artists—black artists. And just trying to be more confident, you know? Because we have been put down for so long. And of course art is people expressing themselves and just really exploring and diving into things that they couldn’t imagine—thinking outside of the box.

M: With all that in mind, who are your influences when you create? And what is your creating process usually like?

J: Influences, I would say.. it’s a funny story because I went to an arts high school, but before that, I went to a regular huge high school. I had transferred my junior year and it was my first time being in a school that was predominantly black and that, and having an art school and putting that together is amazing. You are with different black creatives and they do music, writing, dancing, painting—everything. I had professors who were all black and that was really empowering. I took an art history class where my teacher (who is also an artist), he would play these art dvds for us. He would introduce us to artists like Hank Willis Thomas, Mickalene Thomas, Nick Cave, Wangechi Mutu—all these artists that I learned up during high school. I would have never thought I would meet any of them or see them now that I am in New York City and college. But those are my first influences. I think a lot of people would compare my work to some of them—I guess cause I really am influenced by them and I am trying to break that. I really love how they portray black culture, and black women specifically Mickalene Thomas, and the portaitures that she does.
When I first started with my *We The People Series*… When I started school… tumblr was just starting. I had just transferred from my little blog spot to tumblr. And thinking ‘Oh this is cool.’ Being able to connect and/or see other black girls embracing their beauty was new to me. You know? Because I had a perm up until I went to that art high school. After a year, I decided to go natural and had cut my perm off. It really was an awakening and a transition period. I had started posting my art-work [on Tumblr] about what I was doing in my high school and I was really inspired by the beauty that was on Tumblr from other black girls. That’s what inspired me to start creating the work that I create. So I started off by taking images from Tumblr and recreating them—just taking inspiration from them and visually creating my own images of black women. Usually when I work, I listen to music… a lot of black music. I’m really inspired by my culture and people. I feel like we are so beautiful and we tend to feel not confident. I know that’s something that I still struggle with and have struggled with for a while. I feel like my art is an expressive way to shed light to confidence, or my confidence. So I’m confident through my artwork. My process is that I’ll take images or create my own, and create the silhouettes and then I’ll create the prints I want to use in my pieces. And I am still trying to develop a technique where I create my own prints and then I use it in my own work to tell a story. Because I am really interested in finding ways to tell stories in my work. One of the last projects that I did was “We The People of the Diaspora” and I was exploring my Kenyan culture…. Usually you learn cultures through food, music or fashion so I focused on the fabrics that came out from Kenya or that are popular in Kenya which are the kanga fabrics. I designed my own versions after taking these print design classes at Parsons. Then I used them in the illustrations I created and collaged them onto my
painting. That’s where I am right now. I also did a project where I was just exploring using the same prints and making actual garments and these head pieces. I also kinda dabbled into afrofuturism, but I am still learning about it. I understand the concept behind it, but I don’t fully understand it. I’m trying to catch on and read Octavia Butler.

[After conversation about blacklivesmatter and her experiences around afrofuturism and the activism around these movements, Jamilla reveals that she felt bad did not create any political artwork around these movements.]

M: What do you think your artwork does to address, resist, and heal violence that has been [inflicted] on black bodies?

J: Maybe I haven’t dealt into that where it reflects the violence on black bodies but I guess it does for our mental health. I have gotten a lot of feedback where people say that they feel empowered by my work—which is very overwhelming for people to say that because I am just creating what I feel and I don’t know whether it is going to impact people or not. But for me, it’s very personal because it is coming from me and it’s a way for me to cope with not feeling confident as a black woman having to always be in these areas where it is predominately white or other races… and being the one person who’s of color or black. I’ve always have that situation since elementary school, middle school, high school and the school I am at now but luckily there is small community of black students who are very social justice [oriented]. I guess you can say that is empowering experience for me—to be around people also on that journey of loving themselves and
really being okay with who they are in these environments. And that’s something that I struggle with, so it’s like my art work is something that projects that—especially when I’m in class and I’m like ‘this is my work.’ And I’m the one black student who’s always doing black art. All the white students in my class know me by my work because they are like ‘oh yeah, she’s the one who does all that black art with the afros and really colorful work with the prints and stuff.’ Sometimes it’s really scary… not scary… but uncomfortable because you don’t know how they are going to react or how your professors are going to react or what they are going to say. I am lucky to not have any negative feedback from professors, they’ve always been very supportive of my work and they’re like ‘Wow, I’ve never seen anything like this before,’ or they are just new to this [her art].

