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THE BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE OF BLACK FEMINISM: CHANGES IN REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD EXAMINED THROUGH THE ARTWORK OF ELIZABETH CATLETT AND MICKALENE THOMAS

by

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DEDICATION

To Antwuan, Joy, Emee, and Ari.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The visual representation of black womanhood is important in understanding black women's journey toward liberation and empowerment. Black feminism focuses on the essential idea of self-definition as a tool for empowerment. The use of representations of black womanhood as tools of empowerment is evident through the artwork of Elizabeth Catlett and Mickalene Thomas. Catlett's work became prominent in the 1960s – 1970s during the Black Arts Movement. She was one of the most important black female artists during the time period whose artwork and activism expressed the Black Nationalist theories of the Black Arts Movement. Thomas, however, began exhibiting in the early 2000s, during the current post-blackness era. Thomas's artwork and artistic beliefs are in line with many theories regarding post-blackness. She provides a clear example of the shift in artwork and ideas regarding African American women during the Black Arts Movement, to the post-black era. Post-black art moves away from the responsibility of being political and focuses more on the broadening and reinterpreting of the definition of blackness. Discussing the work of these artists offers a glimpse into the gradual widening of space made available for the black female voice. Within this space, black female artists are portraying the black feminist ideal of self-defined black womanhood. Issues of gender, race, and class are integral to the work of Catlett and Thomas, yet displayed in drastically different ways. The changes in how the themes of race and femininity are addressed throughout their artwork are directly related to the cultural climate of the time period in which each artist began working. By dissecting the social and cultural context of the time, I will demonstrate the correlating shifts in how black womanhood is represented.

There was a clear change from the idea of blackness and a particular black aesthetic that grew out of the Black Arts Movement, as represented by Elizabeth Catlett, to post-black artists

such as Mickalene Thomas. African American art of the 1960s and 1970s was primarily focused on opposition to the dominant, white patriarchal culture and concerned with the effects of intolerance to black subjecthood. The following decades saw a shift in African American art to focus more on expressions of individual experiences regarding a broad range of topics. The transformation was not simply a dismantling of previous ideas; rather, it was an indication of the progressive development of representations of blackness. Post-black art stands on the foundation of the black aesthetic, yet it allows for a broader range of variations in the definition. Although not fully developed, the black aesthetic was a cultural ideology that promoted the importance of confronting white western aesthetics, speaking out against social injustices against blacks, helping to develop an African-American identity and creating art that spoke directly to the black community. [1] The black aesthetic most notably required African American artists to create artwork that contributed to the political revolution and spoke specifically to a black audience.[2] The artwork produced during the Black Arts Movement often incorporated Afrocentric themes and similar stylistic elements, such as very colorful canvases and symbolic imagery. This shift from the clear guidelines of what was determined as black art to the post-black era speaks directly to the progressive development of self-defined representations of black womanhood. Additionally, theories of black feminism, particularly Patricia Hill Collins' theory of black feminist thought are significant as a basis for discussing black female visual representation. Black feminism played and continues to play a substantial role in the creation of a gradually widening platform for visibility of blacks and particularly for voices of black women.

The change is directly related to political and cultural changes in the U.S. Sociologist Patricia Hills Collins's theory of black feminist thought is a useful framework for helping to

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[1] Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony* 24, no. 10 (1969): 54.

[2] Sharon Patton, *African-American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 213.

explain this shift in artwork created before and during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras and art created in the following decades. Black feminist thought is the "intellectual center" of black feminism, which is a response to interconnected oppressions of black women.[3] Black feminism acts in response to oppressive experiences of black women in the U.S. The importance of black feminism is to understand the distinct nature of self-defined representations of black womanhood and the role representation takes in the process of empowerment and liberation. Collins discusses the dialogical relationship of "collective experiences" and "group knowledge" as the rationale for the shift in themes and aesthetics of African American art.[4] Group knowledge, in reference to black feminism is a black feminist standpoint or consciousness.[5] Thus, as the collective experiences of black women change, there is a transformation in the black feminist consciousness. In addition, there may be changes in how those experiences are visually expressed and fought against as a result of changes in thinking.[6]

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was a cultural and political movement for black artists to present blackness in confrontation to oppressive, white domination. The Black Arts Movement followed in the direction of the Black Power Movement. During the Black Power Movement blacks wanted to emphasize pride in their own interpretation of their identities, which conflicted with representations by the white dominant society. Because there was a significant focus on promoting black hypermasculinity to counter negative stereotypes of black manhood, black women were often relegated to subservient roles in the movement. Although black women were not completely ignored, concerns and ideas of black men clearly took

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[3] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* (New York City: Routledge. 2008), 24.
[4] Ibid., 34.
[5] BFT 35
[6] BFT 34

precedence. Male dominance was repeated in the Black Arts Movement. Although generally overshadowed by black men, black female artists played an important role in the movement. Despite the obvious suppression of black female voices, female artists who continuously depicted black women and experiences of black womanhood gradually created space for self-defined expressions of black womanhood.

Elizabeth Catlett is a particularly significant example of a black female artist who utilized her work and activism to aid in making African American female artists visible and to create a platform for the voices of black female artists. Catlett's artistic talent and her focus on themes that were representative of black womanhood and inclusive of overall ideas of liberation of the black community, carved out a space for the acceptance of her work within the Black Arts Movement. Her artwork had a social and activist focus. She understood the central theme of creating a unified voice within the Black Power Movement and contributed to that voice with her artwork. Catlett's artistic interests consisted of focusing on giving a voice to oppressed people, especially black women. Through her artwork and activism, she attempted to replace historical stereotyped imagery and categorizations, such as the mammy stereotype and the "lazy black." She instead presented celebratory images of blackness. She wanted to create art to service the "culturally starved black community" and work toward the evolution of a "black aesthetic."[7] Catlett was attentive to the struggle for black liberation, in general, but through her work, she portrayed her significant interest in promoting positive narratives of black womanhood. She wanted to empower black women by creating positive, self-defined representations of working class black women and by representing experiences of black women. Her beliefs about the psychological, and often physical, tolls that accompanied the lives of black women, as well as

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[7] Elizabeth Catlett, "The Role of the Black Artist," *The Black Scholar* 6, no. 9 (1975): 12.

celebration of the contributions they have made to their countries, Mexico and the U.S., are present throughout her work.

In addition to the sexism of the Black Power Movement, black women also faced racism in the Women's Liberation Movement. Although there were a few black women who were able to navigate the white feminist movement and feminist art movement, black women felt mostly excluded. Ideas of black feminism began to take shape during the 1960s as a response to the lack of equal inclusion of black women in Black Power and white feminist movements. The importance of promoting voices of black women became popular as obstacles became pronounced through these particular movements. Patricia Hill Collins argues that African American women possess an independent black feminist consciousness that is unique to individuals who are both black and female. The black feminist consciousness results in black feminist thought, which identifies the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of black women. Black feminist thought speaks to the idea that black women have an understanding of their own oppression and experiences. Thus, representations of black womanhood from the standpoint of black women are unique in comparison to expressions of black womanhood by those who are not both black and female. Black feminism, in some ways, expresses experiences that are common for black women, yet Collins argues that variables, such as class, call for an understanding that there is no single black feminist standpoint that is uniformly representative of all black women.

There was a significant thematic and aesthetic shift in African American art after the Black Arts Movement. The most notable difference was a shift from a focus on unity and the liberation of the black community to a focus on expressions of individual experiences and personal success. The determination of the Black Arts Movement to create an identity tied to African heritage, while rejecting identities rooted in white supremacy began to somewhat

diminish, broadening the realm of expressions of black representation. The successes of the Black Power era, and the distancing from slavery, the Reconstruction era, and the Jim Crow era created different goals for post-black artists. Perhaps in an effort to simply be heard, most of Catlett's work focuses on representing black womanhood in a palatable way. Rather than explicitly confronting negative stereotypes and aspects of U.S. society that denigrate and oppress the black community, Catlett focused on simplistic, and sometimes abstract, positive renderings of figures and narratives.

The cultural shift after the Black Arts Movement and the beginning of black feminism created a space for more explicit visual confrontations of negative imagery and movement outside of the aesthetic requirements of the Black Arts Movement. Therefore, artists began to create more deliberate confrontations of stereotypes rooted in racist and sexist ideology, as well as other degrading symbols of blackness. Racist and sexist stereotypes concerning black womanhood are dependent upon Eurocentric ideologies, which are centered on standards of European civilization. Stereotypes regarding African American women were created during slavery through the differentiation of black women from Victorian era ideals of white femininity. For example, the jezebel stereotype categorized black women as hypersexual to contrast the ideal standard of purity in women. The stereotypes were used to manifest ideologies that would preserve social order, and legitimize slavery and the mistreatment of black women. Thus, black women became defined by oppressive powers with ideological justifications. Black feminist theories argue against forced identities and encourage the importance of self-definitions of black womanhood to be birthed from experiences of black women. During the Black Arts Movement, black female artists represented black womanhood through celebratory African American female

imagery. Self-defined representations of black womanhood through confrontations of stereotypes became more prevalent after the Black Arts Movement.

During the current post-blackness era, previous artistic ideas are somewhat abandoned. Post-blackness argues that African American artists can present expressions of their experiences without the burden of representation of race. In other words, post-black artists argue that the idea of a black aesthetic and the limitations imposed by race on black artists should no longer exist. The previous signifiers of blackness are now engaged in satirical and contradictory ways, which render blackness open to the process of redefinition. Post-black artists create artwork about blackness that simultaneously "transcends limitations that are imposed by race."[8]

Mickalene Thomas is an example of a post-black artist and exhibits the drastic departure from representations of black womanhood and experiences of black feminism displayed through artwork during the Black Arts Movement. Thomas does not completely abandon imagery rooted in stereotypical ideas. Rather, her work consists of multiple inferences to different ideas, which are melded together to form a cohesive image. Some of the major themes of her work are "marginalized" beauty, queer black feminism, Blaxploitation, the black female body, and sexuality. Thomas represents the idea of black feminism that there is no single definitive representation of black womanhood. Similar to allowing for a broadening of the definition of blackness, post-blackness allows for a broadening of the understanding of black feminism. Through her work, Thomas attempts to represent black womanhood from her own individual perspective, rather than present an idea of black womanhood that adds to the unified voice against oppression. Without the burden of the limitations of race, Thomas takes a different approach to representation. The lingering effects of the promotion of a hypermasculine,

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[8] Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41 (2007): 626.

patriarchal ideal that was prevalent during the Black Power Movement and the necessity of a focusing on confronting stereotypes, are not as prevalent. Those topics remain important; however, such a significant focus is no longer necessary. Thomas, as an artist working in the early 2000s can utilize the progress made by previous black female artists and scholars to exhibit a broader understanding of black womanhood.

The progression of visual representations of self-defined black womanhood can be examined by employing Collins' theory as well as historical context as a foundation. Elements of race, gender, and representation in the artwork of Elizabeth Catlett and Mickalene Thomas may be understood as chronological markers of progress and distinct emblems of change. Although black women have yet to be liberated from oppressive, stereotypical ideologies, the progress that has been made is evident through the work of these artists. There is a clear delineation between the artwork of black women during the Black Arts Movement and the present post-blackness era. The changes in representation through the artwork of these artists demonstrates how current artists have utilized the progress made by previous artists to explore previously unrepresented aspects of black female identity. However, the goal remained the same between the two artists. The ways in which Thomas and Catlett presented their ideas were different, yet ultimately each artist wanted to utilize their artwork to resist oppression, marginalization and invisibility of the black woman.

