ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE BLACK BODY IN POLITICAL PHOTOGRAPHY, 1990-2020

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Black political art has been an important element of Black liberation efforts in the 20th and 21st centuries. Black artist-activists of the past and present have demonstrated a concern with systems of oppression that perpetuate multiple forms of racial trauma in the lives of Black people. This project examines the various strategies deployed by artist-activists between 1990-2020 to re-instantiate political trauma in U.S. collective memory. In the process, the project spotlights continued oppression by visually connecting past atrocities with current forms of physical, emotional, and representational violence and examines artists' depictions of the Black body to remember racial trauma and visualize Black agency.

In Chapter One, I examine Carla Williams's *How to Read Character* (1990-1991) and the ways she revisits the history of scientific racism to expose strategies used to predetermine character based on race. Williams uses her nude body as a means to critique by positioning her self-portraits next to early scientific documents to evoke Black agency and to subvert the dominant gaze that has contributed to Black subjugation of the past and present. In Chapter Two, I examine how the photo-text

installation series by Carrie Mae Weems, *From Here I Saw What Happened and Then I Cried* (1995-1996), intervenes in the circulation of archival images of the Black body to contemplate and challenge past and current notions of Black embodiment across race, gender, class, and sexuality. In the process, Weems re-politicizes historical and contemporary representations of Blackness and collective remembrances of Black trauma to call for retribution and healing. In Chapter Three, I interpret how Julian Plowden's *Project #Shootback (*2014-2020), offers a haunting reminder of the continued racial inequalities through political street photography of the Black Lives Matter movement. Drawing from collective memories of earlier Black liberation movements, the collection situates Black Lives Matter within a legacy of Black activism committed to ending inequalities faced by Black people. Plowden ultimately re-politicizes Black emotion and Black embodiment as a means to resist racial oppression, survive racial trauma, and expose ongoing atrocities.

In the Conclusion, I analyze LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographic exposé on the life and memory of Breonna Taylor featured in *Vanity Fair's*, "A Beautiful Life." I argue that the emotional photography of Taylor's loved ones pushes back against negative stereotypes about Taylor and Black women to assert Black worth and visualize the suffering that police brutality causes to the Black community.

Situated within the context of continued racial tension, the images in this project demonstrate the multiple strategies of resistance and empowerment used by contemporary artist-activists in the U.S. to expose and end racial injustice. Overall, the images highlight the continued importance of photography in the current fight for Black liberation.

THE BLACK BODY IN POLITICAL PHOTOGRAPHY, 1990-2020

by

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Introduction: The Black Body in Visual Culture

Grappling with social constructions associated with the Black body, Myra Greene photographs close-up images of her facial features to explore the relationship between Black embodiment and notions of personal character. In her series, Character Recognition (2006-2007), ambrotypes of her ears, teeth, lips, and nose are printed on black glass. By using this photographic technique from the mid-1800s, her images have an aged, black and white appearance that visually blur the past and present.[1] In one sense, the images look like archival images of scientific racism, yet they also have the appearance of contemporary "mug shots." The segmented images of her face somewhat conceal her identity and make her gender difficult to interpret. Her dark skin color is also exaggerated in the images, making her brown skin the color black. These visual strategies center her race as a source of meaning to highlight the absurdity of racial assumptions attributed to the Black body to define Black people in limited ways.

Like her images, the Black body is exaggerated and obscured in cultural representations. The series reveals the hypervisual/invisible paradox of the Black body. On one hand, her features are magnified as the images focus in on the details of her features and skin, down to her pores. Yet at the same time, she is hidden by partial view, which reduces her to parts. Greene provides an extended caption with the images to explain the series:

> Confronted with a swell of bigotry both personal and public. ... I was forced to ask myself, what do people see when they look at me. [sic] Am I nothing but

Black? ... Under a photographic process linked to the times of ethnographic classification, I repeatedly explore my ethnic features in Character Recognition. The lessons are haunting and frightening in these modern times. Combined, the images and the caption engage memories of racial classifications that defined groups based on skin color to determine their character. Ultimately, these associations have been used to justify state-sanctioned racial trauma and oppression, including the enslavement, disenfranchisement, segregation, profiling, and criminalization of Black people.

Institutional racism has a long tradition in the United States, and it continues to result in a myriad of everyday consequences for Black Americans. And even though the Black liberation movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s resulted in noticeable social, economic, and political improvements, racial discrimination persists. Discriminatory hiring practices,[2] ongoing segregation, longer criminal sentencing,[3] harsher school punishments,[4] fewer educational opportunities,[5] discriminatory housing practices,[6] higher unemployment rates, voting restrictions and gerrymandering, and underemployment after college,[7] are some examples of how institutionalized oppression continues to impact the lives of Black people in the United States.

Efforts to resist and speak back against acts of racial oppression against African Americans has been a part of U.S. culture since the country's genesis. One form of resistance is seen through Black art as Black people use art to question and challenge racial domination and to affirm Black worth. From the subtle anti-slavery message of a Phillis Wheatley poem in 1773, to the anti-racist editorial cartoons of

George Johnson in 1924, to the anti-lynching message of Billy Holiday's "Strange "Fruit" in 1939, to political art today, African Americans have used these various forms of art to expose social injustice and assert political outrage.

In part, the roots of political artistic expressions of African American artists can be traced to the folk culture of slaves in the forms of quilts and slave songs. Quilts were used to record oral history, express Black culture, and map escape routes (Turner, 2009). Similarly, slave spirituals functioned to construct alternative perspectives of Blackness and Black life. They were also believed to be used to make direct calls to action, such as planning escapes from slavery and sharing vital safety information (Sanger, 1995). For example, "Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away" alerted slaves of an upcoming escape, while "Wade in the Water" gave survival tips for escaping unseen.

Black political artistic strategies changed over time. As slaves and freed Black people gained access to other forms of expression, political art expanded to include a diversity of artistic forms (Bates, Lawrence, & Cervenka, 2008). The political critique offered by early Black American artists was often subtle to avoid possible deadly consequences. Political messages consequently became more overt as civil rights activism increased in the 20th century. Historically, Bates et al. believe that creative outlets might have been safer and more accessible options for African Americans to voice their perspectives. Squires's (2002) work on the public sphere also supports this argument. She writes that Black people used more implicit, coded forms of expression during times of extreme oppression, such as the use of spiritual songs during slavery.

During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, Black art reached a heightened period of artistic production. Also known as the New Negro Movement, this movement stimulated a cultural and political awakening that helped further the political potential of art (Smethurst, 2005; Bracks & Smith, 2014). As burgeoning Black art expanded into numerous mediums, Black artists recognized that art could serve as a powerful tool to express alternative political messages and redefine what it meant to be Black in America (Gates & Higginbotham, 2009). In order to increase rights and opportunities for Black Americans, activists recognized that the image of Black Americans needed re-envisioning (Farrington, 2005).

The legacy of Black activism through art continued even as the Great Depression diminished the proliferation of Black art from the Harlem Renaissance. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the Black Arts Movement signaled a resurgence of Black political art (Oswald, 2019). Like the Harlem Renaissance, activists believed in the liberating potential of creative expression (Morgan, 2020). Collins (2002) explains that the movement called for "a new aesthetic that would inspire and value art that reflected 'Black realities,' affirmed Black culture, spoke to the masses of Black people, and aligned itself with the liberation struggle throughout the world," (p. 5). Black artists once again seized the opportunity to use political art to expose racial injustice and encourage Black empowerment.

Black activist-artists of today continue the cultural legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. According to Willis (2002), "The interplay between the historical and the contemporary, between self-presentation and imposed representation, are all fundamental aspects of art-making practices" (p. 227).

Black activist-artists have been keenly aware of how the Black body is portrayed and how it affects how people see and interpret the world (Willis, 2002). For example, art scholars note that Black art reimagined Black identity through messages of "Black power" and "Black is beautiful" to counter dominate anti-Black messages in the 1960s and 1970s (Collins & Crawford, 2006; Painter, 2007). Contemporary Black political art still directs these messages of empowerment and self-definition towards Black audiences, which was a central focus in the Harlem Renaissance and Black Art Movement. Visual culture in the U.S. continues to be a site of contestation over representations of the Black body. On one hand re-representing the racist and demeaning messages attributed to Black people through political art has the potential to re-inscribe these messages, if the political message of Black political art does not resonate with the audience (Smith, 2019). But at the same time, Black political art presents opportunities to counter negative and demeaning constructions of Black identity that has led to deeply rooted systems of racial discrimination.

This project accordingly analyzes political photographs of African American artists that critique oppressive ideologies circulating through historical and contemporary representations of Black embodiment, while also visualizing Black self-presentation of Black identity and culture. In the process, the activist-photographers offer more progressive images designed to critique discriminatory acts, liberate Black bodies, empower Black voices, and champion acts of social equality. These contemporary works of art are examined through the critical lenses of critical race theory, intersectionality, memory, and trauma. From such a perspective, this

study shows how artist-activists rework memories of Black trauma into images of Black empowerment and agency as a means to promote progressive political change.[8]

Signifying the Black Body

In efforts to promote social change, artist-activists are working against ideological discourses that have fostered narrow interpretations about Black bodies and their meanings. Such discourses have been fueled by racial politics related to campaigns for European expansion, African enslavement, scientific investigation, and Western dominance throughout the Common Era. Messages and meanings about race emerged as early as the 1st century through early philosophical, religious, scientific, and travel discourses in Western societies (Mudimbe, 1994). While scholarship frequently focuses on more recent notions of racial identity in the 20th century, it is important to recognize the vast history of racial practices and ideologies. Understanding the history of Black people in Western society helps illuminate how their bodies were interpreted through the dominant, White *gaze* to form demeaning representations and stereotypes that linger in contemporary times.

The literature is divided into seven sections to examine various types of discourses chronologically to briefly address the ways Black bodies have been constructed over time to form long-lasting notions of Black manhood and Black womanhood. The first section begins with early philosophical discourses that worked to naturalize notions of embodiment and race. The second section highlights early origins of racial myths and stereotypes in travel literature that "otherized" Black bodies. The third section discusses the symbolic ways Black bodies have been "marked" as deviant to advance racial oppression in early religious discourses. The

fourth section investigates the various ways Black bodies were displayed in exhibits to legitimize claims of Black inferiority and White supremacy. The fifth section explores the ways in which racial claims gained credence through early scientific discourses. The sixth section highlights popular representations of the Black body in U.S. visual culture from the late 19th century and early 20th century to reveal the ways in which old racial myths have been refashioned in contemporary presentations. And the final section examines contemporary efforts of artists-activists to address the long history of demeaning Black representations. After the literature review, details on the project will be further discussed and outlined.