M: I know for me, taking music classes, I am also often one of the three black girls in the music major. Usually we are always in these classes together, or there’s one of us. I find it very hard… when you’re learning Western art, in order to create your art [black art]—for whatever reason, those two things are separated or seemingly separated. When you’re learning western ideas of what art should be like from strokes, for me—it’s rhythmically, vocally, melodically. … Having to apply these Western standards of music… how is that experience for you learning about art, honing in on those skills and having to go through Western ideas of what your art and our fashion is supposed to be like, in order to create it [art] for yourself.
J: For me, it’s been exciting because I feel like I listen and I hear, this is how you make your art. This is the Western, European [way of] how to do it. But then you take what you learn, you go back home, and you figure out how you take that and you turn it into yours. You really put your aesthetic into it. I feel like that’s what I’ve been doing the entire time that I have been here. My major is integrated design and the focus is fashion and we have 4 classes and we can take whatever electives we want. I’ve taken print design, drawing, sewing and other fashion contraction [classes]. I took a couture design techniques class last semester which was very ‘french.’ I am only taking this class because I want to advance my fine arts practice and I want to create paintings where I include beading and embroidery into it my paintings. My theme is black art. So it’s like taking that traditional, French, European technique where you make these couture gowns, and incorporate it into my work. For my final, I did this corset. My final had to be a corset. I made this corset with beading and I beaded a variation of this painting by SunRa.

M: Sun Ra is such an afrofuturist.

J: I really like his music. It’s very interesting and fun. But this is the corset I ended up doing. My teacher was just like “wow, it’s very different”. Everyone else did these very traditional corsets that are for wedding gowns.. My perspective was very artsy and not fashion. I’ve always felt like I was an outcaste with my work and in everything that I do. Everyone does these traditional things or their topics are not about their cultural identity. I remember, in a thesis class, a white girl did a video series on these characters and I
don’t unnecessarily understand what this was about or what was the outcome. It was very abstract—she was wearing these wigs.

M: That resonates with me as well. A lot of my friends at Wesleyan are artistic as well. My friend, born and raised in Senegal, and his work is ‘dark.’ Dancing is not always about the music, it’s about movement. His art is very ‘spooky’ and he really calls out a lot of his classmates because of the art that he creates or that they do. It is not based in anything. His work is obviously based in trauma. People of the African Diaspora are constantly—if the work does not mean anything, we are not going to do it. Or we will try and find meaning in what we do.

J: I feel like that’s what I am struggling with a lot right now. I have been developing my techniques, but I am kinda stuck on what my next topic is going to be. I don’t want to just create these pretty paintings and people are wondering ‘what’s it about?’ I feel weird about that—I always feel like I have to have some kind of story. I don’t know if that’s because that’s how we are as black artists or I am afraid to not just be enough.

M: But do you also feel like, as a black artist, your art has to be based on something? Because you can just create to create, but do you feel like you have to create all the time with a [particular] meaning and why do you feel like that’s necessary?

J: Sometimes I do feel like that. I feel like as an artist, I do have a responsibility to create something that may impact people or having them thinking. Sometimes I do want to
create whatever I want and not have any meaning behind it and if someone asks me, I say take it as it is. I do just want to try whatever I want and see whatever happens. But I don’t know.

M: With that in mind, who do you think your audience is? Do you create with an audience in mind? Who in general, since social media is such a thing, gives you feedback on your work?

J: My audience to me is black people, but I have gotten a lot of feedback or more attention from older black women which is interesting because I’m only 22 years old and I’m really young. I feel like.. not that I don’t know anything about life.. but those experiences about relationships, being an adult and growing up… it’s very interesting that the audience that gives me all this feedback are older women and older women. It’s people from their 30s, 40s, 50s, and older. I don’t know if it’s because the aesthetic of my work. Recently, it was inspired by the 70s/60s music and it has the afro-puff and those outfits that they would wear with the flare legs or roller skates. I think they have this connection with a past. But I always get this feedback from older people that my work is so beautiful. I get emails from people who want my work for their wedding or their partner—like the Love You Series that I did. I could understand that because my work doesn’t necessarily portray younger people.