CHAPTER 2 BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Black feminism is an activist response to the interconnected oppressions of black women and is an empowering agent that is supported by black feminist thought. It not only resists oppression, but it also resists all the practices and ideas that justify discrimination against black women. Black feminist thought is the "intellectual center" of black feminism and the black feminist movement.[9] Black feminism is rooted in two interdependent levels of knowledge. The most fundamental level is the black women's standpoint, which is commonplace, everyday thought.[10] The second level is black feminist thought, which is a more specialized knowledge that is developed by experts to express a group standpoint.[11] Although, there is no homogenous black women's standpoint because of our complex and varied experiences, a distinctive, self-defined standpoint can be understood based on "collective experiences."[12] Black feminism focuses on the essential idea of self-definition as a tool for empowerment. Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that focuses on rearticulating the black feminist standpoint for ourselves as well as the world.[13]

At the core of black feminist thought is black women's "collective wisdom," yet the existence of this "collective wisdom" challenges two prevailing theories regarding the consciousness of oppressed groups. One theory argues, "...subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression."[14] The second theory assumes, "…the oppressed are less human than their oppressors, and are therefore less

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[9] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 39-40.
[10] Ibid., 38.
[11] Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 750.
[12] Ibid., 748
[13] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 12.
[14] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 28.

capable of interpreting their own experiences."[15] Collins argues that both viewpoints are refusals to accept any form of expression of "independent consciousness" by an oppressed group as original to the group. She also argues that both theories are refusals to acknowledge expressions of oppressed groups as equal or superior to the perspective of the dominant group.[16] However, Collins asserts that black women's studies have revealed two interlocking explanations that oppose these theories and instead emphasize how black women's refusal to become passive victims of or willing accomplices to their domination has revealed the theory that black women's viewpoint of their oppression is self-defined.[17] The explanations are that black women, as a group, experience the world differently than others who are not both black and female, and that these particular experiences create an independent black feminist consciousness. In other words, black women experience a different reality and may interpret that reality differently than dominant groups.

Collins argues that black feminist thought consists of multiple concepts. One aspect deals with the idea of interpretive frameworks such as race, class, and gender studies. Discourse surrounding black women's experiences became more complex in the 1970s, as African American women began taking a new approach to analyzing their experiences.[18] Rather than simply understanding black women's experiences in relation to race, ideas of oppression based on other aspects such as gender, class, and sexuality were also investigated, simultaneously. Through exploration, black women's experiences were further understood as an interconnecting system of oppression. In 1989, civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to explain the systems of discrimination and oppression based on overlapping

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Collins, "The Social Construction," 746-747.
[17] Ibid., 747.
[18] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 10.

social characteristics. The term revealed that oppressions could not be simplified into individual forms; rather oppressions of black women were combined to create inequity. [19] Thus, the interpretive framework shifted from focusing on separate forms of oppression, with an emphasis on racism, to a more complex and inclusive exploration of intersectional systems of oppression. Understanding black women's experiences under the umbrella of a system of discrimination that is interconnected further aids in the development of black feminist theory.

Feminist scholars generally agree that the connecting cord between women is a history of patriarchal oppression. Similarly, Africanist generally agree that there is a collective experience of racist oppression between people of African heritage. Black feminism reflects both standpoints, yet characteristics that are deemed distinctly African or female often overlap. Similarities between the two standpoints reveal that despite dramatic differences between conditions of oppression, there may be consistency in the epistemologies of oppressed groups. Collins mentions these similarities to note that an Afrocentric feminist epistemology reflects similarities in the epistemologies of both blacks and feminists, yet it also reveals elements that are exclusively connected to black women, as a group. In other words, there are ways in which the oppression of black women relates to the oppression of black men and ways in which the oppression of black women relates to the oppression of white women, yet black women also stand apart from both groups in some ways. Therefore, the idea of a "both/or" orientation, described by feminist sociologist Deborah K. King, is brought into question and examined in relation to black feminism.[20] "While an Afrocentric feminist epistemology reflects elements of epistemologies used by blacks as a group and women as a group, it also paradoxically

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[19] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 20.

[20] Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 68.

demonstrates features that may be unique to black women. On certain dimensions, black women may more closely resemble black men, on others, white women, and on still others, black women may stand apart from both groups."[21] King's theory brings about the idea that black women are members of both black and feminist groups, while simultaneously not completely belonging to either. In this situation, black women are forced to choose which group to identify with, white women or black men.

Collins considers the "both/or" theory and expands it to include what she terms the "outsider within" theory.[22] Black women simultaneously belong to and stand apart from both groups. Bonnie Thornton Dill asserts that the "dialect of black womanhood," which reflects ideas similar to the "both/or" orientation, is central to the Afrocentric feminist consciousness.[23] Dissecting black feminism in this way helps us to understand the foundational ideas that underlie theories of a unique black feminist consciousness. However, Collins argues that it is more productive to utilize black feminism as a connection between the two oppressed groups, black men and white women. She contends that a black feminist epistemology is a more accurate approach to developing and examining black feminist thought. Because factors outside of race and gender play a role in determining epistemologies, all black women do not necessarily share an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Black feminist standpoints are very much rooted in life conditions based on social class, rather than simply combining black and female values.[24]

Understanding the importance of relating relevant epistemological approaches is vital to developing black feminist thought. Utilizing Eurocentric, masculine epistemologies essentially

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[21] Collins, "The Social Construction," 757.
[22] Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S26-S29.
[23] Bonnie Thornton Dill, "The Dialectics of Black Womanhood," *Signs* 4, no. 3 (1979): 544.
[24] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 758.

force black women's expression of our experiences to be viewed through white male interpretations. Thus, black feminist thought would remain subjugated knowledge. [25] Black feminist epistemology is a process for determining truth that is generally accepted amongst black women.[26] It is rooted in collective experiences and worldviews of black women, specifically in regards to work, family and oppression. A collective wisdom of a black women's standpoint is developed as these particular experiences and worldviews are shared and passed on. Standards for accessing knowledge claims may be available to black women because of these shared experiences and the principles become black women's wisdom, or black feminist epistemology.[27]

Collins contends that the most important element when developing black feminist thought is the absolute requirement of living life as a black woman. Produced thought, within black women's communities, is significantly connected to "a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions."[28] Black feminist thought is produced and validated by black women's understandings of our own experiences and histories. Collins asserts that many black women have produced a tradition of black feminist thought that was met with much rejection. In addition to singers, poets, and storytellers, academics have attempted to create an understanding of Afrocentric feminist epistemologies. Theories of black feminist thought by black women scholars were rejected as legitimate unless the women earned advanced degrees and adhered to Eurocentric masculine epistemologies, rather than a solely Afrocentric epistemology. Rather than producing a concretely alternative understanding of black feminist thought, for work to be

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[25] Ibid., 269.
[26] Ibid., 274.
[27] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 275.
[28] Collins, "The Social Construction," 770.

accepted as scholarly it needed to be produced from the standpoint of a foundational understanding of Eurocentric masculinity.

As the range of black feminist scholarship expands, the requirement to center ideas around Eurocentric masculine epistemologies diminishes; however, black feminist thought must now meet the criteria of three basic groups. Black feminist thought must be validated by black women, accepted and legitimized by black women scholars, and within academia, must also be able to confront Eurocentric masculine epistemologies. What makes this problematic is that theories that adequately meeting the criteria of one group may fall short of acceptance from one or more of the other groups. The challenge to meet the criteria of all three groups may not be necessary, given the rationale for constructing black feminist thought. Collins declares that rather than attempting to situate black feminist thought in the established academic frameworks in an effort to reveal universal knowledge claims that can translate between epistemologies, it is more useful to rearticulate black women's standpoints. This, in essence, gives black women tools to resist subordination by refocusing previous academic discourse for inclusion of black feminist thought. However, in academia, theories may continue to be rejected if they do not accommodate the white male worldview. Thus, black women scholars must ultimately placate white-male dominated academic institutions by developing knowledge claims that accommodate not only Afrocentric feminist epistemologies, but also Eurocentric masculine epistemologies. Collins refers to this goal as "objective generalizations that can stand as universal truths."[29]

Collins primarily focuses on academia; however, her theories are also relevant to the art world. Collins discusses the initial problems with presenting ideas from an Afrocentric epistemology, which essentially relate to countering European masculine epistemologies. Yet,

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[29] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 282.

this requirement for legitimization diminishes as the range of black feminist scholarship expands. There is a direct correlation between these theories and a comparison of Catlett's and Thomas's work. As an African American female artist working as early as the 1940s, Catlett, along with other black female artists, was forced to work on beginning the process of countering Eurocentric masculine ideas and promoting imagery of black womanhood through an Afrocentric perspective. The necessity of validation by European masculine ideology somewhat diminished as the range of topics expanded and the amount of artwork produced by African American female artists increased. Thomas is able to utilize the progress made by previous black female artists. The vast array of ideas she portrays regarding black womanhood significantly differs from previous artist. Her success as an artist also demonstrates an expansion of the range of perspectives considered acceptable and legitimate. Previously, white, heterosexual, male perspectives completely dominated the art world. Although the domination has not completely diminished, the range of legitimate and acceptable perspectives has broadened.

Suppression of knowledge equips dominant groups with tools of oppression. Suppression of knowledge that is produced by oppressed groups appears as absence of opposition to oppression, which may in turn imply willing cooperation in the group's own victimization;[30] thus, making domination easier and appear natural. Collins argues that African American women's oppression encompasses three interdependent dimensions in regards to suppression of black feminist thought. The three dimensions are economic, political, and ideological. This paper focuses on the black feminist representation of black womanhood in the work of two artists working in two different eras. Thus, although Collins refers to multiple forms of suppression of black feminist thought, in this paper I focus specifically on the ideological dimension of

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[30] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 5.

suppression. Ideology is a system of ideas that typically reflects the interest of a specific group.[31] The ideological dimension of black women's suppression involves what Collins refers to as "controlling images."[32] Controlling images of black women are the negative stereotypes of black womanhood that have been fundamental in the establishment of ideologies to legitimize the oppression of black women.[33] An example of a controlling image is mammy imagery, which supplemented the creation of an ideology that supported slavery. One rationale for the promotion of the mammy stereotype was the perpetuation of the myth of the contentment of slaves. It was utilized to not only legitimize slavery as harmless, but also to create an illusion of generosity through slavery by enhancing the myth that slavery created opportunities for uncivilized beings to receive material and spiritual needs.[34] Because of the exclusion of black women's ideas and knowledge, negative stereotypes applied to black women such as the mammy myth have pervaded society and become hegemonic.[35] Furthermore, the ideologies created from controlling images developed to depict discrimination against black women as natural and inevitable.

Self-defined stances typically assist in encouraging oppressed groups to reject domination, which may result in resistance of subordination. Thus, fear of oppressed groups' resistance and rebellion is a specific reason for dominant groups' suppression of alternative viewpoints. Regardless, black women are choosing to develop independent viewpoints because of the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the dominant viewpoint. Black women's realization and expression of a distinctive black feminist consciousness is problematic because our expressions work opposite the dominant group's effort to suppress it and thus complicates the dominant

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[31] Ibid., 7.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Sue K. Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the shaping of US social policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 41.
[35] Ibid.

group's interests that rely on the suppression of expression of black feminist consciousness. For these reasons, self-defined expressions of black womanhood are marginalized and delegitimized.

Black feminist thought, as the intellectual center of black feminism, identifies the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of black women.[36] Black feminist thought is created from black feminist standpoints and is the catalyst for black feminists' resistance of oppressions of black women. The core of black feminist thought is to work against injustices and ideologies that work to legitimize oppression of black women.[37] Black women, as a group, have collectively experienced similar oppressions, which have encouraged the portrayal of a self-defined standpoint. An understanding and expression of a black feminist consciousness has promoted activism, which is referred to as black feminism and the black feminist movement.