Normalizing the White Gaze in Early European Philosophical Discourse

Early European conceptions of the body have "naturalized" notions of embodiment to associate bodies with innate characteristics. From such a perspective, "our body forms are considered expressions of an interior, not inscriptions on a flat surface…The body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read onto" (Grosz, 1994, p. 198). Such insights establish bodies not only as texts but as texts with set meanings. In her discussion of the body politic in premodern Europe, Scheman (1993) writes: "The ways people knew their places in the world had to do with their bodies and the histories of those bodies, and when they violated the prescriptions for those places, their bodies were punished, often spectacularly" (p. 186). The body consequently became a key aspect of maintaining systems of power and social order within the Western world. As Scheman argues, "One's place in the body politic was as natural as the places of the organ in one's body, and political disorder as unnatural as the shifting and displacement of those organs" (p. 186).

Social hierarchies were reinforced as bodies were thought to represent their "natural" order of society and the "rights" accorded those governed by such hierarchies.

The perceived value and capabilities of individuals have largely been interpreted by their bodies. For example, Descartes, the influential 17th century French philosopher, advanced Cartesian dualism in early philosophical discourse by defining the mind and body as mutually exclusive. He argued that the body was ruled by desires, instincts, and emotions, while the mind was pure and rational (Descartes, 1641). Cartesian dualism, Oyěwùmí (1997) explains, affirmed that the body was "a trap from which any rational person had to escape," but it left certain bodies attached to their minds and certain bodies attached to corporeality (p. 3). For this reason, Oyěwùmí argues that many early European thinkers deemphasized their own embodiment as they claimed "bodylessness" was a precondition for rational thought. At the same time, "women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor, and all those labeled different in varying historical epochs have been considered to be embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 3). The corporeality of marginalized groups consequently constituted non-White men and all women as intellectually deficient.

The binary of the mind and body also influenced the politics of sight. Sight has always been situated within power relations that sustain systems of privilege and oppression by normalizing dehumanizing perceptions regarding race, gender, and class. Story (2011) explains that "early Western philosophical discourses contended that some human bodies were *read* and other bodies were attached to minds that allowed them to be the *readers*" (p. 24). Again, the social location of a *reading* body

was determined by its translated ideological value (based on race, national origins, and gender) (Story, 2011). This dichotomy of reading bodies/read bodies worked within projects of domination (e.g., colonization and enslavement), to privilege Western worldviews in much of the world.

Through these systems of domination and the distinction between "reading bodies" and "read bodies," the "dominant gaze" has ingrained particular ways of "seeing" that reifies those in positions of power and marginalizes those who are not. The "dominant, White gaze" has become the lens in which all bodies are read. Russell (1997) argues that: "The dominant gaze subtly invites the viewer to emphasize and identify with its viewpoint as natural, universal, and beyond challenge; it marginalizes other perspectives to bolster its own legitimacy in defining narratives and images" (p. 268). Through this process, the interpretation of Africans through the dominant gaze in early discourses and beyond worked to place them in the subjugated position to be "read," while marginalizing their view as "readers" of themselves or others. For this reason, the White gaze is "an important site of power and control, a site that is structured by White epistemic orders and that perpetuates such orders in turn" (Yancy, 2008, p. xviii).

The treatment of African Americans is fundamentally linked to ideological practices of distortional "seeing" that valorizes Whiteness and demonizes Blackness. Rather than seeing Black people as a group of diverse individuals with a shared African heritage, Black *people* become Black *bodies* that are reduced to their corporality. Black bodies are then reduced to "the" Black body as Black persons, regardless of individual characteristics, are all implicated in a system of meaning that

distorts Black identities. In describing this process, Young (2011) says: "The mystery of Blackness, which manages to become a fact through repeated deployment across a range of bodies, encourages the (mis)identification of individuated bodies (*a body*) as the Black body…. The individual become anonymously or, more accurately, metonymically Black" (p. 7). In other words, all Black people are signified through narrow notions of Blackness that construct Black people as a homogeneous group. Through this process, the myth and ideology regarding Blackness is deeply implanted into the American racial imagination.[9] Racial imagination about Blackness (and Whiteness) becomes normalized as it is reconstituted again and again through discursive systems, producing powerful and persuasive messages about race. Constructions about race are built on memories and messages reproduced within social discourses that continually signify meanings of race. Over time, various discourses have contributed to the circulation of troubling racial images that have fueled racial imaginations in Western societies.

Otherizing the Black Body in Travel Literature

European travel literature was likely the first form of written discourse to describe Africans and their cultures to European audiences. This literature helped Europeans conceptualize and classify people beyond Europe, which resulted in European societies forming racial stereotypes long before they encountered other so-called races in person (Okrin & Joubin, 2019). Writers contrasted their home with the places and people they wrote about, therefore which such focus, ideas of otherness are prominent in these writings (Speake, 2014). The genre is thought to have emerged during the Enlightenment period of the mid-17th century through the 18th century

(Koivunen, 2008). However, the first forms of travel writing developed much earlier. As early as the 1st century, European descriptions of Africans in travel literature dominated popular perceptions of Black people (Koivunen, 2008). According to Thompson (2009), the travel journals from Greek, Roman, and Muslim explorers initially informed European knowledge and opinions on Africa and its people. As explorers from various parts of Europe traveled to Africa, Thompson argues that travel literature detailing the encounters of "European explorers had the most lasting effect on distorted images of the African…" (p. 58). Such descriptions frequently described Africans as the antithesis to Europeans in their physical appearance and cultural characteristics. For example, Niebrzydowski (2001) explains that Pliny in *Natural History* (23-79 CE) "talks about how the outermost districts of Ethiopia produce such human monstrosities as tribes of people without noses, no upper lips, and others with no tongues," while other tales said they had one large foot used to shade themselves in the sun (p. 191). With such outlandish descriptions that read that fantasy novel, Black bodies were portrayed as monstrous and seemingly unhuman.

Such descriptions "otherized" Africa and its people, which worked to form a subjugated status for Black people and forged racial division. Hinton (2000) argues that there are three main components to define and signify "the other" in society. The first component requires the group to be identified through physical characteristics, such as skin color and hair texture. Additional differences, such as language, geography, and attire, also help to further distinguish an out-group. The early origins of this process can be read in the work of *Herodotus of Halicarnassus*, a Greek researcher and historian from the 5th century BC, who was one of the first to record

observations of interior Africa. He wrote that Africans ate "creepy things," shared sexual partners freely, and their language sounded like "the squeaking of bats" (Herodotus, 440 BC/1920, chp. 183). He goes on to say that Africa was inhabited by "wild men," "wild women," and "dog-headed and headless men" (Herodotus, 440 BCE/1920, book 4, chp. 191). While many of Herodotus's writings have been discredited, he is recognized as the "Father of History" and "Father of Travel Literature" (Thompson, 2009). Therefore, his literature influenced general ideas about African people and his work is still studied by scholars today. Similarly, 1st century Greek historian, Diodorus, described Africans as savage, animalistic people who lacked cultural refinement (Abubakar, 2013). These examples demonstrate how Greco-Roman writers endowed European thought with the power to define African identity and culture. Abubakar (2013) argues, "The signification of Africa as the other enabled Herodotus and Diodorus to idealize Greek culture, to in fact elevate it over African culture" (p. 845). Early Greek writers imposed a binary between Greek and African characteristics, in which all Africans were savage, wild beasts as they put it, and Greeks were above them in every way from religion, customs, language, beauty, and more (Abubakar, 2013).

The last component of constructing the "other" involves identifying all people in the "out group" as having the assigned characteristics (Hinton, 2000). As a result of this process, persistent stereotypes have been established based on group membership to associate all Black people with negative attributes. The notion of Black inferiority has now been deeply entrenched in Western discourse through the repeated construct of the exotic, inferior "other." From the 1st century through the 18th century, various

reiterations of demeaning stereotypes were repeated in literature to advance this ideological view of Africans within each generation (Mudimbe, 1994).

By the 18th century, Africa and its people had become a sign of inherent inferiority (Mudimbe, 1994). Travel literature was thought to replace legends and myths with eye-witnessed observations, but their supposedly objective description was still based on racial fantasies and preconceived notions of Blackness. Abubakar (2013) argues that the West needed an "other" to define itself against. He says, "To this extent, the African represented in Western writing is only a code or a metaphor—in short a myth, a mere presentational object, more the effect of poetic ordering than reality" (p. 845).

As the genre of travel literature grew, visual images to support the descriptions were included in accounts for additional descriptive weight. Several scientific societies encouraged seaman to make drawings to support their observations in the 17th century. Drawing schools were even established for sailors and travelers to assist them in creating visual documentation on coasts, islands, flora, fauna, and people of foreign land (Sontag, 2011). It was also common to employ an illustrator to accompany explorers on their travels. Visual images were thought to give life to the descriptions and allow even non-readers to consume the exotic people and their land. "Thus, visual documents were considered to have a special ability to directly and purely convey the appearance of landscapes, animals, and people observed in the interior of Africa for consumption at home," according to Koivunen (2008, p. 34). Visuals did not receive the same level of scrutiny before the 10th century and were generally accepted as representations of places "found" and events witnessed. Sontag

(2011) makes the point that tourist photography has traditionally allowed people to feel a sense of ownership over the space and gain a sense of security in a new environment. Koivunen (2008) makes a similar argument with visual documentation produced for travel literature. She says, “Visual documentation provided travellers with a means to organise their experiences to cope with unexpected or strange aspects of a new environment” (p. 34). Therefore, the invention of the camera in 1839, photography provided an additional means of documentation that was thought to increase the accuracy of evidence, while overlooking the “rhetoricity” of the image (Twigg, 2008). For this reason, visuals enhanced descriptions in travel literature without critical understanding of the ways in which photographers and illustrators construct meanings and messages.