M: Because it’s just silhouettes.
J: Yeah, exactly. So I guess people see an older version with the way that they’re posing which I can understand because I could create silhouettes with young people doing typical poses or squats but I have not done that yet. I do want to get the attention of my generation because I feel like I have not been a part of the movement that’s going on in our generation. That is something I want to work on.

M: Why do you think that younger people aren’t more aware of your work?

J: I feel like it looks for a older crowd and younger people of our generation are making—the themes are feminism, trap [music] culture. I have noticed that the work is more carefree and I guess my work doesn’t portray that—it’s very elegant looking or sophisticated—that’s the feedback I have gotten from a lot of people.

M: I think it’s also what you said—you listen to music while you create. You listen a lot of music from older generations—then that’s also the images you create.

J: I also noticed that. The series I did, I definitely listened to older people—like Marvin Gaye and that whole crowd. That’s basically what I created—it had that aura. It was exciting to just listen to that. I listened to other music too, that’s just the vibe I was going for and that’s what ended up on the paper. I do really want to explore creating younger work. I am also inspired by fashion and fashion illustration. When I was in high school, I thought I wanted to be a fashion illustrator and when I came to Parsons, I was all over the place. I’m kinda coming back to where I started. But that may be why my work looks like
it’s for an older crowd—but, it’s interesting because I take inspiration from fashion photo shoots and the way they pose. I guess that’s something that I didn’t touch on with my creative processes—that I get inspired by fashion photography. I took a fashion photography history class this semester, and I was really inspired by the process, the way they create the images, the set, and the way they style the people [models].

M: So, do you identify as a black female artist or a black artist and why do you identify as either of those? And what is your opinion on what the difference is?

J: Oh my gosh. I never even thought of that—that people identify as either two. I know there are a lot of black artists that don’t even want to be identified with black artists because they do not want to be in that box when they create. Or they feel like it limits for what they can create. [For example] So if they do an abstract painting, they are not a black artist anymore. But I don’t think there is anything wrong with being labeled as that—but maybe this is my opinion now because I haven’t had an experience for me to [know why they] choose their title. But, I would say I identify as a black female artist. A lot of my work is around being a woman, and being a person of color—just that entire experience because that’s my experience everyday. I just can’t hide it. If I go to work, it’s like I am that one black girl who works here. I don’t know if that’s just my perception or if I need to change my perception. But I identify as a black female artist. I think it’s empowering because our experiences are so real. Despite the fact that people say racism is over, and all these other things—it happens on the daily. Or people unconsciously do things where they show they are uncomfortable around me because I am black.
M: A part of my thesis is about Kara Walker. How do you feel about her work? She also does silhouettes, and her work is very controversial. I am interested to know what your opinions are of her, and the complexities of her work.

J: When I was in high school, I was really inspired by her work and Hank Willis Thomas and that was the kind of work I wanted to create—that was really controversial and made people uncomfortable and made people really think about things—which I still do. I think that I need to look more into her work, but it’s very intense. It’s a very intense experience, and I feel like I need to read more about where she comes from as far as why she creates what she creates and the stories that she’s is telling. A lot of people have negative feedback on what her work is about. But like you were saying about afrofuturism and the past, it is important to bring up the past and remind people that’s where we come from and how situations are because it gives you a way to reflect on how that relates to what is happening now. There are kinda similar situations. What she [Kara Walker] is portraying in her work, and what’s happening now—it’s just a modern version of that. It is very swept under the rug and you don’t really realize that you are going through those same situations. I don’t know. I think her work is really interesting. I went to her Sugarcane exhibit [Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the marvelous Sugar Baby].

M: It was very overwhelming.
J: I don’t know what she was expecting out of it. I went with a group of friends and there was this white woman who posed in front of it [the mammy-like sphinx] and pretended to grab the titties of the sphinx. My friend went up to her and said, excuse me, that’s really not okay for you to do, it makes me uncomfortable and it hurts my feelings. The woman was just like “whatever.” A friend of Kara Walker’s went up to my friend and asked her what happened and they were recording how they felt about the situation and I guess told Kara Walker about it. But that was also an overwhelming experience too because everyone was able to see that exhibition and it wasn’t only for black people, or white people, or whoever. Everyone could experience this so you got to see how other people reacted to that pieces and it was uncomfortable to see the way white people would pose in front of it or behind it.