Collins describes the connection between black women's "collective experiences" and "group knowledge" as a dialogical relationship.[38] A dialogical relationship proposes the idea that "changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness."[39] Therefore, changes in the collective experiences of black women may promote changes in black feminist thought, which may result in an altered version of black feminism. In regards to black feminism, the collective experiences refer to changes in societal, political, and cultural aspects of black women's lives. Because black feminist thought is tied to lived experiences, changes in black feminist consciousness explain shifts in activism throughout black feminism. Modifications within black feminism are not simply results of shifts in social conditions. The knowledge and actions of black feminism are

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[36] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 750.
[37] Ibid., 14.
[38] Ibid., 34.
[39] Ibid.

required to change for continuous resistance of shifting social conditions.[40] As African American women's experiences change, a need arises for new black feminist analyses of black womanhood.[41]

With the assumption that black women have an independent, oppositional knowledge concerning our own suppression, a black feminist consciousness can be developed, namely black feminist thought. One significant element in the development of black feminist thought is the "process of destruction" that reveals how concepts portrayed as natural or reflections of reality are actually ideological and culturally constructed.[42] As previously discussed, another aspect of developing black feminist thought is utilizing black feminist epistemological principles for intellectual discourse, by challenging terms based on standard epistemological criteria. Yet another component is the inclusion of ideas from black women not previously considered intellectual. Because black feminist thought relies on the collective experiences of black women, it constantly changes as experiences change.

The theory of how "collective experiences" and "group knowledge" is a dialogical relationship is particularly relevant to the art world, as it accounts for the shift in how African American art was produced from the 1960s to the present. The differentiations between the overall purpose and message within the artwork of Elizabeth Catlett and Mickalene Thomas relates to changed experiences. African American women who came of age during or before the Civil Rights era had drastically different experiences than women who came of age after the Civil Rights era. The difference between our experiences is based on social, cultural, and political changes in the U.S. The collective experiences of black women refers to common

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[40] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 43.
[41] Ibid., 44.
[42] Ibid., 18.

experiences in relation to broad issues such as oppression. Generally speaking, how black women experience and navigate different time periods is reflected in artwork as group knowledge. Therefore, information regarding black womanhood that is portrayed in the ideas and artwork of Thomas differs from those of Catlett because of the shift in collective experiences.

CHAPTER 3 ELIZABETH CATLETT AND BLACK NATIONALISM

Elizabeth Catlett's extensive career as an artist and activist reflected multiple subtle shifts, yet the importance of self-defined representations and the uplift of the African American community held constant as the central themes throughout her artwork. Catlett's intricately depicted sculptures and linocut prints portrayed her solidarity as well as her protest and activism with working class and oppressed people. Catlett's artwork spanned over more than sixty years and throughout the United States and Mexico, as representations of her beliefs. She believed that art gained its power through the "artist's command of form, sensitivity to materials, and technical proficiency."[43] Although her artistic technique was evident through her prints and sculptures, she utilized her talent and training to convey messages. She believed the message behind the visual imagery of her work was more important than the artwork itself.[44] Community was an incredibly important aspect of Catlett's life. She not only wanted to reflect her ideas regarding the African American community in her work, but she was also convinced of the importance of clearly conveying her messages to the black community, especially. She portrayed positive narratives to counter degrading, stereotypical imagery of blackness in an effort to empower the black community.

Catlett was born to a single mother in the early 1900s, a time when there was little effort to hide the face of racism and injustices against blacks. Blatant racism, segregation and injustice still reigned throughout the nation as results of white's fears of perceived lost superiority. Her personal experiences throughout her life laid the foundation for her focus as an artist throughout her career. For example, despite being accepted to the Carnegie Institute of Technology

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[43] Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: In the Image of the People*, (Chicago: Art
      Institute of Chicago. 2000), 5.
[44] Ibid., 7.

following high school, once her race was revealed, she was rejected admittance to the art program. Additionally, while teaching in segregated black schools in North Carolina, Catlett attempted to join the fight for equal pay for black teachers. The North Carolina Teacher's Association denied blacks the right to earn the same pay as whites. Catlett understood the opposing standpoint of black people in the U.S. because of her personal experiences, such as the two specific examples mentioned above, as well as her continued engagement with artists and other members of the black community.

During graduate school at the University of Iowa, Catlett's sculpture instructor, Grant Wood encouraged her to focus her work around subjects that were particularly personal to her. With Woods's encouragement, Catlett began focusing her work on black people, specifically black women. Throughout her career, she continued to primarily produce artwork that spoke to ideas surrounding the black community and black womanhood. Catlett also credited Wood with teaching her technical and formal discipline, as well as encouraging her to sculpt rather than paint. Although Wood encouraged his students to sculpt wood, Catlett eventually moved to stone and received the first MFA in sculpture from the university. Her first major work was her thesis sculpture, *Mother and Child* (1940, fig. 1), and it set the tone, in theme and craftsmanship, for many of her future sculptures. *Mother and Child* is a brown clay sculpture of a seated woman with a small child in her lap. The woman has one foot placed beneath her and she appears to be in a relaxed pose. Her head is tilted down toward the child and her hands are grasping the child's body. In an embrace, she is holding the child close to her bosom. The clay is smoothly carved to realistically render the figures. The emotion and connection between the figures is recognized as characteristic of mother and child.

Catlett began portraying characteristics of black women that countered negative stereotypes and instead presented her perspective of black womanhood. Hard-working, powerful, strong, and loving were some characteristics she often depicted in the figures she produced and she used her artwork to celebrate black women's contribution to the country and to the particular movements she supported. In addition to the influences of artists and art historians, experiences of racism and sexism throughout her life deeply affected her work. Most of her work focused on black womanhood in various ways. Catlett revisited the theme of "mother and child" multiple times throughout her career.

The 1960s saw the beginning of a momentous shift in the political climate in the United States. The black community became significantly focused on solidarity as they attempted to utilize unity in efforts of liberation. Catlett, while living in Mexico also experienced a transition period during the 1960s. In 1966 she decided to leave the printmaking group, Taller de Gráfica Popular, after 20 years of participation. She did, however, continue working as a sculptor and sculpture professor in Mexico. She was very much involved with artists and the art world in Mexico; however, a tremendous amount of her time and energy was devoted to the struggles of African Americans.[45] Until the 1960s, while Catlett lived in Mexico, her artwork was not given much attention in the U.S., despite remaining connected with many U.S. black artists. However, as social justice issues were being brought to the forefront and fought through the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, Catlett's subject matter became much more relevant in the U.S. Amongst other issues she regularly protested imperialism, racism, and class and gender oppression both in Mexico and in the U.S. By 1962 she was officially a citizen of Mexico and barred from entering the U.S. because of her perceived political beliefs. Despite living in

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[45] Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico,* (Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2005), 129.

Mexico she continued exhibiting work in the US and became a prominent figure in the Black Arts Movement.

Catlett began to reflect her African American heritage and her concern with African American issues much more explicitly in her artwork during the 1960s. Just as she had done in regards to Mexican politics and culture, she continued protesting, but the community on which she focused shifted to the African American community.[46] Thus, the themes of social justice that she worked on during her time at the Taller continued to pervade her work but stylistically, she also began shifting to more abstracted images. As her primary focus shifted to liberation in the black community in the U.S. and her artwork changed stylistically, the importance of creating art that was accessible to all people remained a significant focus.

One particular image that depicted Catlett's political interests and activism regarding the oppression and liberation of the black community was her multilingual serigraph poster *Freedom for Angela Davis* (1969, fig. 2). The poster was simply a recognizable image of Black Nationalist writer and activist Angela Davis with the words "FREE ANGELA DAVIS AND ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS" repeated in multiple languages. From Mexico, Catlett organized an international movement to protest the imprisonment of Davis and to confront racism. Not only did Catlett produce the poster for distribution, she also wrote press releases, approached other groups for support, and spoke publicly in Mexico City about the impact of racism in the U.S.[47] *Freedom for Angela Davis* is indicative of Catlett's political viewpoints and displayed Catlett's stylistic choices of using simplicity to make her work accessible to the public. The simplified image was reproduced from a photograph and only features the head of Davis. The varying fonts

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[46] Ibid., 129.
[47] Ibid., 136.

and sizes of the text counter the weight of the figure to create balance throughout the image.[48]

The way Catlett chose to render Davis was also important because it spoke to Catlett's goal of

presenting the black woman as strong, dignified, and even heroic.

Although Catlett was a citizen of Mexico and prohibited from traveling to the U.S., she

focused her artwork on the political happening of her home country and the community she most

identified with. Her dedication to the movement was apparent through her artwork. Throughout

her career, she focused on both African American and Mexican subjects, yet her most prominent

affinity to discuss issues of African American culture, particularly the subject of black

womanhood, was pronounced during the Black Arts Movement. She agreed with the

movement's emphasis on black identity, pride in African heritage, and the activism and ideology

of the Black Power Movement.[49] Catlett felt personally connected to the struggle despite her

physical distance from it. She utilized her artwork to stand in solidarity with her black

community in the U.S.

The Black Arts Movement grew out of the Black Power Movement and shared the social

theory of Black Nationalism at its core. Black Nationalism, in its essence, is a social theory that

disavows racist white normative ideology and instead promotes ideas about the unification of

African Americans through the expressions of shared experiences, a self-defined standpoint, and

a foundation in African heritage. The foundation of Black Nationalism is the institution of

American chattel slavery because slavery created the necessary fuel for the creation of and

understanding of Black Nationalism. The inequality that grew from pseudo-scientific

justifications of racism created a platform for protest. Black men became economic tools through

slavery and Black Nationalism counters that objectification. The core of understanding Black

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[48] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico,* 136.
[49] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: In the Image of the People*, 32.

Nationalism is an "acknowledgement of the historical by-product of slavery."[50] White racist ideology coupled with repeated denial of African history, culture, and civilization permeated American society and caused many enslaved blacks to begin accepting such ideas as truth. Black men were taught to renounce their heritage and accept their status in the U.S., which resulted in a lack of self-pride. Black Nationalism formed out of an awareness of cultural dispossession. It further developed through a conscious internal examination, which revealed historical and social traditions.[51] In other words, blacks began studying African history and heritage. Because Black Nationalism relies on the confrontation of white dominance, in its simplest form it can be reduced to a refutation of the underlying ideology that justifies slavery and segregation.[52]

The earliest distinctive and collective form of Black Nationalism was expressed during the early nineteenth century by a group of free blacks and was a desire to separate from the U.S.[53] It identified political nationalism and argued for establishing a black nation outside of the U.S. After emancipation, the desire for immigration waned as blacks focused on becoming part of American society.[54] Marcus Garvey, following World War I, prescribed the initial manifestation of an integral form of Black Nationalism. It included political, economic, and cultural nationalism. Rather than secluding themselves, blacks attempted to participate in economic aspects of American society. However, blacks were rejected from equal participation in the economy and thus worked toward strengthening the economy of the black community. Economic and cultural nationalism specifically sought to break down racial barriers by

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[50] James Turner, "The Sociology of Black Nationalism," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 2 (1969): 23.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] J. Herman Blake, "Black Nationalism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382 (1969): 16.