Overall, the travel narrative was particularly persuasive as a medium of first-hand accounts. By the mid-18th century, the literacy rate of the male population in Europe and American colonies was around 60% (Daly, 2019), which provided a wide audience for travel literature. Thompson (2009) reveals that most people believed the fictional realities constructed in travel narratives. The history of travel literature demonstrates the absurdity of the early racial myths, while also highlighting the persuasive power it carries into our present day. Black people had little to no agency in their initial representations in European visual culture. No documents of indigenous peoples of this era served to challenge the European gaze, so the Western perspective constructs itself as the dominant view from which the world is interpreted. As a result, the Black body was made into a spectacle and a subject of tall tales that imagine Black bodies as grotesque, freaks of nature. Such constructs assign

Black people to a subhuman status.

Religious Discourses and the Marked Black Body

From a Western perspective, European and African cultural identity was heavily influenced by Christian thought from the 5th century onward. Mudimbe (1985) argues that a genre of "missionary discourse" emerged during the medieval period, which discussed Africans and Europeans through the conventions of "good" and "evil." Africans were framed as heathens, pagans, and infidels, while Africa was represented as a place of darkness and evil. Once Africans had been constructed as such, the ideologies of Blackness worked to justify enslaving, converting, and colonizing Africans (Mudimbe, 1994). In this sense, it became the Christian duty to save Africans from themselves.

The cultural and religious significance of "White" and "Black" in Europe further primed Europeans to view Black people as inferior, reifying persistent Black/White dichotomies. Like other religious rhetoric, Christian discourse is imbued with dichotomies of good/evil, purity/impurity, and White/Black that divide and classify the world. In this case, the polarizing rhetoric of White verses Black works to construct African people and their culture negatively. Gao (2000) explains that colors hold cultural and religious meanings that complicate perceptions of race. In much of Europe, White has always been associated with highly positive meanings (Jacobson, 1999). Used in weddings and religious ceremonies, White represents purity, kindness, beauty, and generally good qualities. The color Black, on the other hand, has symbolized dirtiness, wickedness, and depravity (Lomax, 2018). Jordan (1968) argues that Europeans, particularly the English, "found in the idea of Blackness a way

of expressing some of their most ingrained values. No other color conveyed so much emotional impact" (Jordan, 1968, p. 7).

Religious discourses also helped shape ideologies related to the Black body by further establishing a relationship between the physical body and the soul. Grosz (1994) argues that in religious texts a body can be "read as an expression of a subject's psychic internal boundaries" (p. 198). Like other characteristics, the outward appearance of a body was thought to display the purity or impurity of one's souls. The idea that the value of one's soul is connected to one's embodiment is supported by some interpretations of Christian mythology.

One such example of the connection between the body and one's purity or impurity is revealed in a biblical story used in pro-slavery rhetoric to support racialized slavery. According to some biblical scholars, a man named Ham sees his father's naked body. As Ham's punishment, his youngest son, Canaan, and his descendants are "marked" and cursed to serve their brothers (Daly, 2004). Although the Bible does not state whether Canaan's descendants were marked as Black or not, Gao (2000) contends that Jewish oral traditions later interpreted the mark of Canaan as Black skin. And even though Canaan is innocent, he is the bearer of the curse and punished accordingly. The punishment seems unjustly severe, which is why some ancient and contemporary scholars argue there is more to the story (Kugle, 1998). Some contend that the phrase in the Bible that reads, "sees his father's nakedness," refers to incestuous, same-sex sexual activity between Ham and his father (Levenson, 2004). Other scholars argue that story of Ham may also refer to Ham having sex with his mother, which makes Canaan the offspring of that act (Kugle, 1998). Regardless

of the original meaning, the story of Ham associates same-sex sexual activity and Black people with wickedness. This biblical story was evoked in pro-slavery rhetoric to support the system of slavery when it came under attack by the abolition movement in the 18th century. Pro-slavery rhetoric interpreted Canaan's curse to serve their racist agenda and thus rhetorically *mark* Black people as cursed to a lifetime of servitude.

Religious discourse has played a powerful role in shaping conceptions of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Niebrydowski (2001) contends that the Bible and other religious literature have long functioned to shape ideas about Blackness, womanhood, and the African people in general. She notes that the two African women who appear in the Bible are only redeemed from their Blackness by spiritual salvation and their heteronormative relationships to non-African men. The first is an Ethiopian woman who announces, "I am Black but beautiful," after adopting Christianity and her subsequent marriage to a European man (p. 192). While there are conflicting interpretations of whether "Black" is referring to her skin color or if Black was a reference to her prior religious beliefs, Niebrydowski argues that either way the woman is granted beauty in spite of her Blackness in both senses due to her Christian faith. Either interpretation of Blackness represents lowliness and filth, perpetuating racism. The second woman is the dark-skinned, Egyptian Queen of Sheba, who obtains salvation through the wisdom of King Solomon. She too is freed from her Black status when she is interpreted as "White and pure" and once she has adopted the Christian faith. The biblical exegesis of Queen Sheba is represented in a late 12th century stained glass of a Canterbury Cathedral that shows her with White skin,

contrasting against the dark skin of her African, non-Christian servants.[10] The Whitewashing of the Queen of Sheba separates her from constructions of Blackness as she was deemed noble and elevated to a higher class by both wealth and salvation (Niebrzydowski, 2001). These examples depict Black women (and Black people in general) as impure and in need of salvation through Western religion, culture, and wisdom.

Black Bodies on Display

While travel literature and religious discourse stirred racial imaginations in Western societies, shifts in cultural practices of sightseeing and the development of the Atlantic slave trade created a growing desire for visual representations of Black bodies. Historically, these representations often consisted of nude or semi-nude Black men and women that fulfilled the public desires to consume the "erotic other" (Thompson, 2008). By culturally defining Blacks and other people of color as "different," "uncivilized," and "lacking modesty," exploiters justified the display of non-White bodies for entertainment and profit (Gould, 1981). An early example of such displays occurred in 1493 when Columbus brought back people he called Arawaks to be displayed in Queen Isabella's court.[11] Like the Arawaks, African people were displayed in royal courts and served as private entertainment for the royals and other elite families in Europe from the late 5th century through the 16th century (Williams & Willis, 2002).

Slowly, the private viewing of Black bodies grew beyond the elite classes to serve larger political, scientific, and commercial entertainment purposes (Thompson, 2002). Adler (1986) explains that sightseeing shifted from "the ear" to "the eye"

between 1600 and 1800 as sightseeing was no longer experienced through reading about other places, cultures, and people. Instead, sightseers began to "witness" for themselves the descriptions reported in literature through public exhibitions that brought other cultures and people to European audiences. The shift helped to expose the Black body to the public's eye beyond elite classes and reveal the "visual evidence" to support descriptions in literature.

Freak shows sprung up in Europe as early as the 16th century to entertain audiences already primed by travel literature to see through the nebulous lens of racial ideology. Black people were frequently depicted as "the missing link" or savages in an attempt to portray them as oddities in stark contrast to the viewing audience (Bodgan, 2014; Woolf, 2019). In their book, *The Black Female Body*, Willis and Williams (2002) describe numerous early international fairs in Europe and America that displayed African people as a primitive homogenous group during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many exhibits headlined Black people as the central focus of the show. An exhibition during the late 18th century, for example, featured an albino woman from Jamaica called "Harlequin, the White Negro Woman" (Williams & Willis, 2002). Williams and Willis (2002) explain that: "The politically charged exhibits examined human difference through the display of living human beings, billed as a practical lesson in evolution that underscored European genetic superiority" (p. 63).

Human exhibits displaying Black bodies flourished in the New World out of the public's desire to view perceived oddities and racial differences. Both living bodies and body parts of Africans, natives from the Americas, and Aborigines were

displayed from at least the late 17th century through the 20th century in what is now the United States. Some of the exhibits are fairly recent in American history. For example, the P.T. Barnum's Ringling Brothers Circus featured fifteen Africans, including a 1931 exhibit entitled "the nine largest lip women in the Congo" and a little person of African descent was displayed as "Tiny Tesha, the Island Princess" in 1992. However, historians have attributed P.T. Barnum's early success with the exhibit of an elderly African American woman named Joice Heth in 1835 (Reiss, 2009). After being sold to Barnum as a slave, Heth helped to launch his career and the world-famous Ringling Brothers circus by alleging to be the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington (Reiss, 1999; 2009). Following her death in 1836, Barnum orchestrated a media spectacle at a New York saloon where 1,500 spectators witnessed a doctor dissect Heth's corpse to test her age (Woolf, 2019). The "finding" of the doctor labeled the Heth exhibit a fraud, which sparked a mass-media spectacle and public debate over the spectrum of racial difference (Reiss, 2009). Heth's ability to fool White audiences with her impressive knowledge of the Washington family was also a topic of debate (Woolf, 2019). Notions of intellectual inferiority of both Black people and women made the Heth's hoax more controversial, since many believed that Black women would not have the knowledge or ability to trick the White public without help.

The exhibition and controversy of Heth demonstrates that the Black female body has been a site of contestation over racial and gender differences. In the analysis of Heth's case, Reiss (1999) links the struggle of meanings over Black bodies to "loose structures" of racial difference in religious, scientific, and legal discourses.

While notions of racial difference were already embedded in Western culture, Reiss (2009) argues that human displays helped to solidify racial difference and racial hierarchy in the public consciousness.

Following the popularity of fairs and circuses, human exhibits at zoos and museums increased as interest in consuming Black bodies persisted. Black human zoos, sometimes called "negro villages," displayed Black people in their alleged natural or "primitive" state in the 19th and 20th centuries (Samaan, 2013). The human zoos initially traveled with fairs, such as the World's Fair. Yet, at times they were connected to actual animal zoos (Samaan, 2013). Unlike the circus or freak shows, the zoos and museums were traditionally focused on education over entertainment, which gave credibility to the racist gaze of the exhibits. During the 18th century, both zoos and museums burgeoned throughout the Western world as White leisure activities that reflected high status and high culture (Mullan & Marvin, 1999). These zoos would thrive in the golden age of Darwinism as they purported to juxtapose "lesser" humans with White public audiences (Samaan, 2013). Some of these zoos featured scientific documents and experiments next to the exhibits to further strengthen the underlining message of White supremacy. Therefore, caged and displayed Africans gave a direct and simple racist message—Black people were like animals.