M: Yeah, because you could see everything—the genitalia. It was interesting for me because I hoped that people read about it or did some research before—this is about slave workers, little kids, grown women and men who worked here to create sugar and how it’s being torn down, and that it’s probably going to be a space for somebody’s condo. So how about we just pay respect that was here, in this space? And then, you are re-traumatizing these bodies [by sexualizing them in the ways Okubo described earlier].

J: Yeah, it’s just like they don’t care. Alright—move on from the past. Get over it. It’s fine.

M: I mean Walker’s work is very controversial, she gets crap from her peers and fellow artists who are in her generation. Even though it’s crazy, you can’t tell me it’s not powerful and that there is a “good” way to represent trauma. You can have artwork that is very positive, and futuristic in the sense of ‘here’s hope.’ But people are still drawing
pictures of mammy’s and still drawing pictures of the pickaninny. This is because this is what slavery was.

J: Yeah, and people still don’t know about it. [Some] black people still don’t know about it because they don’t want to face our past, but they want to live in the present or future, but they don’t know how to live in the present or future because they do not know who they are or where they come from—what they are trying to do—who they are trying to be. They are just trying to take from what they see being portrayed in the media. Some people just want to face who they are and are trying to create new identities for themselves, but they run into situations where they are reminded that they’re black and people see them differently—that’s traumatizing too. And that’s something that I struggle with in my work. Going back to me telling stories—it’s because I am still learning about my history and who the important people are. I still feel empty or not really knowing how to navigate throughout this world. Yeah I am going through these experiences present time, but I feel like I don’t know fully where I come from or who I am or how to go about being confident in these different spaces. Because my mom didn’t really teach me about the authors during her time, who were writing about race and stuff like that. Now, I’m figuring it out while I’m in college. I feel like that happens for a lot of people. It takes for them to grow up to start going on that journey of figuring out where they come from or who are the greats of the black community.

J: It’s always fun to talk about these things because I don’t feel like I talk about this enough. As an artist, I’m not a vocal person because I don’t want to sound stupid for saying things I don’t really know about. Like I said, I am still in the process of really
learning about my culture and just reading different books and poetry. Like James Baldwin—I haven’t read any of his work.

M: ..I was in a class called Rereading gendered agency. We were reading female slave narratives and I just remember the whole class asking, ‘is this real?’ ‘this can’t be real..’

M: I saw your “Into the Storm” Video on Instagram. Could you tell me about it.

J: It was a collaboration with a photographer, Dexter R. Jones. Basically, I did this project where I created head pieces and stuff. It is very interesting. I took this class called Fashion, Illustration and Performance where you integrate these three topics—fashion, illustration, and performance. I have never done performance. I don’t know anything about it. I had two professors—a fashion designer and an illustrator. And she did a lot of illustration that is social justice based.. about her culture… She did illustration comics on war. The teacher who was a designer, he has this brand where it integrates his culture to—the prints that they design. He has two other partners in the brand. That was kinda cultural based too. He understands my work. He was pushing me to do something that was ‘african inspired’ and he wanted me to create these collages with the prints that I had already made, based on the silhouettes of traditional African clothing. I kinda based it off of afrofuturism and Kenyan Masai and dress and South African Ndebeles. I recreated these silhouettes and made the garments. I wanted to collaborate with Dexter R Jones to do photos for my final presentation. We were trying to figure out what I could do as a performance piece. We were thinking about how we could showcase the designs through
movement so it was really experimental. We went to this area near where he lived and he
was directing me on how to move with the garments. After putting it together and editing
it, it felt very afrofuturistic because a lot of people seem to compare afrofuturism to aliens
and how black people are seen as aliens. That was one project I was and was not
necessarily proud of going back to the idea of having meaning behind it because it did not
have a specific meaning behind it. But, a lot of people, interpreted it the way they saw it.
It was interesting to have that. I think that was a part of the performance, to hear people
comment on what they saw. He just chose a poem that it [the video] was inspired by
which I think was from a song.

M: Do you think art or black art can heal, resist, and speaks to traumas in many ways?