[54] Ibid.

developing economic strength, racial solidarity, and black consciousness.[55] Many aspects of the theory of the integral form of nationalism were continued through multiple leaders of The Nation of Islam and the range of focus for contemporary Black Nationalism increased to include topics such as self-determination, among others. Additionally, rather than equally integrating multiple components of nationalism, cultural nationalism has become a more prominent focus.[56]

Through her artwork and activism, Catlett implicitly and explicitly promoted ideas of Black Nationalism. *Malcolm X Speaks for Us* (1969, fig. 3), explicitly asserts Catlett's Black Nationalist political stance. The three-tiered linocut represents complexity in its simplicity. Varying sizes of renderings of heads disjointed from an earthly realm perpetuate multiple ideas relevant to Catlett's assertion of Black Nationalism, as well as criticisms of the Black Arts Movement. An image of a woman or girl replicated five times, greets a stoic three-quarter view of a recognizable image of Malcolm X. A trio of larger black male heads gaze out to the viewer as they rise from the lower border of the image. Enclosing the uppermost portion of the print is a repeated reproduction of the first image from Catlett's *Negro Woman* series, "I am the Negro Woman." A textured monoprint image fills the background and links the faces. The inclusion of Malcolm X is an explicit indication of Catlett's agreement with Black Nationalist theories. The other three figures represent the black community, the "us" referred to in the title. Malcolm as a single figure represents leadership and a singular voice, while the repetition of the other figures creates continuity throughout the frame and symbolizes the black community. Just as in Catlett's work, community was a significant theme within Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism argues for the importance of the collective community.[57]

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[55] Blake, 15.
[56] Turner, 18.
[57] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico,* 137.

Black Nationalism is a political ideology based on the black man's experience in the U.S. Black Nationalism worked from a theme of independence and sought to counter the forced dependence of black men on the white dominant culture.[58] Black Nationalism stresses the necessity of African Americans' "unitary response" to domination and oppression.[59] Black Nationalism encouraged ideas surrounding black males rather than simply all black people, and the unified voice that was most predominant throughout struggles rooted in Black Nationalism always promoted black masculinity. Perhaps the promotion of masculine voices within Black Nationalism explains the significance of the differentiating sizes of the faces; the black boy, or young male is the largest image and attracts the viewer's focus most prevalently. Within *Malcolm Speaks for Us*, male, female, adult, and child are all represented. Catlett's inclusion of young black girls and black women speaks to her disapproval of the exclusion of black female voices and concern within the movements of the black struggle. The lack of representation of black females was a critical concern of Catlett's.[60] Catlett's choice to visually represent black women and girls while actively referencing Black Nationalism was her way of forcing the inclusion of females. Catlett's repetitive reproduction of the image from her *Negro Women (I am the Negro Woman)* series also places her among the "us" for whom Malcolm is speaking.

Catlett's lithograph *Black is Beautiful* (1970, fig. 4), very explicitly referenced the movement while specifically paying homage to the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party was founded in the 1960s in the U.S. as a revolutionary black organization, rooted in nationalism and socialism. The cornerstone of the Black Power Movement was the Black Panther Party. Black Nationalism, as well as ideas of self-definition and self-determination, is the

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[58] Turner, 18.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico,* 137.

foundation of the Black Power Movement. Black power focuses on empowerment of the black community by having control of our own lives and viewing the world through our own realities. As a nationalistic concept, Black Power emphasizes liberation for African Americans. The faces of a black man and a black woman are rendered as emblems of who the Black Panther Party represented. With subtle tonal variations, combined with naturalism and simplified variations, the figures take on the quality of structural forms and are stylistically influenced by African masks.[61] Both faces are tightly framed as the man turns and focuses on the distance, the woman's frontal face is sorrowful and disconnected. The remainder of the composition is filled with Black Panther Buttons with the words "Black is Beautiful" encircling the Black Panther logo. Once again, Catlett represents ideas of Black Nationalism and solidarity with the movement, while criticizing the exclusion of women. Catlett portrays the face of a woman on an equal scale to the man, yet the juxtaposition between the two figures speaks to the juxtaposed roles of each gender in the Party. While supporting the overall concepts of the Black Panther Party, and subsequently the Black Power Movement, Catlett incessantly promoted black feminist ideas. According to the Black Panther ethos, as a black woman in the struggle, her role was to support the black men fighting. However, Catlett's artwork argues her disagreement with subjugating black women and promotes inclusion of black feminist standpoints.

Black feminist art is often mistakenly defined as only including representations of black women. However, at the core, black feminism is more of an expression of the experiences of black women. As a wife and mother, Catlett experienced personal relationships with males, advocated for males from a personal standpoint, and depicted realities that women faced as they related to males in their community. For example, *The Torture of Mothers* (1970, fig. 5)

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[61] Ibid., 138.

represents one aspect of the black community's struggle for liberation, which is police brutality against young black males. The profile of a black woman's head is rendered in an imaginary realm as her thoughts are consumed with the death of a young black boy. His body is contorted, with his face to the ground, and lifeless. White clothing and black skin form a break in the jagged, harsh red mass that fills the cavity of the woman's mind. The simplified forms of the woman's face, reminiscent of African masks, are almost emotionless as it creates the left border of the image but her eyes thoughtfully and mournfully peer upward. The title reveals the relationship between the two figures, as well as the theme of the image. Through *The Torture of Mothers* Catlett speaks to the issues of police violence but more specifically discusses how black women are affected when their young sons are murdered. Protesting police brutality, especially unjust murder at the hands of police was a concern of the Black Power Movement, yet the standpoint of women who were affected by the unexpected deaths of young black men was not initially acknowledged as relevant. Images such as Catlett's *The Torture of Mothers* revealed the unique and critical standpoint of black women in relation to police brutality against young black males. The voice of women was promoted through Catlett's work, not only as an expression of intersectional oppression, but specifically as an expression of the experiences of black women in the U.S.

Although the promotion of Black Nationalism through the Black Power Movement began diminishing after the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, at the same time the Black Arts Movement officially began.[62] In response to Malcolm X's murder, writer LeRoi

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[62] Lisa Gail Collins. "The Art of Transformation: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movement," In *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* edited by Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 275.

Jones moved to Harlem and began the Black Arts Repertory Theater/ School (BARTS). The creation of BART marked the beginning of the Black Arts Movement.

As the Black Power Movement was concerned with the liberation of African Americans, the Black Arts Movement's primary concern was specifically the cultural and spiritual liberation of Blacks.[63] The central purpose of the movement was to express the "Soul of the Nation." The Black Arts Movement was born out of the Black Power Movement and centered around ideas of Black Nationalism. African American artists attempted to create a defining notion of blackness before and during the Civil Rights era. Within the Black Arts Movement there was a desire to work toward the creation of a black aesthetic that incorporated Afrocentric themes and stylistic elements. Because blacks have been forced into a society in which our African culture is not accommodated, we are outsiders forced to participate in a society controlled by a group to which we do not belong.[64] The Black Arts Movement was the cultural aspect of the Black Power Movement and aided in fighting against oppression by the white dominant society. Attempting to create a black aesthetic was an important element in the struggle. However, the Black Arts Movement was much more complex than simply creating a black aesthetic and Catlett's activism and artwork exemplified the principles of the Black Arts Movement.

Catlett expressed a range of subjects and narratives through her prints; however, the overwhelming majority of her sculptural work consisted of representations of black women. *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1968, fig. 6) is perhaps Catlett's most relevant piece with regards to revealing her ideas about Black Nationalism and black feminism. Similar to *Malcolm Speaks for Us*, Catlett makes clear her connection to the struggle with the title of the sculpture. As Catlett was confined to Mexico, she wanted to display her solidarity with the Black Power

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[63] Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," 54.
[64] Ibid.

Movement and pay homage especially to black women who participated in the struggles in ways she could not. A life-sized cedar form, abstracted yet easily recognizable as a woman displayed as a visual representation of the strength and courage of black women, in general, but specifically the black women who fought alongside black men in the struggle for liberation and equality. Rather than representing a specific person, the lack of specific facial features allows the sculpture to represent a variety of individuals. The abstraction of the figure also signifies the idea of the strength of a unified group. A gaping hole bordered in black and piercing straight through the angular body is a vessel for the potential energy that flows through the sculpture to the erect fist extending high about the tilted head. The fist is a symbol of solidarity with the struggle. The figure is simple, yet grand and powerful.

Homage to My Young Black Sisters represents Black Nationalist ideas through the revolutionary positioning of the figure as well as the stylistic choices that refer to African sculpture. As a significant element of Black Nationalism, African heritage was a large influence throughout Catlett's print and sculptural work. The abstracted curves and angles of the figure are indicative of Catlett's effort to reference Africa through her work. In addition to representing her ideas regarding the struggle and the position of black women within it, *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* is an excellent example of Catlett's belief regarding the importance of the artist's responsibility to render emotion and meaning through each piece. Another aspect of her work that was influenced by African sculpture dealt not only with form, but more specifically form as a tool for the expression of ideas. "Most important for me is not the beauty of the form but rather the expression that can be achieved with this form." It is clear through each of Catlett's

sculptures that she carved the material to reveal meaning, rather than simply create an aesthetically pleasing form.[65]

Although Catlett's career began before and continued after the Black Arts Movement, her work reflected the ideals of the movement. Through her artwork and activism, she embodied the central ideologies of the Black Arts Movement, such as creating artwork specifically for black people and replacing degrading imagery of blackness with uplifting narratives. Through her artwork, she aided in creating self-defined imagery for black people, as well as the beginning stages of a black aesthetic.

In the beginning stages of the Black Power and Black Arts Movement, black women were positioned in the background and their standpoint was not accounted for or portrayed. Artists such as Catlett gave a voice to the marginalized group of black women who were affected by intersectional oppression and wanted to participate in the fight against it. Catlett's understanding of utilizing form to express ideas and her range of thematic sources aided in her ability to navigate the black community and movements to promote a perspective of black women. Not all of Catlett's work explicitly focus on women, instead Catlett attempts to transfer black womanhood from the margins to center; her ideas and themes are centered around womanhood and the experiences of black women.

Elizabeth Catlett is heralded as an activist and dominant artistic figure within the black community, and particularly revered as a significant figure during the Black Arts Movement. Her continued success as a visual artist and activist representing unitary ideas of Black Nationalism led her into a position of prestige within the black community and the visual arts world in the U.S. and Mexico. However, it was her resounding voice as a black woman that made her work

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[65] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, 142-144.

particularly compelling. She not only contributed to the collective goal of Black Nationalism, but she also forced the inclusion of female perspectives and self-defined representations of black womanhood into the frame. Among other black female artists, Catlett gave a voice to black women who had previously been silenced by the dominant white misogynistic culture, white feminists, and black males. As African American women were often rendered inferior and assigned subordinate roles in the struggle for black liberation, Catlett presented the idea that Black Nationalism should be inclusive of the entire black community, equally. She gave a voice to a group within the black community that remained subjugated and was not accurately represented through the collective voice of the struggle. What was significantly interesting and perhaps gives credence to the success of Catlett was her ability to continue to include women in the uplift of the male-dominated perspective of Black Nationalism, without straying enough from the center to be dismissed. Catlett's strategic mode of utilizing the ideological framework of Black Nationalism, critiquing it without offense, and promoting a black feminist standpoint was what made her work dynamic. Her success as such a significant representative of black feminism was rooted in her ability to stand firm in her beliefs as a Black Nationalist but also to understand and speak for oppressed groups whose voices were not clearly represented.

CHAPTER 4 MICKALENE THOMAS AND POST-BLACKNESS

Mickalene Thomas is a contemporary painter, photographer, and mixed-media artist. She is most recognized for her large-scale, decorative, brightly colored, figurative paintings featuring black women in rooms filled with 1970s décor. Her art is her voice. It is an individual expression of black womanhood and she has no desire to meld into a unified voice within a black movement.[66] Her artistic choices are implicative of her multiple influences including French Modernism, African art, and specific African American artists such as Carrie Mae Weems, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence.[67] Her work is primarily concerned with representations of African American women. Thomas is particularly interested in confronting Western standards of beauty, expectations of femininity, sexuality, and issues involving the black female body. Thomas asserts that her artwork is her way of looking in a mirror.[68] Her figures are in some ways representative of herself or others with whom she interacts. Similar to many artists, she uses her artwork to express her viewpoint and work through her life experiences. Thomas' work is aesthetically powerful and attention grabbing and the conceptual themes of her paintings and photographs also add complexity. The large-scale format she typically uses for her paintings creates a loud voice and Thomas magnifies the legitimacy of her artistic expressions through underlying themes.