One example of this message is shown in exhibits featuring an African pygmy man from the Congo with filed teeth named Ota Benga. His body was used to demonstrate the range in human diversity, but the sites and manner in which he was displayed was dehumanizing both to him as an individual and to Black people more

generally. As the only surviving member of his village, Benga was sold into slavery and later exhibited at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. After being displayed at the fair, Benga was "housed" in the American Museum of History (Newkirk, 2015). In many ways, he was treated like another "found artifact" as he became a walking exhibit at the museum as he roamed the museum halls. He stayed in the museum until he was moved to the "Monkey House" at the Bronx zoo in 1906, because he became "too difficult to control" (Keller, 2006).

To Black activists and allies, the message of the exhibit clearly conveyed that Africans were somewhere between the apes who lived with Benga in the Monkey House and the White crowds that found Benga so entertaining (Keller, 2006). However, other public responses dismissed the racial messages of the exhibit and the suffering Benga experienced (e.g., Gabriel, 1906). After initially being confined to the caged primate area, Benga was eventually allowed to "roam" the zoo grounds more freely, which was perhaps prompted by criticism of the controversial but popular human exhibit (Bradford & Blume, 1992). One day, crowds followed him as they yelled, mocked, and even poked at him. He attempted to defend himself with a bow and arrow ("Pigmy chased," 1906). As a result, Benga was punished by being locked in a room ("Pigmy chased," 1906). Zoo officials believed Benga was becoming increasingly violent and less controllable, which led to him being placed in the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum. His teeth were capped and he was encouraged to assimilate, but he grew depressed. At the age of 32, he built a ceremonial fire, pulled off his capped teeth and committed suicide (Bradford & Blume, 1992). Like

the story of Baartman and so many others, Benga's story of being ripped away from home and displayed like an animal ended tragically.

With the rising criticism of human exhibits, live human displays declined but museum displays of human body parts persisted well into the late 20th century. Clegg (2020) notes that various museums continue to maintain body parts in their collections that were previously on display. The Smithsonian, for example, houses thousands of Native American remains, including decapitated heads and scalps taken as war prizes (Clegg, 2020). In Spain, an African man, referred to as "El Negro," was stolen from his grave in 1830. He was then stuffed and displayed in a museum in Catalonia until 1991, when a Haitian doctor living in the area started a protest. After much resistance, his body was finally re-buried in 2000 in Botswana (Davies, 2003). The political struggle over brown and Black bodies continue as many museums oppose removing human remains from their collections (Clegg, 2020).

The rhetorical choices used to educate the public about African culture and identity has created racially charged messages of inferiority. For this reason, the human displays of Black bodies paraded as education and entertainment worked to celebrate imperial triumph and White superiority. The physical control and containment of Black bodies communicated that Black people were not only inferior, but also animal-like, wild, and unpredictable. The notion that Black bodies needed to be contained and controlled emerged from earlier travel tales. Yet, such messages were reenacted during slavery, reinforced in exhibits, maintained in Jim Crow laws, and perpetuated into the present period. This project is concerned with circulating discourses that perpetuate these ideologies in current day practices of racial profiling,

police brutality, and hate crimes. When Black people have displayed discontent or anger in response to such abuse, as was the case with Benga, they have been treated as aggressive, dangerous, unruly, and even criminal.

The Black Body as Scientific Investigation

Exhibitions assisted in constructing Africans as deviants, but the advances of technology and the growing interest of modern science further solidified the racial imaginations of biographical differences and Black inferiority. With developing advancements in photography from 1839 onward, the camera allowed scientists or interested viewers to inspect Black bodies through photographs. Under the guise of scientific objectivity, documentary photographs of African slaves produced the "evidence" needed to advance scientific claims of Black inferiority. These visual images enhanced the power of racial ideology that created distinct categories of "races" and their stereotypes. Jackson (2011) argues that "the image's power as an authenticating device lies in its assumed ability to mirror without mitigating truth" (p. 17), while Collins (2002) notes that "visual documentation emboldens and lends credence to myth" (p. 11). Therefore, visual images of both hand-drawn illustrations and photography have played a powerful role in the construction and confirmation of myths that reify racial hierarchies and that contemporary science is still trying to correct (e.g., Livingstone, 1962; Biondi & Rickards, 2002).

The burgeoning scientific and medical literature on race in the 18th and 19th centuries used images to support notions of Black inferiority. These drawings and photographs enforced myths of scientific objectivity and served as "proof" of racial claims. For example, scientific documents and images reported that there were clear

measurable differences among various groups of people that could be observed in their external physical characteristics. This notion developed the concept of "different races" or different species, which was based on the belief that these different "species" evolved separately throughout the world. The pseudoscientific theory was also known as "polygenesis" (Gould, 1981). Related scientific branches, including phrenology and physiognomy, made claims that the physical characteristics could also determine character, intellect, and behavior (Jackson & Weidman, 2004). The germinal book, *Crania Americana* by Samuel George Morton (1839), further advanced the theory of polygenesis and classified the four distinct races (European, African, Native American, and Asian), which continue to dominate contemporary conceptualizations. Morton was not the first to claim distinct races; some scholars argue that race was first "invented" in the 16th century (Puzzo, 1964; Frederick, 2002). Yet Morton's writings have been particularly influential. Morton conducted studies that measured the head size of Whites, Blacks, and chimpanzees to locate Africans in between Whites and primates. Africans therefore were treated as not quite human based on Morton's definition (Smedley, 2018). His writing included many stereotypical characteristics of Black people that have been reified throughout Western culture and into the current era.

The scientific obsession with classification continued with scales of beauty and intelligence that were reportedly based on scientific observation and empirical truth, which supported earlier claims in travel literature. For example, Francis Galton, who is known as the "father of eugenics," claimed that beauty was evidence of intellect and health (Galton, 1869). Eurocentric standards of beauty were then used to

claim that the European population, especially those positioned among the upper class, were superior to other races. Similarly, in Havelock Ellis's *Studies of the Psychology of Sex* (1905), the author placed Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom of a beauty scale. Many studies concluded that White women were the most desirable, but Black women used their sexual influence to lure men to have sex with them. This belief was supported through scientific data which concluded that larger qualities of melanin found in Black people to give them a darker skin color caused them to desire sex more than other races (Asim, 2007). Therefore, the Black body itself was used as evidence to bolster the scientific legitimacy of racist ideology.

These ideas persisted in American culture and laid the foundation for troubled race relations for centuries to come. Racist ideology permeated all institutions, resulting in three hundred years of slavery and delayed rights for African Americans for decades to follow. Racist beliefs are documented in the writings of several of the nation's early leaders. Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and many others believed freed slaves should return to Africa due to their inferiority and inability to contribute to society (Asim, 2007; Jackson & Weidman, 2004). Jefferson's claims of Black inferiority advanced the development of scientific racism to prove racial difference (Asim, 2007; Jackson & Weidman, 2004). Therefore, the scientific paradigm of the time fixated on difference and keen attention to interpreting difference in virtually any way possible. Early scientific images of Black people reduced them to their bodies—mere objects to be studied, observed, and exploited in the name of science.

The Black Female Body and Science. For Black women, the history of scientific racism is complicated by constructions of gender that were also formed through medical and scientific literature. Schiebinger (1987) argues that cultural ideals of Whiteness and womanhood are depicted in scientific illustrations of human skeletons, in which these ideals masquerade as facts of nature. Typically, drawings exaggerated the hips of the White female skeletons to accentuate the reproductive value of the White female body. The head was generally depicted as small and child sized to reveal women's "lesser" intellectual ability and "childlike" nature. Africans and their descendants were also depicted to have smaller heads to mark intellectual inferiority (Jackson, 2011). Black women accordingly were seen as intellectually inferior on two fronts—as women and as Africans.

Black women's bodies were also exaggerated to emphasize difference and deviance. Amadiume (2008) notes that Black women's bodies were frequently associated with reproduction, especially as slave owners selected Black women based on their perceived childbearing potential. However, Black sexuality was represented as a deviant form of sexuality that served the interest of economies profiting on slave labor. Drawings comparing women's vulva size were used to demonstrate the sexual desire of various races, suggesting that White women had the least sexual desire and Black women had a highest (Ford, 2010). These projects gave rise to a long system of viewing Black women as morally corrupt, detestable, and filthy, but sexually available to men in power.

Ultimately, science rested its truths on visual evidence and such practice lingers in the study of humankind today. Anthropology, for example, has built its

disciplining authority on the visualizing of truth through photography (Edwards, 1992). Recognizing the continued politics inherent in visualizing "truth" and "evidence," Edwards (2015) warns that the "framing and practice within this history might be very different but the concerns about validity, translation and epistemology inform past engagements with photographs within anthropology as much as they do today" (p. 235). As a result, contemporary politics related to viewing and interpreting identity and race is still entangled in assumptions about what can be "read" on the body. Ultimately, Edwards argues that "evidence" within photography must always be problematized. Understanding this history helps to provide insight into the interrelated, complex systems of domination that shape interpretations of the Black body.

Constructing Blackness in U.S. Popular Visual Culture

The cultural consumption of Black bodies shifted from live exhibitions to commercial images. These images served political and economic purposes in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries. Such turn-of-the-century entertainment included silent films, phonograph parlors, amusement parks, movie theaters, and sporting events. The prominence of mass media and public amusements accentuated American attitudes about race (Nasaw, 1999). Whites across ethnic groups and class started to engage in a common commercial culture, where "social solidarities were emphasized and distinctions were muted" (Nasaw, 1999, p. 2). Blacks were excluded from participating in these social activities with Whites, but they were overrepresented in commercial and entertainment media. Nasaw argues that racial distinctions were exaggerated between Blacks and Whites on stage and on-screen, while differences

among Whites across class and ethnicity were overlooked. Therefore, poor and working-class White people were able to emphasize their racial status and see themselves as part of the American dream in popular cultural fantasies. In the process, Black people were further marginalized.

Deep-seeded notions about Blackness fueled a proliferation of negative representations of Black people in popular culture. Such a backlash deepened in response to the emancipation of slaves and the continued efforts for African Americans to gain civil rights. As Painter (2007) points out, "African Americans were largely invisible" in popular culture, unless depicted through Blackface in "cruel, demeaning stereotype[s]" that "distorted their humanity all too often" (pp. 189-190). Blackface imagery grew out of a genre of pro-slavery literature called plantation narratives that emerged in the 19th century. These narratives provided minstrel shows and early American films with the material to create "comedic" skits that characterized Black Americans as pathetically inferior. Live performances of Blackface slowed around 1910, but films continued the minstrel show tradition. Such films like, *Picknainnies Doing a Dance* (1894), *Dancing Dark Boy* (1895), *A Nigger in a Woodpile* (1904), *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1905), and *For Massa's Sake* (1911), helped circulate stereotypical and demeaning representations of Black people originally popularized in Blackface shows. In 1915, the ideological film, *Birth of a Nation*, which characterized "emancipation as a mistake," epitomized the resurgence of the organized racist groups (Edwards, 1999). The film was adapted from Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman*, which glorified the violent actions of the

Klu Klux Klan and characterized Black people as a class of people that should be feared and controlled.