J: I think some do… depending on what trauma. I don’t know if you can really heal all
traumas. For example, rape.. how do you showcase that through your art? Or black art?
I’m trying to think of art that I know of that does that. I’m not sure that I feel that it… I’m
not sure. I think that a lot of artwork is representation of black people or black culture.
You really have to research the work to really understand it. You’ll see an image and not
really know what it’s about unless it’s really specific and very obvious. It dos address
trauma, but does it heal? For example, the work of Hank Willis Thomas.. you know that
piece that he did with a slave ship bottle? I think it was some sort of alcoholic drink and
there are people of the slave trips inside of the bottle. It is addressing the traumas of
slavery but is it healing? I think it is just awakening people to think about the history of
slavery. But then there are a lot of artists who are creating representations of women and
its very feminist inspired—and maybe that’s healing for many women to be able to express themselves and not feel tied down to follow the norms. [For example] Don’t show nudity because as a black woman, you are seen as this black, ghetto… you’re degrading yourself. If you compare, for example, a nude piece of black woman to a nude piece of a white woman, it’s like white woman are seen as angelic and nurturing. But if you see a black woman, who is naked in the woods and posing the same way, people tend to degrade them. So I think that maybe it is healing that trauma of just being brought down so much… So yeah, I guess it does. It does go back to slavery where we were brought over here and we were told we were nothing and we were taken away from our cultural norms and traditions… We were a part of a culture and we were removed from it and had to start from scratch and be slaves in these little sheds or wherever you were living—in the house or in the plantations. I think that a lot of black art does empower black women. I think of my grandmother and she is from the south and she wasn’t that far [removed] from slavery—maybe a little bit after. I know that she would tell me that she used to work in a plantation—when slavery was over and she would still pick cotton for like ten cents or however much it was worth. Now that she’s living in this generation, she’s been through so many generations. It’s like she still struggles with accepting herself as a black woman which is very sad to see because she sits at home and watches television shows and she sees white women or white men on television and everyone glorifies Oprah. She glorifies Oprah... She would always comment [in a southern accent], ‘oh Oprah sure loves to hug them white men.’ I’m just like okay…. It is very interesting to hear my grandmother’s perspective—knowing she came from that time period of transitioning from slavery to segregation. She would tell me stories about how
she would walk down the street, and go to the store and buy a bottle of coca cola but she couldn’t stay there and sit there. She had to walk around [the store/block] to finish her drink because she couldn’t sit in a white only space or store.

M: Yeah, you can’t sit here but you can buy this.

J: You’re going to support us.. and then get the fuck out. That’s very traumatizing. She is still very affected by it. She doesn’t feel very beautiful at all, she’s always talking negative about herself. It’s interesting because I don’t know if my work positively affects her. I try to tell her that there is movement of teaching each other about self-care and self-love. I tend to tell her that myself—she has to appreciate who you are. She’s kind of like ‘alright,’ and feels uncomfortable. I try to tell her all the time, that she’s beautiful. It makes her feel happy, and I’m her granddaughter and I tell her that because I don’t think many people [things] do. I do feel like art heals and addresses trauma because it really does have to do with our history and the way we think about ourselves. It is [us] having to break that. That’s why I love tumblr so much because there is so much that is about self-healing. A lot of people just post their own work on tumblr and sharing it with the community. Yes, we may not have exposure in the contemporary art scene or in galleries, we don’t see much work except for a few contemporary black artists. But at least we have that platform to share with each other and empower each other.

M: Where do you see yourself in the next 5 to 10 years? Where do you see your work? 5 years? That means I’ll be in my mid-twenties. I am hoping to be in galleries and doing
things that contemporary black artists are doing now. Because I do not know what the future is—the culture, the tradition of showcasing our work. I hope to have my work shown in galleries and maybe museums if I work hard enough til that point. Just continuing to do my work, and explore creating and figuring out what it is I want to create. And figuring out how I can contribute to our society—to black people—how I can continue to do work that uplifts us. I don’t really understand afrofuturism and I don’t necessarily know if I want to be a part of that. I don’t know what I am getting myself into. I want to create work that is in the present—because there is a lot of work happening now. For example, Kehinde Wiley did a photoshoot with those black designers—what does black lives matter look like in fashion? I thought it was interesting. I don’t know if it was empowering—I guess it was for some people to see black designers because a lot of people don’t know that there are black designers that exist still. I have been thinking about applying to different artist and residency programs maybe at the studio in Harlem. Is afrofuturism going to get old or am I going to miss this wave of black art/ black lives matter if I am not creating right now, during that time. That’s something I think about. We are not a trend, but still, we are gaining a lot of attention and people are learning about it. That’s something I want to be a part of but I am still trying to figure out how I navigate the space as a black artist.