Thomas cites her experience of viewing Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* and *Ain't Jokin'* series in a retrospective exhibition as a significant influence on her as an artist.

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[66] Mickalene Thomas and Sean Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB* 116 (2011): 35.

[67] See Mickalene Thomas and Sean Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB* 116 (2011): 32-33, 35; Roberta Smith, "Loud, Proud and Painted," *The New York Times*, September   27, 2012, accessed September 30, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/arts/design/mickalene-thomas-origin-of-the universe-at-brooklyn-museum.html

[68] Thomas and Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," 31.

Thomas was in her early twenties and recalls Weems's exhibition as one of her first times viewing an exhibition of artwork by an African American woman. In an interview for BOMB magazine, she revealed that it made her "aware of how you can use your experiences as a person and make art out of it."[69] Her artwork is intensely personal. It is an important aspect of her work to include the "ingredients" of who she is.[70]

Thomas's work addresses intersectional oppression, such as race, gender, and sexuality. She confronts stereotypical theories and heteronormative notions of black womanhood. As a black lesbian, Thomas takes a particularly interesting viewpoint because her sexuality adds a level of marginalization that heterosexual black women don't experience. As a black woman depicting black women, she exemplifies the black feminist idea of self-definition and self-representation. Similar to Catlett, Thomas uses her artwork to discuss different elements of black womanhood and concerns of black women. However, Thomas's work is much more of an individual assertion of ideas, rather than a contribution to a unified voice against oppression. This deviation from a focus on community and unity epitomizes a significant difference between the ambitions of Black Power Era artists and current post-black era artists.

Many scholars argue that the culmination of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras ushered in a new era that simultaneously utilizes the foundation of Civil Rights, as well as Black Nationalist ideas, yet also criticizes and attempts to shift away from such ideas. Before the Civil Rights era many African American scholars, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke believed that black art needed to be propaganda that helped improve the conditions of the race and

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[69] Thomas and Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," 32.
[70] Ibid., 35.

produced in an effort to develop black people and black culture.[71] These theories were challenged beginning with the Civil Rights era. Civil Rights era artists were interested in fighting for the liberation of black people through issues such as desegregation. Post-black art moves away from the requirement of an overtly political aesthetic to a more ambiguous and nuanced one.[72] Attempts have been made to centralize new ideas under multiple names such as post-black soul, the new black aesthetic, and post-black. The art world typically refers to artwork that is in opposition to the limiting racial boundaries of blackness as post-black art.

There are varying definitions of post-blackness. Post-black is a term coined by curator Thelma Golden and she used it to explain contemporary black artists who did not wish to be categorized by the prevailing definition of blackness that were presented through the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Post-blackness is rooted in the framework of criticizing the existing notions of blackness and creating space for blacks who are not represented through definitions of blackness.[73] People who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights and Black Power eras are farther removed from personal experiences that older generations had, such as Jim Crow laws and segregation. Because the experiences of the contemporary black community changed after the Black Power era, a notion of blackness created during that time is no longer a sufficiently definitive representation of blackness. Post-blackness is a breaking away from those eras because blackness does not represent experiences that are not included in the values of the Black Power era.

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[71] Richard Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetic in Contemporary African American Art." *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 641.

[72] Ibid., 645.

[73] Thelma Golden, *Freestyle*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: Studio Museum Harlem, 2001), 14.

Race and gender remain prevalent themes throughout post-black art; however, post-black artists denounce limiting boundaries with regards to personal identity.[74] This is particularly important for artists such as Thomas because homosexuality was an experience that was not represented through blackness. The focus on reestablishing black masculinity in the Black Power era left issues of black womanhood and voices of black women excluded from the voice of the movement. The increase in the inclusion of black female artists has contributed to the shift between Black Power era art and post-black art. Within post-blackness, as female voices are promoted, expressions of perspectives that were once silenced are now being revealed. One prevailing notion of post-blackness is the re-articulation of African American identity. Thus, post-black artists are not completely rejecting ideas of blackness. They are, instead, arguing that African American identity is a much broader spectrum than what was depicted through categorizations during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. African American Studies scholar Paul Taylor discusses how many artists born after the Civil Rights era argue, "[Blackness] limits artists to black influences and black topics, and saddles them with the burden of inhabiting the art world most saliently as Black Artists."[75] Post-black artists call for the release of limiting racial categorizations, as well as communal responsibility, although topics of gender and race are commonly portrayed in post-black art.

Thomas expresses ideas of post-blackness through her work in multiple ways but most broadly through her focus on individuality. Scholar Richard Schur contends "Post-soul aesthetics have liberated artists to question the social construction of race, but invited the re-examination of ways that African American art is or should be connected to African American

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[74] Renee Ater, "Post-black Art and the New Millennium," in *Creating Their Own Image: A History of African-American Women Artists by Lisa Farrington* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 281.

[75] Paul Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 632.

communities…"[76] Although black feminist thought is not representative of all black women, it is knowledge rooted in common experiences of black womanhood. Thomas reveals through her artwork the elements of black womanhood that were excluded from understandings of black feminism during the Black Power era. Her artwork is about broad topics such as race, gender, class, and sexuality but more than anything else, she focuses on herself and her experiences. She has no interest in representing anyone else's experiences.[77] However, Thomas has experiences that are common with many other black women. Although her intent is not necessarily to represent any form of "group knowledge," she does in fact individually respond to a form of common experiences.

The black female body is a central element in all of her artwork. The discourse she has created centers around the black female body including challenging Western ideas of beauty, confronting notions of female identity and sexuality, and the importance of self-representation. She is critical of the exploitation and commodification of black female bodies by the dominant white culture as well as within the black community. She discusses depictions of the black female body throughout Western art history by criticizing how black women are depicted and the lack of inclusion of black women in Western art by white male artists. She seeks to counter the depiction of the black female body in positions of servitude and through the viewpoint of an anthropological perspective. She reinterprets art historical images that feature white women as the central figures and repurposes the images by inserting black women in those positions.

Thomas has multiple paintings that are representative of this idea; however, *Origin of the Universe I* (2012, fig. 7), is an especially apt expression of Thomas's ideas. A nude black female

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[76] Schur, 642.

[77] Lisa Melandri Lisa and Mickalene Thomas, *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe,* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012) 33.

figure is partially depicted reclined on yellow bedding. The identity of the figure is concealed as the viewpoint is between her spread legs. Her flatly painted brown skin is bordered by the bedding. Her breast, lower torso, and upper legs are exposed and surround the central focus, which is the pubic area of the figure. *Origin of the Universe* is a reworking of French Impressionist Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (*Origin of the World*) (1866, fig. 8). Thomas held steady multiple aspects of the painting, enough to display the obvious connection, yet the changes that she made are noteworthy and complicate the message. Thomas replaced the French female figure with an African American woman, more specifically herself. Courbet's original painting was a white masculine viewpoint of a white female; Thomas's is a self-portrait. The implications are remarkable because Thomas not only confronts the white male-gaze and the denigration and exclusion of the black female body within Western art history, but she situates a black lesbian as the origin of the universe. By placing her own body in the frame, she makes the work even more personal than her artwork usually is. *Origin of the Universe* is a clear indication of Thomas's desire to place the black female body in the spectrum of Western ideas of beauty and convert the black female body from commodity to subject.

She also confronts the way in which blacks have depicted themselves and is particularly interested in discussing misogyny within the black community, especially the male-dominated Black Power era.[78] Satire and irony are important signifiers of post-black art. Many post-black artists use the irony of self-criticism to speak to issues within the Civil Rights era and within the black community. Thomas creates narratives that appear situated in the 1970s to critique the

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[78] Derek Conrad Murray, "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness"
American Art 28, no. 1 (2014): 12.

masculine-centered black community.[79] Although she is not old enough to remember the 1970s, she recalls hearing stories in her youth about her older family members' experiences.[80] Through installations, she reinvents the memories of the stories she heard during her childhood. The process in which she works further reveal her focus on individualism and self-representation. Her paintings typically begin as installations of these particular scenes. She recalls the wood paneled walls and the patterned 1970s décor from her childhood. She chooses models that remind her of herself in some way because her focus is to express and explore her own experiences through her work.[81] However, she also considers her work a collaboration with the models because she attempts to capture them the way they wished to be viewed.[82] She recreates experiences that she does not personally remember and recontextualizes them to alter the meaning. She also oftentimes uses models who add to the complexity of the narrative, such as homosexual and transsexual women, and further confronts heteronormative ideologies of the Black Power era.[83] By using homosexual and transgender women, as well as identifying as a lesbian herself, she challenges existing notions of female identity. Her primary focus is on self-defined black female identity and she uses recognizable imagery from the 1970s to critique the way in which black women were treated within the black community. Rather than attempting to uplift or liberate the black community through a unified voice against oppression, her artwork simply criticizes the black community's treatment of black women.

La leçon d'amour (2008, figure 9) is an image in which Thomas tackles the subject of homosexuality in the black community in a satirical way. Similar to many of Thomas's images,

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[79] Murray, "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," 12.
[80] Melandri Lisa and Thomas, 33.
[81] Thomas and Landers, 35.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

the photograph features black women with hairstyles, clothing, and accessories that reflect 1970s style. The 1970s theme is also repeated through a paneled wall and music albums. African-patterned textiles cover the floor, furniture and women's bodies. The image features two African-American women, one seated with her legs open to cradle the body of the other woman. The first woman uses her hands to gently, but purposefully hold the leg and hand of the other woman. She focuses intently on the woman in her lap. The second woman, however, peers out toward the viewer as her body lies seemingly lifeless. The second woman appears apathetic toward the first woman and completely disengaged. The title of the image, *La leçon d'amour*, which means "the lesson of love" is an indication of the relationship between the women. Multiple meanings can be inferred based on the positioning of the individuals, as well was the connection between the two, but what is most fascinating is that Thomas is commenting on homosexuality between black women in a satirical way. Through this image, Thomas criticizes the black community's treatment of black women. Lesbians were not accepted into the black community during the Black Power era. To confront heteronormative ideas, Thomas produces a large-scale image that places a lesbian relationship at the center, which creates visibility for black women, more specifically homosexuality.

Thomas's reference to the 1970s credits the "Black Is Beautiful" movement for raising visibility of black women, yet more so specifically critiques mainstream American media for the debasement of black women. Thomas visually references Blaxploitation through recognizable connections such as the 1970s clothing and room décor. Blaxploitation is a controversial subgenre in film that was originally created to specifically appeal to a black audience by using a primarily black cast, soul and funk music, and themes that were thought to be of interest to black people. Blaxploitation films became controversial because of their perceived perpetuation of

racist stereotypes about black people. Thomas recontextualizes the imagery from Blaxploitation films in her photography and paintings to create a possibility of the construction of new meaning.[84] She argues that Blaxploitation films represented black womanhood stereotypically and criticized the films by restoring subjectivity to her models.[85]

Hotter than July (2005, fig. 10) is a clear example of Thomas's common stylistic choices, as well as an indication of her affiliation with post-black era artistic stances. A semi-nude black female figure reclines on a yellow couch in front of a purple wall and decorative curtain. The familiar flatness of the skin is enhanced by decorative elements such as rhinestone, not simply for visual effect but to convey "tawdry regalness."[86] The semi-nudity and the figure's gaze into the distance elicit a seductive quality. The gaze, lack of expression on the subject's face, and the lack of form and volume in the skin tone all render the subject slightly detached from the scene and the viewer. Depicting a figure who is detached is imitative of pornographic films and images.[87] The arrangement is similar to still images from 1970s Blaxploitation films and is used as a tool to reference critical race discourse about Blaxploitation aesthetics.[88]

Thomas's interest in the 1970s also reflects aspects of her relationship with her mother and how the theme of beauty became an important aspect of her own artwork. Thomas's mom, Sandra Bush, had goals of becoming a fashion model; however, during the 1970s finding space in the modeling world for black women was nearly impossible. The 1970s was a time where black women slowly began appearing in the modeling world, yet the demand for black models was very limited. Despite her goals, Sandra had to deal with the reality of limited options in the

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[84] Murray, "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," 12.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 11.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 12.

modeling industry for black women, as well as personal issues that stood in the way of her success. Thomas's view of her mother's struggles made Thomas admire her mom's strength and tenacity. Sandra's goal of becoming a fashion model never came to fruition; however, Thomas utilized her mother as a model for her own artwork.