Farrington (2005) links the rise of these depictions to numerous stereotypes that emerged throughout history, including the criminal, the lazy "buffoon," the mammy, and the jezebel to name a few, which continue to appear in popular culture in various forms. Explaining the ideological power of such images, Collins (2000) argues that "controlling images" of African Americans repeatedly depict Black people in "narrow and demeaning ways" to justify and sustain intersecting oppressions. In this sense, these images are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice [be interpreted] as natural, normal, inevitable part of everyday life" (Collins, 2000, p. 69). The Black sexual deviant and the Black criminal are perhaps two of the most persistent images of African Americans that continue to linger in U.S. visual culture.

The Hypersexual Black Body

Initially, Black sexuality was represented as a deviant form of sexuality that served the interest of economies profiting on U.S. slave labor. Amadiume (2008) notes that Black people's bodies were frequently associated with reproduction. During slave auctions, for example, Black bodies were often purchased based on their perceived ability to produce offspring. White (1999) writes that during slavery, "major periodicals carried articles detailing optimal conditions under which bonded women were known to reproduce, and the merits of a particular 'breeder' were often the topic of parlor or dinner table conversations" (p. 31). Discussions of slaves' sexual activities increased as reproduction became a topic of public discussion (White,

1999).

Race, gender, and class oppression coupled with the long history of Black women's perceived hypersexuality have made them uniquely vulnerable to sexual exploitation. For this reason, hooks (1982) argues that Black women have long been associated as sexual providers for White men. A Black slave's refusal to engage in sex could have resulted in being beaten, sold, or having loved ones sold to another owner (Pilgrim, 2002). According to D'Emilio & Freedman (1998), "The rape of a female slave was probably the most common form of interracial sex" (p. 102). Their perceived compliance with rape undoubtedly added to the impression of Black women's lustfulness and promiscuity. For this reason, Wanzo (2009) argues Black women throughout history have been deemed *un*-rapeable. Sexual assaults against Black women did not "count" due to ideological notions that constructed Black women as impure, hypersexual, and immoral. Similarly, other scholars have observed that Black women were viewed as "loose women" and whores, which consequently gave their accusations of rape less legitimacy (Davis, 1981/2011; Gammage, 2015; Lomax, 2018). In fact, Black women had little legal recourse against rape during slavery and throughout most of the 20th century (Putzi, 2006). Consequences of this history continues today as Black women are less likely to report sexual assaults and more likely to be blamed than other women for inciting the act of violence (Washington 2001; Wyatt, 1992; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018). Donovan and Williams (2012) argue that historical and contemporary images of the "Black jezebel" have contributed to less empathy and judicial support for Black rape victims.

The image of the "Black jezebel" has been refashioned but continues to persist

in contemporary popular culture. Contemporary Black jezebels are frequently referred to as “welfare queens,” “hoochies,” “hoodrats,” and “freaks” in popular culture (Donovan & Williams, 2012.) The jezebel image is reinforced in various forms of media, including music videos, rap music, movies, magazines, and pornography (Collins, 2000; Gammage, 2015). The repeated circulation of the jezebel projects the stereotype onto all Black women. For example, after viewing sexually seductive rap videos featuring Black women, researchers at the end of the 20th century found that college students were more likely to described Black women as *indecent*, *sleazy*, and *sluttish* (Gan, Zillmann, & Mitrook, 1997). The researchers concluded that viewing the behavior and perceived traits of a small segment of Black women was generalized to other members of the population. Few recent studies have attempted to duplicate the stereotyping effect of Black people using experimental methods, but a more recent study tracked the eye movement of individuals’ viewing patterns when observing Black and White women’s bodies. Anderson, et al, (2018) argue that “individuals attend more often, and for longer durations, to the sexual body parts of Black women compared to White women” (p. 461). This suggests that the long history of overt objectification and dehumanization of Black women may influence contemporary viewing behaviors of individuals. In other words, Black women are more likely to be gazed upon as an object due to stereotypes and perceptions about Black women.

Similar to representations of Black women’s sexuality, Black men’s perceived hypersexuality was used to support violence and trauma against Black bodies. The image of the hypermasculine, mythically endowed Black rapist fed White fears and

justified lynching practices. From slavery through much of the 20th century, suspected sexual relations between a White woman and a Black man could result in the man's castration, death, or both, regardless of consent (Loewen, 2013). During the Jim Crow Era, scientific journals, local newspapers, and best-selling novels claimed that Black men were raping White women in epidemic numbers, which served as public rationale for lynching Black men (Pilgrim, 2002). Davis (1981/2011) calls the myth of the Black rapist "one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism" (p. 173). She argues that the myth "has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications" (p. 173). The myth of Black rapist and the perceived need to protect White women from Black-on-White rape continues to be used by White supremacists as justification of hate crimes against Black people today.[12]

Although the myth of the Black rapist is not overtly claimed in contemporary science and news, the image of the Black rapist lingers in popular discourses about Black male sexuality. Scholars have noted that the imaging of Black sexuality in mainstream contemporary film constructs Black characters as deviant individuals who lack regard for others and humanity (Jones, 1993; Slatton & Spades, 2016). Collins (2004) makes a similar point about Black men in popular culture. She says:

> Representations that reduce Black men to the physicality of their bodies, that depict an inherent promiscuity as part of the authentic Black masculinity, that highlight the predatory skills of the hustler, and that repeatedly associate young Black men in particular with violence converge in the controlling image of Black men as booty call-seeking rapists. (Collins, 2004, p. 166)

In the same way that Black feminist scholars have argued that Black women's bodies are constructed as promiscuous, critical scholars contend that myth of the endowed Black penis in popular culture has functioned as proof of Black male sexual deviance (Gines, 2013; Tucker, 2007).

The image of the Black jezebel and the Black rapist reinforce each other as Black people are portrayed as inherently deviant. Although hooks (1982) argues that the image of the Black rapist weakened with the rise of the Black jezebel myth, Davis (1981/2011) complicates the relationship between the Black rapist and the Black jezebel image by arguing that the two constructions strengthen each other. According to Davis (1981/2011), "The fictional image of the Black man as a rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous" (p. 182). In this sense, the two representations are complementary constructions of masculine and feminine notions of Black sexuality. More recent scholarship continues to examine the ways these constructions reinforce the other (Gines, 2013; Slatton & Spades, 2016). Thus, the combination of early perceptions of African lewdness, the sexual exploitation of Black bodies, and unequal protections under the law forged a strong stereotype of Black hypersexuality.

The Black Criminal or Thug

Like the image of the hypersexual Black body, the image of the criminal Black body is also one of the most consistent images of Black people in visual culture. Tucker (2007) argues that the image of the Black criminal is built on a long legacy of images, ideas, and beliefs that have supported systems of domination that contain, control, and annihilate African Americans. As Black people gained rights in

the United States, practices of domination and control changed form, but structural oppression still functioned under new practices.

For this reason, Franklin (1979) explains that Black slavery did not end with the emancipation, it merely changed forms. Black slaves were denied the forty acres and a mule as promised. Without land, labor jobs were the primary options available to Black people and they moved freely to seek competing opportunities (Franklin, (1979). But as Franklin notes, former masters had no intention of allowing Black people to compete economically, "so they devised a pervasive, intricate apparatus of law, custom, and brute force to keep the Blacks in perpetual bondage" (p. 6). These oppressive strategies worked to oppress Black people economically and keep the Black body tied to White economic power. Tucker contends that "the language of the Thirteenth Amendment was prophetic, forging explicit connections among the condition of slavery and the condition of the prisoner, and what has over time become the ideological redefinition of Black men as a race of criminals" (p. 5). Similarly, Franklin says, "Central to this historical redefinition of the role of Black people was an ideological redefinition of them. No longer were they just a subhuman race, they were now to be thought of a as race of criminals."

This redefinition became particularly important throughout American culture to shape perceptions of Black resistance (Corrigan, 2018). As Black people seized opportunities to improve their livelihood and freedom, they were met with resistance. This included Black activism since it represented a disruption to the status quo and Black people attempting to change power dynamics in America were criminalized (Corrigan, 2018). Therefore, "through White code words of the 1960s and 1970s,

such as ‘Black militant,’ ‘welfare Cadillacs,’ ‘violent-prone,’ ‘crime in the streets’ (as opposed to ‘safe streets,’), and ‘racial disorders’ (opposed to ‘law and order’),” Black people were continually labelled as criminals (Franklin, 1979, p. 7).

Lynching was another way to control Black populations and it represented a spectacular visual practice that terrorized Black communities and reified White power. Woods (2011) writes that “those deaths themselves were representational, conveying messages about racial hierarchy and the frightening consequences of transgressions against that hierarchy” (p. 8). Some lynchings drew large crowds of men, women, and children from neighboring cities. According to Woods (2011), lynching did not just “dramatize an undisputed White supremacy,” but also generated a sense of White unity (p. 8). Photographers even sold postcards of smiling White crowds with dangling Black bodies over their heads and some onlookers left with souvenirs of body parts (Woods, 2011). The production and dissemination of lynching imagery worked to communicate White domination and superiority to a wider audience. Such grotesque keepsakes were mailed to loved ones to allow them to share in the spectacle. Ore (2019) explains that while most such keepsakes served as commemorative mementos for supporters of White supremacy, other images were sent as threats to those who sought to challenge lynching.

Furthermore, the practice of lynching communicated that Black people were undeserving of justice through due process and marked them as likely suspects of criminal acts. Williamson (1984) describes the treatment of Black people during this era in the following way: “Their Blackness alone was license enough to line them up against the wall, to menace them with guns, to search them roughly, to beat them, and

rob them of every vestige of dignity" (p. 73). Williamson's description of this era sounds eerily similar to racial profiling of Black people today who are stopped without cause by police. During the Jim Crow Era, if a Black person was perceived as guilty by a White person that could be enough to sentence them to death by lynching, which worked with already perceived notions of Black wickedness to further construct African Americans as lawbreakers.

The creation of fear and distain for Black people deepened associations between the Black body and criminality. Many southern and northern cities were "sundown towns," which meant Black people were not allowed in these cities after the sun went down (Loewen, 2013). This rule was conveyed by signs and/or reputation. Being caught out in the streets after dark could mean death, which was reportedly the case with Carol Jenkins. She was killed while trying to sell encyclopedias after dark in Martinsville, Indiana in 1968 (Singer, 2005). This history remains visible in the suspicion of Black bodies in White or affluent neighborhoods. Through the lens of White supremacy, Black bodies symbolize threats to the safety of White communities. The perceived threat of Black criminality is frequently used to justify violence against Black people, such as the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was walking home from the store when a neighbor's interpretation of his physical presence in his neighborhood after dark led to his death.[13]

The on-going and persistent practices that construct Black people as a race of criminals function to naturalize the association between Blackness and criminality. This association is built within what Foucault (1977) calls the "carceral network," which represents all the disciplinary mechanisms used within society. The carceral

network centralizes power and authority but ignores social conditions that contribute to criminal behavior. These techniques produce the perceived need and justification for a prison system that controls and contains a segment of the population. Actions by members of a criminalized group are routinely viewed through a lens of criminality because of the perceived innateness of such immoral behaviors. These same acts would go unnoticed by groups freed of such naturalized criminal stigmas. As such, this process "establishes the 'criminal' as existing before the crime" (Foucault, 1977, p. 252). A White offender is typically viewed as "the author of his [or her] acts," whereas the actions of a Black delinquent are seen as a reflection of a criminal race exhibiting deviant traits and tendencies (Foucault, 1977, p. 252). When a group is marked with criminal imagery, such markings make their "criminality all the more formable and demands penitentiary measures that are all the more strict" (Foucault, 1977, p. 252). This discriminatory treatment is evident in the harsher sentences given to African Americans in comparison to Whites (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2004). In testing the theory of criminal threat, Feldmeyer et al. (2015) finds even harsher sentences in areas where a growing Black population are perceived as a collective criminal threat.

Bodies of Power

The barrage of degrading messages of Black people in visual culture has compelled numerous Black artists to attend to the historical and contemporary treatment and depictions of Black people. The growing body of literature on Black artwork demonstrates the wide-ranging political strategies used by artist-activists to re-envision Black bodies as sources of empowerment and resistance. Like the

rhetorical strategies of resistance that have always been a part of the African American rhetorical tradition, artists spotlight continuing injustices in contemporary society. In reviewing the literature, this section identifies several strategies used by artist-activists to revisit the past, to raise awareness on social issues, to educate the public, and to encourage social action.

Black artist-activists manipulate images to call attention to the marginalized experiences of Black people through a variety of ways. [14] One strategy is through "appropriation."[15] A common theme in appropriation art is to wrestle with history. As critical scholars challenge and reinterpret history from a contemporary perspective, this has created an emergence of "multiple histories" that offer a new lens to view the past, which often centers previously marginalized histories. Evans (2009) argues, "The challenge for appropriationist art now is to discover new ways of dealing with these unresolved histories" (p. 22). Appropriation helps to re-imagine Black bodies through images of self-definition and empowerment. Such strategies politicize historical images and challenge viewers to rethink oppressive representations of Black bodies. Another way artists accomplish this is by inserting their own image in their art to stand in for the historically voiceless and challenge the way viewers interpret Black bodies. Schneider (1997) notes that feminist performances frequently rely on a similar strategy by exposing the female body to reveal the coded meanings associated with female embodiment. An example of this strategy can be seen in a collaborative project between Lyle Ashton Harris and Renee Cox entitled *Hottentot Venus 2000* (1994). In the photograph, Cox exposes her nude body with large attachable metallic brown buttocks and breasts that she found in a costume shop. She

stares directly into the camera as she presents herself as a contemporary "Hottentot Venus" to boldly confront the viewer with the continuing commodification of bodies marked Black *and* female.

Many Black political artists call attention to the power dynamics of sight. Such strategies include artists displaying nude Black bodies to expose the (hyper)visibility of Black bodies that are simultaneously visible and invisible in visual culture. In doing so, Fleetwood (2011) argues that artists reproduce the gaze on the Black body to expose ideological functions of the Black body in the public sphere. Yet other artists avoid subjecting the Black body to the colonizing gaze through their art. Renee Green's installation series, *Seen*, for example, transforms the viewer into the subject of the gaze. It does so through interactive scenes of public exhibitions that position the viewer in front of other audience members. Viewers are encouraged to feel exposed and vulnerable as they are implicated in the consumption of Black bodies (Collins, 2002).

In working against messages that devalue the Black body, many artists use their art to embrace and celebrate Black identity and culture. To reject Eurocentric perspectives, Amadiume (2008) argues that African artists use sculpture, weaving, and body art to assert their culture and resist negative interpretations of Blackness. They do so by celebrating the Black form in all of its many shapes and sizes. In her anthology, *The Black Body*, Danquah (2009) includes short essays written by 30 scholars, artists, actors, and comedians who engage in reflections about the Black body in the public sphere. From deeply serious analyses to witty personal narratives, to funny commentaries, these writers emphasize the importance of addressing social

issues related to race and representations in contemporary era. The collection also highlights the importance of celebrating diverse representations of Black identity, which is necessary to challenge monolithic notions of Blackness.

In looking across Western history, racial ideologies about Black people have developed over hundreds and even thousands of years through a wide range of visual and textual discourses, including philosophical literature, religious texts, travel narratives, scientific documents, and popular media. By tracing the development of race over time, it becomes evident that current perceptions of Black Americans are deeply connected to ideological systems of meaning surrounding the Black body. These discourses have marked the Black body as the antithesis to the idealized White body that have fueled long-lasting notions of racial difference and oppression. As a result, the United States continues to struggle with unhealed wounds from its racist past that bleed anew into modernized forms of racial oppression. Recognizing the relationship between representation and discrimination, critical scholars and artist-activists reveal the importance of identifying and deconstructing problematic representations of the Black body that continue to sustain and perpetuate White supremacy. Yet efforts to *reclaim* the Black body from such representations are in their infancy compared to the long and complex system of racism that has so persuasively portrayed the Black body as "the inferior other." Political art holds a powerful potential to remind viewers that the history of the Black body is steeped in horror, terror, and trauma. Yet, at the same time, the Black body also represents a site of agency, empowerment, and resistance. Artist-activists continue to engage the history of the Black body to elucidate Black suffering, challenge problematic

representations, critique discriminatory acts, promote Black empowerment, and agitate for change.

Outline of Study

Situated within a larger context of continued racial tension and violence, this study examines the rhetorical strategies employed by Black photographers to address the historical and contemporary signification of the Black body. This project features two research questions designed to study the ways in which Black activist-artists intervene politically in representations of Black bodies. First, this study analyzes how Black photographers work to destabilize the historical representations of Black women and men that have constituted Black bodies as naturally inferior. Second, this study examines how Black photographers promote political agency for those traditionally silenced in U.S. collective memories of violence and trauma.

To answer these research questions, this project analyzes the artwork of artist-activists Carla Williams, Carrie Mae Weems, and Julian Plowden. First, the project focuses on Carla Williams's series, *How to Measure Character* (1990-1991), which juxtaposes visual images and texts related to scientific racism next to photographs of her nude body to explore the representational trauma inflicted on Black bodies. Second, the project analyzes the photo-text series entitled, *From Here I Saw What Happened* (1995-1996) by Carrie Mae Weems, which re-appropriates archival images of Black people in America from slavery through the mid-20th century. Third, the project analyzes contemporary images of the Black Lives Matter movement photographed in 2014 through 2020 by street photographer, Julian Plowden. All of the images have circulated online through the artists' websites. Some or all of the

images in each series has also been exhibited in museums and some images have been reproduced in printed media, including books, articles, and magazines. The analysis of this project focuses on the images as they are presented online and, in some cases, as they appear in books.[16]

Critical Frameworks

This project aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on the relationships between representation, power, trauma, and ideology. Four major critical frameworks provide theoretical support for the project. They include critical race theory, gender theory, visuality, political activism and the body, and collective memories of oppression and trauma. Together these critical frameworks provide the theories and vocabularies needed to grapple with my research questions as they relate to power, visuality, and the politics of the Black body.

Theories of Race, Class, and Gender. The critical approach in this project considers the intersectional identities related to Black womanhood and Black manhood in order to explore the complexity of Black embodiment in U.S. political art. To do so, the critical lens will draw upon critical race theories and feminist theories, with an emphasis on examining Black experiences and representations and the accompanying intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality.[17]

Rooted in the political commitment to social justice, critical race theory was initially developed as a theoretical framework to "center" race and racism in legal studies in the 1970s (Bell, 1973). Today, critical race theory has become an interdisciplinary framework to explore and examine the relationship between race and power in many research areas, including education, women's studies, cultural studies,

and communication (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory emphasizes the importance of giving voice to those who experience oppression (Sandoval, 2013). For that reason, critical race theory is committed to presenting counternarratives as “a method of telling the stories of those people who experiences are not often told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

With its explicit embrace of race-centered scholarship and advocacy, critical race theory aims to re-examine the means by which race and racism have been negotiated in the American consciousness (Crenshaw, et al. 1995). From this perspective, this project holds the political stance that racism continues to be a pressing socio-political issue that impacts the lives of Black Americans. Young (2010) argues: “Although Black bodies vary, thus preventing them from having exactly the same experience, the similarities in how they are seen and see constitute a relatable experience of the body” (p. 14). The repetitive and narrow representations of African Americans create a culture of viewing Black people that contain and constrain them ideologically. Therefore, common experiences are shaped by their social location based on their race. In this sense, African Americans experience common patterns in which they are "seen" in similar ways due to visual cultural practices that associate particular ideological meanings with the Black body. Although there are common patterns within Black experiences, McCoy and Rodricks (2015) argue the critical race scholars examine the complex realities in the lived experiences of people of color, “rather than attempt to generalize and essentialize at will” (p. 63). From this perspective, critical race scholarship is “anti-essentialist,” since it is based on “the belief that there is no singular experience or attribute that can

be ascribed to or may define any group of people" (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015, p. 63). Thus, even when centering race, it is necessary to examine other social identities that affect the lived experiences of Black people. Critical scholars argue that "the purposeful approach of intersectionality account for the complex differential racialization that affects Communities of Color and allows for the opportunity to (re)construct histories and narratives by centering voice" (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015, p. 63-64).