In the series of paintings that feature Sandra, Thomas refers to her as "Mama Bush." "Mama Bush" was her first and most important muse during her graduate studies at Yale and throughout her career.[89] Her experiences photographing and painting her mom were a substantial catalyst for her artistic focus. During her time at Yale, her artwork shifted to be more personal and more focused on identity and her own experiences. By using her mom as her model, she examined and worked through their relationship. Ideas about beauty were incredibly important to "Mama Bush" and her interests have influenced Thomas.[90] Therefore, beauty is also a reoccurring theme throughout Thomas's work.

Thomas confronts beauty hierarchies and challenges Western ideals and universal standards of beauty. She shifts black women from the margin we are typically placed in, to the center. She counters the denigration of the black female body honoring black female beauty, which inevitably widens the span of what is considered beautiful.[91] Many of Thomas's paintings are portraits of black women embellished with decorative elements such as rhinestones. Her paintings are expressions of her interpretation of black womanhood and work in opposition to racist stereotypical images of black women. "I want to use the black body because the idea of

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[89] Carey Dunne, "The Photographed, Collaged, and Painted Muses of Mickalene Thomas." *Hyperallergic*. March 1, 2016.

[90] Mickalene Thomas. "A Different Type of Beauty: Painter Mickalene Thomas Eulogizes Her Late Mother." *Creative Time Reports*. February 14, 2014.

[91] Melandri and Thomas, 9.

placing it in a context where it is not usually seen or spoken about enables comparison to the Western ideology of beauty."[92]

In an interview for BOMB magazine Thomas discussed her focus on beauty. "I think beauty is one of the most powerful elements but there's a positive and negative to it, as there's a positive and negative side to most things in life. The figure Oshun captures this duality by assigning beauty to a figure of great power who can be both destructive and creative. We respond to beauty, its seduction and attraction, yet what that has done culturally to people that are subject to universal codes of beauty has been devastating. Still, beauty is something we aspire to and continue to be seduced by it."[93] Thomas's mother struggled with ideas of beauty throughout her life. "Mama Bush" aspired to be a model but was not allowed to prosper in a modeling career partially due to racism. Thomas discusses how her mother's crushed dream affected her own life and also expressed her mother's continued pursuit of a universal form of beauty. As her health waned, the most difficult aspect of her health trials was her perceived loss of beauty. Thomas's mother influenced her ideas through her experiences with beauty and her influence is reflected in Thomas's artwork.

Thomas depicted her mother in numerous paintings and photographs but two paintings are particularly useful for understanding the relationship between the two. These two paintings are also an example of Thomas's continual attempt to portray her models in ways they wish to be viewed. *Dim All the Lights* (2009, fig. 12) features "Mama Bush" smiling, posing and gazing out at the viewer. She's in a bright red sweater striped with black rhinestones and sparkly black accents on the shoulders. Her silver belt, earrings, and gold and silver bracelet are also accented with glitter. The sparkly blue and pink eyeshadow matches the sparkles in her hair. Her hands are

[92] Ibid.
[93] Thomas and Landers, 38.

on her hips, her shoulders are tilted, and her face is slightly turned from the viewer. Her muted brown skin, red sweater and decorative elements stand out from the flat, abstract mostly black and white background. The painting celebrates "Mama Bush" and displays her beauty, confidence, and playfulness.

Portrait of Mama Bush 2 (2010, fig. 12) is a very different depiction of Thomas's mother. "Mama Bush" is reclined on a couch that is covered with a floral textile. A flat green background above and animal-print rugs below, flank the couch. "Mama Bush" is wearing colorful makeup and lingerie. Her breasts are partially exposed, her head rests on her hand, and she peers out to the viewer. *Portrait of Mama Bush 2* is much calmer in tone than how Thomas typically depicts her mother. In the image, "Mama Bush" is without her rhinestones-studded afro and there is more of an emphasis on sexualized beauty.

This elevation of black beauty is not original to post-black art. Artists during the Black Arts Movement promoted oppositional ideas regarding black beauty. However, Thomas and many other post-black artists extend the ideas of the Black Arts Movement to be more inclusive of all black women. Many African American artists during the Black Arts Movement were only inclusive of particular representations of black womanhood. Lesbians, for example were excluded from representation in the movement. Post-black artists, however, seek to expand the range of who is allowed to present a voice as an artist.

The female gaze is an important element of Thomas's work. The female gaze typically refers to a feminine perspective, gives females power, and acknowledges females as those who determine what constitutes beauty. Through her paintings, Thomas attempts to empower black women by giving them a level of agency and control over the black female body. She does this

by deliberately including her models in the process of creating the work.[94] It is an act of self-representation that is oppositional to the way women are typically rendered by male artists. Black feminism reveals self-representation as a critical tool for empowerment. Thomas converts the position of black women from object to subject.[95] Many of Thomas's figures are nude and isolated, seemingly for viewing pleasure, yet they are also rebellious. The inclusion of the female gaze empowers the artist as well as the subject.

A Little Taste Outside of Love (2007, fig. 13) is an example of Thomas's depiction of the black female body in a more subjective way. The image portrays a nude figure reclining on a patterned sofa, surrounded by decorative pillows. The familiar muted brown skin of the figure is outlined in rhinestones. Beneath her untamed hair, her eyes peer out to the viewer, yet her back is turned. Her posture is reminiscent of French Neoclassicist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Une Odalisque* (1814, fig. 14)*.* Although Ingres's painting clearly illuminates the male gaze by presenting the figure as an object of male pleasure, Thomas's rendition takes on a completely opposite understanding. In Thomas's painting, the figure's face is almost completely turned to the viewer and her face presents defiance. The African-patterned textiles indicate Thomas's attempt to situate the black female body in an Afrocentric context. These characteristics are all contrary to Ingres's painting. While Thomas inserts the black female body into the Western art canon through this process, she does not simply reproduce the images with black female bodies. Thomas continually adds layers of meaning into her paintings. The differences in the figure and the background situate Thomas's painting in a very different realm than Ingres's, which speaks to multiple elements of Thomas's experiences. Through different techniques, Thomas voices her criticism of Western art history and promotes ideas of self-representation of black womanhood.

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[94] Murray, "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," 13.
[95] Ibid., 10.

Thomas explains that her models have more power over the artwork than she does. Rather than choreographing the sitters, she encourages them to pose themselves. She wants to "capture a quality within them."[96] She discusses her belief that a woman-to-woman gaze is more powerful than a male gaze. Yet the female gaze is still influenced by and connected to the male gaze because it is the dominant gaze in our culture.[97] Because Thomas is a black woman portraying black women, she includes a double element of experience into her work. Ultimately her artwork is more of an expression of her own individual experiences as a black lesbian; however, the power of expression she gives to her models is also included in the overall perception of the work.

Mickalene Thomas's photographs and paintings are embedded with information that is intimately personal to the artist, yet her work also acts as a tool for giving a voice to people who have been marginalized not only by the dominant white culture, but also by the black community. Thomas's central focus is black womanhood but she asserts that the definition of what is acceptable under the heading of black woman is not a universal image. Instead, Thomas includes lesbians and transgender women in her work as an indication of the inclusiveness of her beliefs and ideas of post-black art, as well as a testament to the beauty and sexuality of the black female body, in all forms.

Although Thomas's artwork is not indicative of the beliefs, experiences, and expressions of all contemporary black females, it does reveal common themes that situate post-black art as distinctly separate from Black Power ideals. Thomas's insistence on focusing exclusively on black women, with particular attention to the black female body is a rebellious act and further delineates her work from themes of the Black Arts Movement. Another distinction of Thomas's

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[96] Thomas and Landers, 32.
[97] Ibid.

work that is common in post-black artwork is the lack of responsibility to the black community. Although many of the ideas rendered through her artwork represent collective experiences of many black women, her intent is not to deliberately portray a unified voice of black womanhood. Despite her intent Thomas gives a voice to black women.

Overall, Thomas's artwork is a representation of black feminism as it is based on her experiences as a black woman in the U.S. She places black womanhood and the black female body in the center of the conversation and offers a voice that depicts concepts relevant to black women. Although Thomas completely focuses on her own experiences as the foundation of her artwork, she is also deliberately creating a voice for black women. In a recent interview Thomas said, "By selecting women of color, I am quite literally raising their visibility and inserting their presence into the conversation."[98] The radical differences between her ideas and artwork and Catlett's speak to the shift that occurred regarding the experiences of black women in the U.S. Artists who came of age after the Civil Rights and Black Power era have a different understanding of freedom.[99] Many advances were made in making space for a black voice and creating levels of freedom for blacks not previously experienced. Therefore, post-black artists have a level of freedom that allows them to somewhat release the burden of communal responsibility and requirements of black arts. Thomas presents an example of how the freedoms that were fought for during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras are now being utilized through post-black artists. Despite different experiences, Thomas also works to present a voice of black womanhood.

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[98] Dunne
[99] Schur, 619.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

The work of Elizabeth Catlett and Mickalene Thomas offer two distinct perspectives of black womanhood. Each artist's work and viewpoints are reflective of cultural, political, and social eras in which their experiences are embedded. Catlett's focus on working class women, motherhood, and the importance of black women being able to view honest, relatable representations of themselves demonstrates her commitment to activism and utilizing her work, as well as herself, as a catalyst for beneficial change. Catlett's work sits at the intersection of art and social change, where the relevance of the immediacy and the never-ending expression of black feminism prevails. Thomas' work primarily focuses on themes of "marginalized" beauty, queer black feminism, Blaxploitation, the black female body, sexuality and the female gaze. The differences in the important themes expressed by each artist are not only because of the diversity of the artists; the differences also offer glimpses into societal aspects that influenced experiences and in turn inspired expression through visual arts. Most importantly, the differences are indicative of the complexity of black women. The realization of this complexity opposes stereotypical ideologies regarding black womanhood.

Catlett wanted to create art for a black community that was starving to view self-defined representations of themselves. She believed that her artwork needed to be created specifically for black people. She wanted to express her perspective of the black community and concerns that were particularly relevant to black people in the U.S. It was critically important to her that she promoted positive characteristics of the black community, especially black womanhood, to counter the stereotypical imagery that supported racist ideology. As she portrayed the strength, resilience, and dedication of black women, she simultaneously supported Black Nationalism and critiqued it. Her experiences as a black woman living in the U.S. and Mexico were revealed

through her artwork as tools of solidarity with the community she most identified with. Overall, Catlett attempted to aid in creating standard of blackness and a black aesthetic. Her artwork represented her agreement with ideas of Black Nationalism and the creation of a unified voice against oppression. Thomas, on the other hand, makes artwork that is very individually focused. Although she represents collective ideas of intersectional oppression and confronts stereotypical representations of black womanhood, her overall focus is to deal specifically with themes that aid in working through her own individual problems.