This project draws from critical race theory and gender theory to take an intersectional approach in order to analyze the complexity of Black experiences and representations in Black political art.[18] The theory of intersectionality illuminates socio-political inequalities by complicating oppression beyond a single identity marker to reveal how oppressions can interact or collide in compounding ways within systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Class is frequently intertwined with race, since racial hierarchies were formed to construct a class system based on race (Atrey, 2019). Perceptions of economic status that are mapped on to the Black body in both the past and present, further advance the intersections of race and class. Taylor (2011) argues that intersectional scholarship should "progress beyond intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm, toward understanding intersectionality as a lived experience," where social identities may be understood as "contested, intersecting categories" (p. 212). In other words, an intersectional lens pushes scholars to examine the material realities of living in intersecting categories.

Similar to the political commitment of critical race theory, intersectionality aligns with political projects designed to uplift marginalized groups. Dill and

Zambrana (2009) describe intersectionality as "a systematic approach to understanding human life and behavior rooted in the experiences and struggles of marginalized people" (p. 122). They explain four underlying premises of intersectionality that form its critical perspective. First, as Dill and Zambrana argue, "inequalities are derived from race, gender, class, and their intersections place specific groups of the population in a privileged position with respect to other groups and offer individuals unearned benefits based solely on group membership" (p. 122). Second, they make the case that "historical and systemic disinvestment of non-privileged or marginalized groups is a major contributing factor to the low social and economic status of those groups" (p. 122). In other words, Black people are economically disadvantaged due to a long history of limited resources and opportunities due to their social status. Third, the scholars claim that "representations of groups and individuals in music, art, film, and other cultural forms create and sustain ideologies" about the superiority of privileged groups and the inferiority of marginalized groups (p. 122). Notions about group superiority/inferiority also function to explain the behavior of individuals based on group membership. Fourth, individual identity draws from multiple socially-defined statuses. One or more statuses are salient in specific situations or within specific historical contexts (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Gender and feminist theories helps to further advance the connection between the body and the production of knowledge. For this project, Black feminist scholarship is particularly relevant as it helps center Black women's lived experiences and interrogate interlocking oppressions that continue to impact the lives of Black

women (Kendall, 2021; Simien, 2012). Similarly, Black masculinity studies give insight into representations and cultural constructions surrounding Black male identity and the unique challenges faced by Black men in America (hook, 2004). Standpoint theorists argue that one's position or social location provides a particular viewpoint of the world (Kenney, 1998). This help scholars consider how physical bodies and social identities impact one's experience in the world. Collins (2002) echoes this perspective in her foundational work, *Black Feminist Thought*, when she argues that Black women's "unique angle of vision" is marked by their experiences with intersectional oppression and a "legacy of struggle" (p. 35). Presenting a similar perspective, Haraway (1988) insists on "the embodied nature of all vision" from which we all see (p. 581). She calls for researchers to work from "embodied perspectives" to produce what she calls "situated knowledges." Such an approach shifts away from "disembodied objectivity" to engage in research that acknowledges the political perspective, personal connection, and/or personal experience of the researcher.[19] Combined, these theories demonstrate the potential for gender theory to legitimatize various marginal perspectives and resist Eurocentric, male-dominated discourse. Combining critical race and feminist theories acknowledge the complexity and uniqueness of individuals across intersecting identities, while also emphasizing shared experiences from specific social locations.

Political Art and Visual Theory. Theories that emphasize the political work of art will form the second dimension of the critical framework. Since art has played a significant role in social movements of the past, this project draws from theories of visuality and political art that highlight the political power of visual culture. Edelman

(1995) contends that art plays a key role in shaping political ideas, language, and behavior. His research reveals how art is embedded in the political fabric of society. He describes political art as "the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring" (p. 2). In this sense, art is more than a mere reflection of a social movement. It also serves "a major and integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior" (p. 2). Political artwork consequently can work with or against systems of power to forge ideology and incite political action.

To study visuality from an intersectional approach, visual scholars challenge traditional assumptions in visual theory. These theories assist in an important shift away from studying aesthetics in an apolitical manner to recognizing that visual culture is always infused within systems of power. In discussing her perspectives on visual art, Korsmeyer (2004) says:

> Aesthetic ideologies that would remove art from its relations with the world disguise its ability to inscribe and to reinforce power relations. With visual art, those relations are manifest in vision itself: the way it is depicted in a work and the way it is induced and directed in the observer outside the work. (p. 51)

Here Korsmeyer emphasizes the role of visuality in the political arena and in perpetuating ideological perspectives. Traditionally, White males have dominated art and media to construct the vision from which the world is depicted. Perspectives must always be interrogated to reveal whose perspective is being privileged and why. Korsmeyer recognizes that viewers' responses to visuals are influenced by their sources of knowledge and experience. Like standpoint theory, she suggests that

multiple perspectives need to be acknowledged in such visual theories. Twigg (2008) also notes that what makes images so persuasive is that they "hide their own rhetoricity." Therefore, a critical perspective that engages race, gender, class, and sexuality must attend to the ideological messages and meanings in visual discourse to reveal power dynamics at work.

Visual theories also provide a means by which to understand how subjects can speak back to power. Willis (2007) argues that photography can serve as a tool for challenging the normative White gaze and the authorizing racialized social structures they represent. Similarly, hooks's (1992/2014) concept of the "oppositional gaze" complicates the issue of spectatorship to demonstrate that subjects can "look back" in acts of resistance. By "looking back," the politics of sights are engaged as the subject asserts their agency within the image. hooks (1992) says: "Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). Rather than assuming the subject of the gaze is always disempowered, this perspective assumes that the oppositional gaze transforms the seemingly passive position into disruptions of the dominant gaze. Rony (2004) uses the term the "third eye" to refer to "the look back" or the "returned gaze" to demonstrate how the third eye breaks the subject-object dichotomy to resist the category of "the Other" and implicate the viewer in its construction.

By evoking the oppositional gaze, individuals resist becoming objects and instead assert themselves as subjects. The subject-object dichotomy is particularly relevant to visual studies of race, gender, class, and sexuality, because subject status

generally implies agency and object status implies restrictions on such agency. Doy (2000) suggests that the term *subject* "refers to being a person, selfhood—a thinking and acting human subject, rather than a passive object. Put simply, a subject is an individual person" (p. 111). The categories of "Black woman" and "Black man" have traditionally been denied personhood through systems of power. Yet, critical scholars continue to observe, people seek strategies of resistance to reclaim their status as a subject (Gordon & Huang 2020; Wender, 2017; West, 2008). As a result, such individuals can push back.

Politics of the Body. Theories that emphasize the politics of the body will serve as the third dimension of the critical framework. In the last couple of decades, communication scholars have become increasingly interested in theorizing about the body and its relationship to power, recognizing that bodies are perceived and interpreted by complex systems of ideologies. As Patterson and Corning (1997) have noted, the body is "a sign of, or site for, the social and political inscription of meaning" (p. 7). If we study the body from a rhetorical perspective, they contend that "we first must read the body as the site of cultural inscription, self-regulation, and resistance" (p. 7). Ellingson (2017) says, "Identities are constructed within the sticky web of culture by embodied people and embodied communication among them," which shapes ways of knowing and our relationships to power (p. 60). From these perspectives, the body becomes a site of struggle in which multiple meanings are inscribed on it to both reify and defy domination. Once we recognize that bodies are politically marked, we can envision the body ''as a pivotal resource for the crucial practice of public argumentation'' (Deluca, 1999, p. 10). This project attempts to

further explore the relationship between the body and power to re-imagine rhetoric beyond its traditional definitions and expand ways of deciphering persuasion, ideology, and power more completely.

In particular, I examine the strategic ways representations of the Black body are shaped through multiple discourses to advance deterministic notions of race. As Young (2010) explains:

> When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of *the* black body. The second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body that and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of a racializing projection. (p. 7)

Black artists have been particularly invested in interrogating the notion of the Black body through art. To do so, scholars emphasize the ways artists engage history to explore, resist, and redefine representations of the Black body (Willis, 2009, Willis, 2021, Smith, 2020, Raiford and Raphael-Hernandez, 2017).

Collective Memory and Trauma. Theories of collective memory represent the final dimension to the critical perspective. Traumatic events are often at risk of being silenced and forgotten in collective memories, which is why trauma theory is helpful in understanding the rhetorical processes of collective memory. Zelizer (1998) argues that collective memory is not merely the remembering or retelling of events, but represents the "social, cultural, and political action at its broadest level" in which history is actively reinterpreted in the present to give meaning to the past (p. 2). Emphasizing the active building of cultural memory through discourse, Assman

(1997) says the process of cultural remembering is “the on-going work of reconstructive imagination” (p. 9). Therefore, memories are never fixed; they are (re)constituted in public discourse. As Halbwachs (1992) explains, “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (p. 38). This meaning-making process accentuates the role of culture and social consciousness in the construction of collective memory. Collective memory is distinct from personal memory because the authority of personal memory “fades with time, [while] the authority of collective memories increase as time passes, taking on new complications, nuances, and interests” (Zelizer, 1998, p. 3). As a critical framework, theories of collective memory serve as a political practice with social, political, and cultural consequences.

One of the most traumatic memories in U.S. history is the American slave experience, which was followed by decades of racial violence and lingering inequalities. Visual and textual discourses of slavery remind the public of this unjust past in the nation’s history. However, historical discourse has the potential to cast racial trauma as a thing of the past if it fails to redress such atrocities as politically relevant today. Critical race scholars argue that Americans have not fully confronted and dealt with the traumas of slavery, which has left unhealed wounds in American culture (Gilroy, 1993; Walcott, 2000). The inability to deal with racial trauma continues to result in far-reaching consequences of slavery that impacts African descendants in the Diaspora today. Degruy (2017) argues that Black folks today experience post traumatic slave syndrome from the enduring injury of slavery. She says, as past violations combine with crimes of today, Black people continue to

experience physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual abuse due to their race. Ultimately, racial trauma is experienced by Black people in numerous ways that intersect with other social identities.