Patricia Hill Collins's theorization of black feminism argues that prevailing criticisms surrounding the consciousness of oppressed groups, specifically black women, fail to realize elements that reveal a purely unique black feminist standpoint. In essence, Collins argues that people in America, who are both black and female, have their own experiences and understandings of their experiences, which in turn can be legitimately expressed as an individual black female consciousness. Many oppressive representations of black womanhood are to rationalize the subhuman depictions of black women. Stereotypes of black womanhood are used to support and protect racist Eurocentric ideology and promote white supremacy. The realization of the black female consciousness, as well as expressions of it, opposes the dominant theories that rely on the suppression and refutation of the black female consciousness. Therefore, the existence of a black female consciousness is constantly contested.

Elizabeth Catlett and Mickalene Thomas represent two drastically different, yet universally similar expressions of a black female consciousness. Through explorations of their artwork and individual beliefs, a variety of differences are immediately revealed. Catlett, as a product of her experiences, worked toward a central goal of liberating black people through a unified voice against oppression. Throughout her life and career, Catlett played an extensive role

in depicting ideas of Black Nationalism, confronting racist, stereotypical ideology, and promoting an opposing self-defined representation of blackness, more specifically black womanhood. Thomas, on the other hand, presents work that is very closely tied to her own personal experiences without as much regard for connecting to other voices of black womanhood. Her goals in creating art significantly contrast those of Black Nationalist artists such as Catlett. Not only does Thomas not wish to portray unified ideas of blackness, she critiques aesthetic requirements of black artists and misogynistic ideas of Black Nationalism.

The dichotomy of the artwork produced by these two artists is a direct reflection of the dialogical relationship that Patricia Hill Collins discusses. The collective experiences of women who came of age before or during the Civil Rights Era were radically different from those who came of age after the Civil Rights Era. There was a shift in black feminist thought that took place as a result of the changed experiences of black women in the U.S. The distinguishing factors that played a role in the life experiences of the two women are displayed through their artwork.

Through visual and analytical dissection of individual works, as well as thematic understandings of artistic visions, it is arguable that each of these artists have worked from the standpoint of black feminist theory. With black feminist theory at the foundation, discussions of works by Catlett and Thomas indicate the successes and progress of efforts to promote empowering narratives of black womanhood, and also speak to the growth in the tolerance of diversity in American culture.

The progression of the underlying themes that are displayed through the artistic visions and choices of these two women reflect the progress of promoting empowering narratives as a means of liberation. In other words, the progress of the movement toward self-defined representations of black womanhood is reflected through the gradual movement away from

literal depictions of stereotypical versions of Black womanhood and focuses on suppressing oppressive ideologies. Rather, there is more of a focus on themes of uplifting black women by simply providing an avenue for the voice of black women to be presented. A variety of black female artists are choosing to move into a more nuanced recognition of stereotypical renderings and instead represent the complexity of black womanhood without the presupposition of negating Eurocentric ideals.

The further time progresses, the more nuanced negative representations and ideologies become in the artwork of black women. This is perhaps an indication of the success of attempts at liberation and empowerment. As self-defined representations of black women are produced from the understanding of a distinct black female consciousness, cultural norms are becoming altered in response. Thus, the empowering narratives are promoted, sometimes without the necessity of first, or simultaneously, confronting negative, stereotypical narratives.

Black women's perseverance, despite experienced adversities, have created an increase in space made for black female voices, including ones that do not fit comfortably into traditional categorization of femininity. That space can now be filled with authentic self-definitions of black womanhood, as well as celebrations of the beauty, power, and resilience of black women. Although there are still improvements to be made, the progress of visual representations of black womanhood through the work of Catlett and Thomas gives credence to the idea that cultural, social, and political change is and will continue to be a result.

Both artists present black feminism through their work in different ways. The themes of Catlett's artwork and the characteristics of black womanhood she chose to portray directly reflected her Black Nationalist beliefs. While Thomas's work is also reflective of her beliefs that are somewhat rooted in the political and cultural climate in which she came of age, it

demonstrates a major shift in artistic portrayals of black womanhood. The shift between the artwork of these two artists lends itself to the broader idea of the dynamism of black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins's theory of the dialogical relationship between "collective experiences" and "group knowledge" is expressed through the artwork of Catlett and Thomas. Black feminism is continually changing because of its reliance on a variety of factors, most notably the experience of black women in the U.S. As the political and cultural climates of the country change, there are correlating alterations in black women's experiences, which ultimately leads to transformation in the art world.

The artwork of Thomas and Catlett speaks to a shift in approach toward a similar goal. Collins's theory gives a rationale for shifts between the ways in which Catlett and Thomas work toward the goal of creating visibility for black women and the underlying consistent theme is self-defined representation. Because the experiences of black female artists born after the Civil Rights era differed from those born before the Civil Rights era, there was a change in responses to their experiences. However, as an examination of Catlett's and Thomas's work reveals, the ultimate goal remained the same. Despite the drastic differences between the artwork and ideas of these two artists, there has not been a significant enough amount of progress made toward this goal. Both artists, working decades apart, create art in effort to confront oppression and produce visibility for black women. It can be argued that the visibility of black women in the art world has expanded from Catlett's expressions of common roles such as motherhood, to Thomas's expression of controversial and further marginalized roles. Nonetheless, as a group, black women remain marginalized, oppressed, and invisible in the U.S.

<u>Figures</u>

Figure 1: Elizabeth Catlett, *Mother and Child*
ca. 1940, terracotta, 35" h.
(Photo: *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico.* Melanie Anne Herzog.
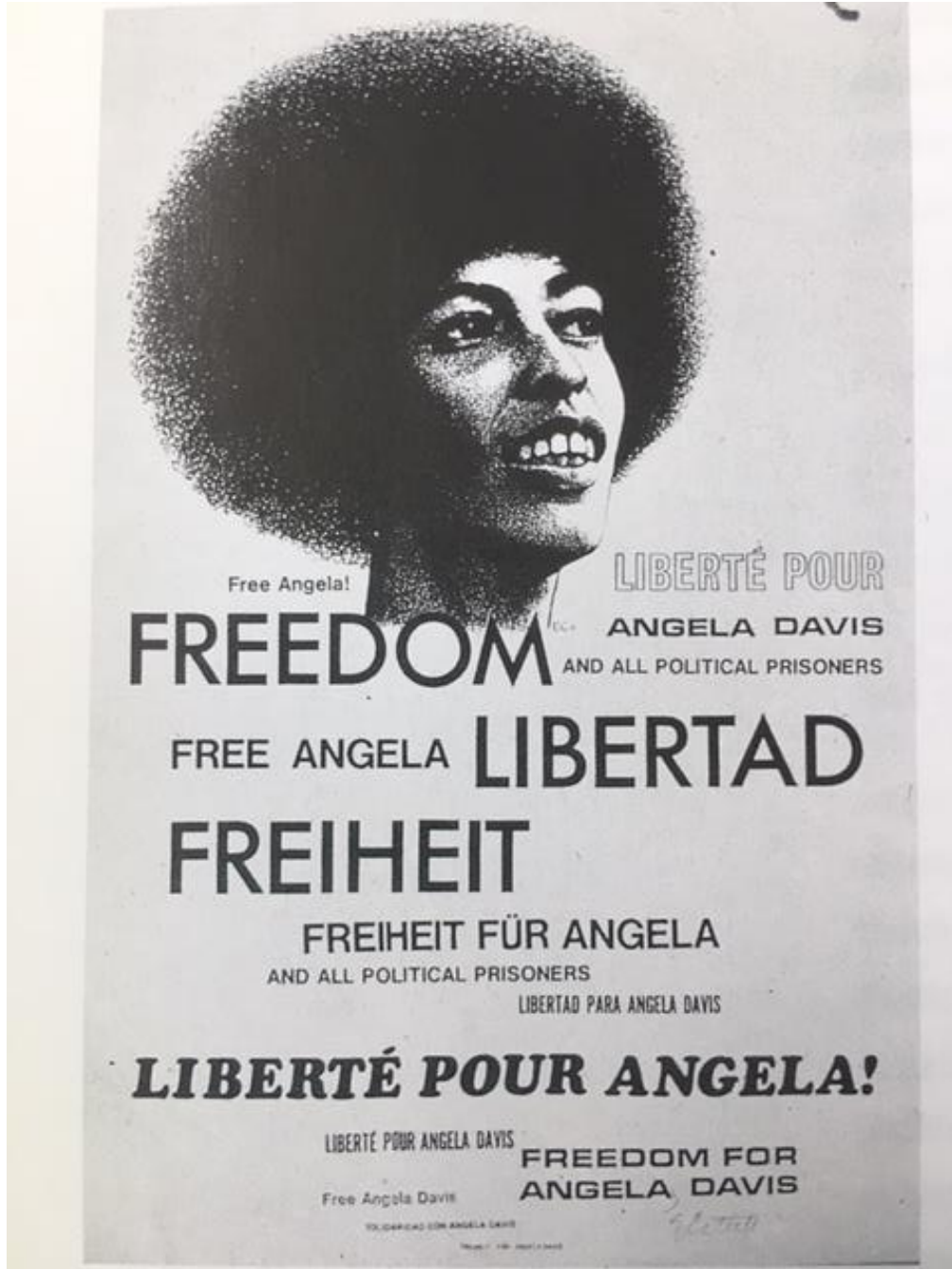Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. Pg. 20).

Figure 2: Elizabeth Catlett, *Freedom for Angela Davis*
ca. 1969, serigraph poster.
(Photo: *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico.* Melanie Anne Herzog.
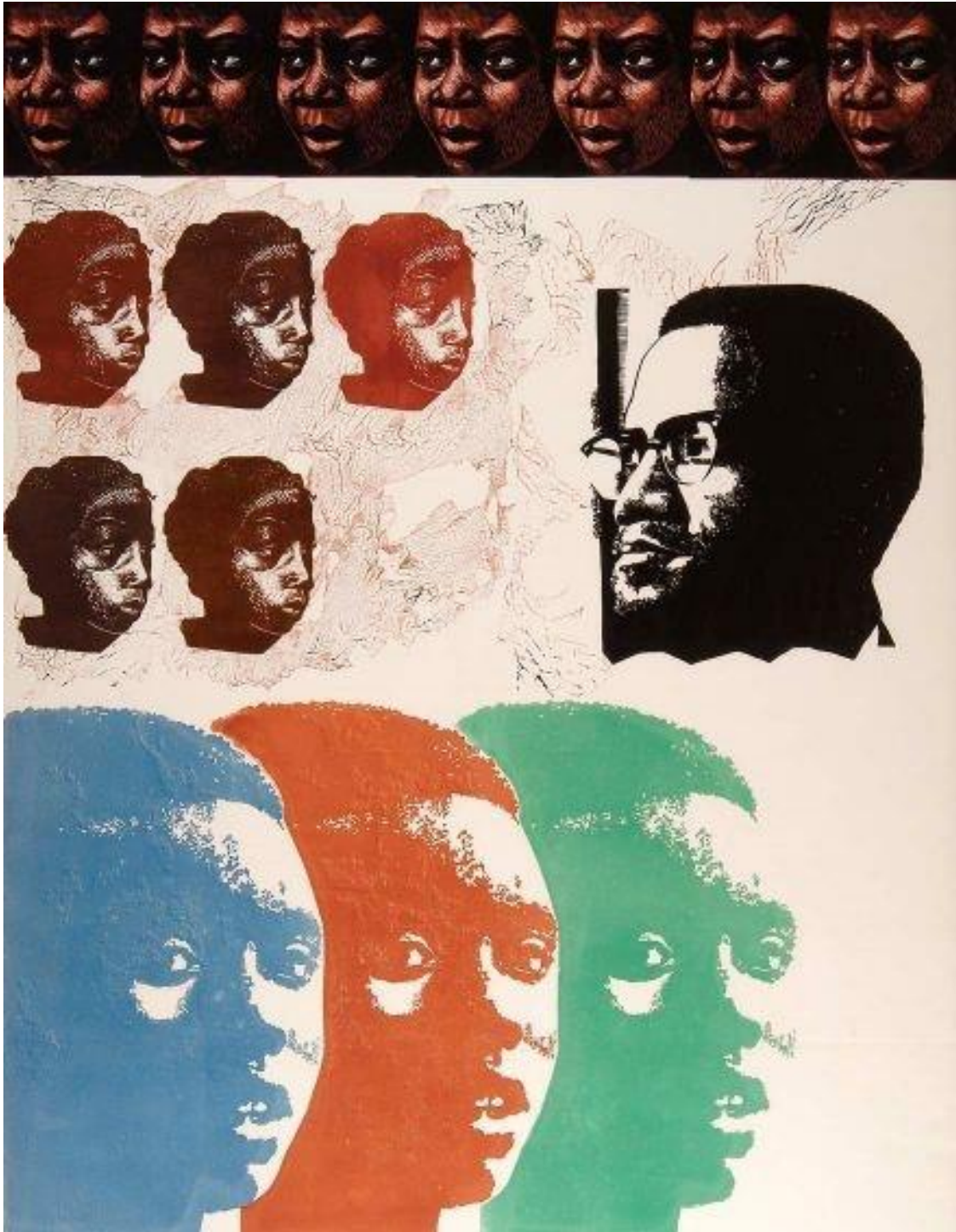Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. Pg. 136).

Figure 3: Elizabeth Catlett, *Malcolm Speaks for Us*
ca. 1969, color linocut, serigraph, and monoprint, 37½" x 27½".
The Museum of Modern Art (Photo: Museum)

Figure 4: Elizabeth Catlett, *Black is Beautiful* or *Negro es bello II*
ca. 1970, lithograph, 30¼" x 23½".
(Photo: *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico.* Melanie Anne Herzog.
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. Pg. 138).

Figure 5: Elizabeth Catlett, *The Torture of Mothers*
ca. 1970, lithograph.
(Photo: *artnet.com*).

Figure 6: Elizabeth Catlett, *Homage to my Young Black Sisters*
ca. 1968, cedar, 68" x 12" x 12".
(Photo: womensartblog.wordpress.com).

Figure 7: Mickalene Thomas, *Origin of the Universe*
ca. 2012, rhinestones, acrylic, oil and enamel on wood panel, 60" x 48".
Santa Monica Museum of Art (Photo: Christopher Burke Studio).

Figure 8: Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*
ca.1866, rhinestones, acrylic, oil and enamel on wood panel, 60" x 48".
Le Musée Courbet (Photo: Museum).

Figure 9: Mickalene Thomas, *La leçon d'amour*
ca. 2008, C-print, 47½" " x 59".
Lehmann Maupin Gallery (Photo: bombmagazine.org).

Figure 10: Mickalene Thomas, *Hotter than July*
ca. 2005, rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on wood panel, 60" " x 72".
Rubell Family Collection and Contemporary Arts Foundation (Photo: The Collection).

Figure 11: Mickalene Thomas, *Dim all the Lights*
ca. 2009, rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on panel, 72" x 72"
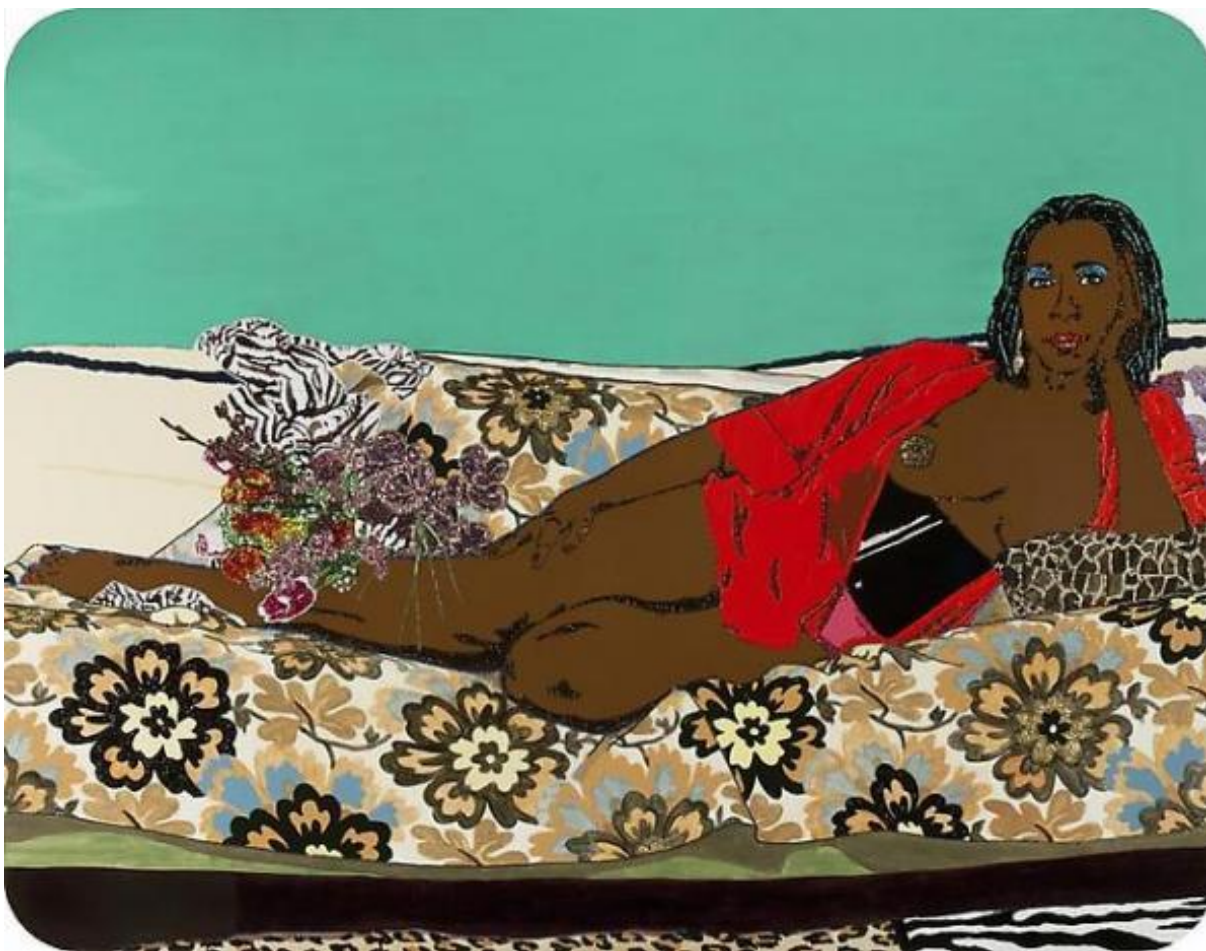Lehmann Maupin Gallery (Photo: Gallery).

Figure 12: Mickalene Thomas, *Portrait of Mama Bush 2*
ca. 2009, rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on wood panel, 84" x 108"
Lehmann Maupin Gallery (Photo: Gallery).

Figure 13: Mickalene Thomas, *A Little Taste Outside of Love*
ca. 2007, rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on panel, 96" x 20".
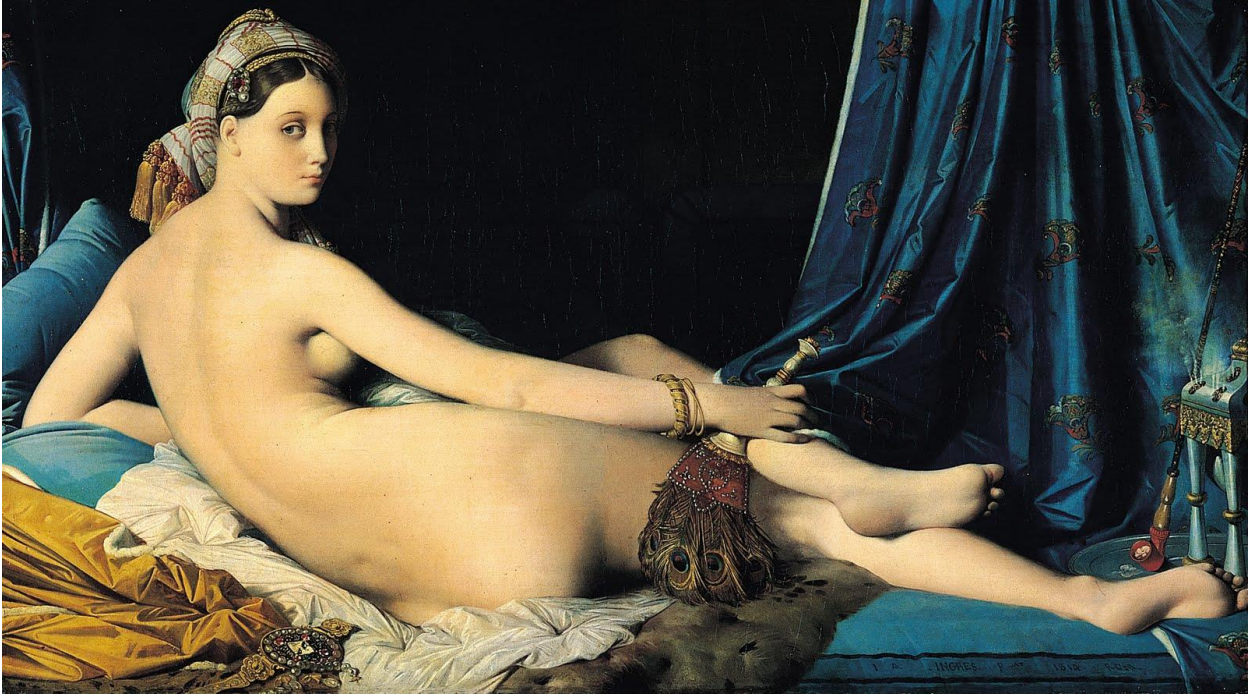Lehmann Maupin Gallery (Photo: Gallery).

Figure 14: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Une Odalisque*
ca. 2007, rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on panel, 96" x 20".
Louvre (Photo: Museum).

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ABSTRACT

THE BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE OF BLACK FEMINISM: CHANGES IN REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD EXAMINED THROUGH THE ARTWORK OF ELIZABETH CATLETT AND MICKALENE THOMAS

by

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The visual representation of black womanhood is important in understanding black women's journey toward liberation and empowerment. The use of representations of black womanhood as tools of empowerment is evident through the artwork of Elizabeth Catlett and Mickalene Thomas. Catlett was one of the most prominent black female artists during the 1960s – 1970s, as her artwork and activism expressed the Black Nationalist theories of the Black Arts Movement. Thomas's artwork and artistic beliefs are in line with many theories regarding post-blackness, such as a reinterpreting of the definition of blackness. Discussing the work of these artists offers a glimpse into the gradual widening of space made available for the black female voice. Within this space, black female artists are portraying the black feminist ideal of self-defined black womanhood. The changes in how each artist addresses the themes of race and femininity throughout their artwork directly relates to the cultural climate of the period in which each artist began working. By dissecting the social and cultural context of the time, I demonstrate the correlating shifts in representations of black womanhood in visual art.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

As an African American emerging scholar and native of Detroit, MI, I am particularly sensitive to and interested in issues concerning the black community. My awareness of the complexity of African American art began as an undergraduate fine art student at Wayne State University, where I graduated with a BA in Art. Throughout my graduate career, my research has predominantly focused on deconstructing complex contemporary cultural issues through examinations of artists and artwork. Through my writing, I attempt to provide discourse around specific topics that are relevant within the subject of African American art, particularly contemporary art. As a supplement to my scholarly work, I have held positions as an employee and intern at various local art galleries and museums to prepare myself for a career as an art curator.