In this developing research area, critical trauma studies draw from clinical models of psychology and neuroscience to study the relationship among memory, loss, and recovery—creating an ability to cope with trauma in our culture (Radstone, 2007). Wertheimer and Casper (2016) explain that critical trauma studies engage in "recognizing and naming 'trauma' not only as a condition of broken bodies and shattered minds, but also and primarily as a cultural object" (p. 3). From such a perspective, "'Trauma' is a product of history and politics, subject to reinterpretation, contestation, and intervention" (Wertheimer & Casper, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, trauma theory offers a framework to unravel and interrogate "the political and cultural work that 'trauma' does—both in the world, as well as for those (like us) doing the interrogating" (Wertheimer & Casper, 2016, p. 5). The critical framework of trauma studies will also be helpful to consider how re-remembering trauma can offer pedagogical lessons from the past to create a more just future (Ball, 2000; Gilfis, 1999).

The collective work of the artists in this project demonstrates the varied strategies used in Black political photography to re-instantiate political trauma in U.S. collective memory and illuminate continued oppression by visually connecting past atrocities with present racial violence. In doing so, artists revisit narrow and demeaning portrayals of Black bodies to demonstrate that such representations have had a long-standing presence in U.S. visual culture. Black people continue to

experience physical and representational violence through these deeply implanted ideologies of Blackness. I argue representations of the Black body are re-claimed as a source of power to initiate social change as viewers are invited to witness on-going trauma to Black bodies as a protest strategy designed to stop it. The impact of oppression has not only political and economic consequences to Black people, but also a heavy emotional toll (Degruy, 2017). The artists visualize a range of Black emotions to spotlight the emotional burden of racism. I argue Black emotions are re-politicized in Black political photography as a means to evoke collective agency, galvanize political support, and empower Black voices.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter One, I examine the visual strategies used by Carla Williams in her series, *How to Measure Character (1990-1991),* to challenge past and present constructions of race by revisiting scientific racism and linking these pseudoscientific efforts to lingering ideologies of race in U.S. culture. To do so, Williams juxtaposes her nude body next to archival documents on race to expose the representational trauma inflicted on Black bodies to characterize them as inherently inferior. Some images in the series display the historical signification of Black female bodies as audiences are confronted with the treatment of Sarah Baartman; other images address the broader concept of race. By restaging the racial trauma of scientific racism, I argue Williams uses her body to evoke Black agency to counter racist claims that contribute to Black subjugation and racial stereotypes today.

In Chapter Two, I analyze how Carrie Mae Weems uses her photo-text series entitled *From Here I Saw What Happen* (1995-1996) to intervene in representations

of the Black body. The art series re-appropriates archival photographs in chronological order to reveal the ways in which Black people have experienced racial trauma in the United States over time. Weems incorporates framing, tinting, and overlaying text on each image to invite audiences to interpret the photographs anew and contemplate the culturally-inscribed meanings of Black embodiment across gender, class, and sexuality. I argue that doing so, Weems re-politicizes historical and contemporary representations of Blackness and collective remembrances of Black trauma to call for retribution and healing.

In Chapter Three, I interpret how Julian Plowden's Project #Shootback (2014-2020) offers a haunting reminder of the continued racial inequalities in the United States through political street photography of the Black Lives Matter movement. I argue the images draw from collective memories of Black liberation movements to construct a movement committed to justice through Black empowerment, inclusive of all Black people and allies. In the process, the collection uses numerous strategies to expose the shared fear of police brutality and racial violence common in the Black experience, revealing the deep racial trauma Black people continue to endure. The images also reveal some of the challenges to the Black Lives Matter movement as protestors work against social stigmas that criminalize Black protestors and minimize the prevalence of racial oppression. Despite these challenges, Black emotion and Black embodiment are re-politicized in Black political photography as a means to resist racial oppression, survive racial trauma, and expose ongoing atrocities.

The art series in this project were selected due to their clear political message about race in America. While there are many possible artists that could have been

selected, the scope is limited to three art series to allow for both range and depth of analysis. This project is particularly focused on art that follows the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s to analyze the legacy of Black political art in the last three decades. The selection of these works reveals the ways Black political art is shaped by the context of the time, yet there is common recurring theme of representations of the Black body and its relationship to social justice. Both Williams's (Chapter 1) and Weems's (Chapter 2) images are produced around public outcry of police brutality through the highly publicized beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991. The incident sparked social unrest and reinvigorated civil rights efforts during the time (Sastry & Bates, 2017). Similarly, Plowden's work directly addresses police brutality in the mid-2010s through the 2020 during the Black Lives Matter movement. All of artists are responding to historical and contemporary issues of their time to emphasize the need for social change. Williams's and Weems's artwork of the 1990s still has resonance to viewers today as racial trauma continues to remerge as a pressing social issue. From this perspective, the artwork reveals the on-going efforts to address Black suffering that has not yet been resolved.

In the Conclusion, I address the implications of Black political art in contemporary efforts for racial justice. While each chapter focuses on the particular strategies used by each artist, the conclusion analyzes the collections together to illustrate the various ways Black artist-activists challenge ideological notions of the Black body and deploy strategies to intervene in collective memory, racial trauma, and Black embodiment. After discussing the themes and arguments throughout the

three collections, I examine LaToya Ruby Frazier's photography on Breonna Taylor's life and memory. The images accompany an article by Ta-Nehisi Coates, entitled "A Beautiful Life," which featured in a special issue of *Vanity Fair*, entitled the "Great Fire." The images of Breonna Taylor call attention to the tragic death of the young Black woman and pain felt by her family due to police recklessness. But on a larger scale, the images reveal the collective Black pain of racial injustice. I compare the strategies used by Williams, Weems, and Plowden to those used by Frazier. I argue that the images reclaim representations of Breonna Taylor to portray her honorable character and demand justice now.

Chapter 1: Black Embodiment in a Carla Williams's Photography

Coded meanings associated with the body undergird dominant systems of power. In the United States, constructions of Blackness and Whiteness have a deep history rooted in colonization and the exploitation of Black bodies that reaches back in time before the formal borders of the nation were developed. Images of Blackness and African people justified their treatment and validated ideas of White supremacy. As Henderson (2009) puts it, "social forces stake claims to fields of representation in the racial economy of Western culture" (p. 14). Representation of identity formation is used to reinvest in the political and cultural objectives of the dominant power structure. Within this process, the enduring legacies of "always-already known" discourses on race and their implications shape notions of difference and systems of subjugation today (Henderson, 2009, p.14). In this sense, the politics of the past are reinvested in the present as lingering racial ideologies are merely refashioned in the contemporary culture. As Hall (2005), Omi and Winant (2016), and other critics remind us, identity and race are not a fixed reality, but an evolving sociohistorical production within the current sociopolitical culture. While the imaging of race and difference evolves, the symbolic residues of the past endure in the present as embedded forms of marginalization and domination are reproduced.

Artist-activists invested in racial equality routinely attend to the racial politics of the past that haunt the present. Such an approach takes a "look back" at Black trauma to examine the legacy of racial oppression in our current era. Drawing from Alexander's (2004) definition of trauma, this chapter interprets Black trauma as both

physical and symbolic injury against Black people to subjugate and exploit Black people collectively within larger systems of power. One such area of Black trauma is scientific racism and its practices. Scientific racism of the 17th, 18th, and early 20th centuries operated within larger systems of domination to enslave, abuse, display, and exploit Black people individually and wound Black people collectively, both symbolically and politically. The memory work of artist-activists function to re-insert this often-marginalized history into the collective consciousness of its viewers to address the trauma inflicted on Black bodies. As Alexander (2004) explains:

> Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go. (p. 10)

In this case, artist-activists act as "collective actors" to represent the social pain of Black trauma and the political consequences in the lives of Black people.

Black art re-politicizing scientific racism is not simply exposing racial trauma of the past, but it is also revealing the continuing significance of material and representational atrocities related to this history. On one hand, archival images of scientific racism can appear outdated as they capture a different era of Western science and culture. On the other hand, the artistic reproduction of these images reveals the ways in which the Black body continues to be assigned negative meanings in our society based on centuries of racial assumptions linked to the Black body. By re-appropriating archival images, artist-activists expose the powerful force of both

images and science combined to establish long-lasting ideologies about race and the body.

Through the lens of intersectionality combined with memory, and trauma, this chapter will examine how Carla Williams's photographic installation series, *How to Read Character,* juxtaposes archival documents and images related to early science next to her nude body to expose the representational trauma inflicted on Black bodies and to identify the strategies that mark them as naturally inferior. By using her own nude body as a vehicle for critique, Williams uses unconventional self-portraits to evoke Black agency to subvert the dominant gaze that has contributed to Black subjugation and racial stereotypes of the past and present. Williams visually reclaims the Black body from an object of exploitation to a representation of power. In the process, the series restages the harsh scientific gaze to reveal the Black body's embeddedness in positivist science, which demonstrates the ways in which early notions of race, gender, class, and sexuality have been at least partially constructed through 19th century scientific discourses, theories, and practices.

This chapter attends to the implications of political art, Black embodiment, and cultural memory work in a number of ways. First, it situates and explores political art's role in collective memory surrounding scientific racism as a form of racial trauma. Second, it examines the ways in which political art subtly interconnects race, gender, and class identity to further politicize the Black body. Third, it reveals *How to Read Character* activates the Black body as a site for empowerment to voice past atrocity and expose lingering forms of domination. Rather than envisioning

history as merely events of the past, the series reveals the relevance of historical Black representation and current perceptions of Black identity.

Reading the Black Body

Scientific racism inflicted both physical and symbolic injury to Black bodies in a quest to determine racial categories, emphasize racial differences, and establish social hierarchies. *How to Read Character* returns to popular branches of modern science of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as anthropometry, physiognomy, and phrenology, to reveal how text and images have framed a visual language to "read" racial, sexual, and class-based characteristics onto the Black body. While everyday folks are familiar with the history of racism to varying degrees, many people are less aware of the role science played in establishing racist beliefs and how these ideas continue to be perpetuated within society. Others may be aware of scientific racism but overlook the relevance it has to current racial tensions. The memory work of Williams's photographs informs, teaches, and reminds viewers of the embeddedness of the Black body in science.

Williams (2008) explains that her self-portraits were initially informed by historical portraits made by male photographers taking intimate images of their female wives, lovers, and muses. Seeking to capture the intimacy in these moments, she turned the camera on herself. However, she quickly recognized that her embodiment as a Black woman would be viewed through the lens of racial difference. In describing her artistic process, she says:

> I realized that my body could never be simply formal, or emotional, or personal. Most viewers would always see a black body regardless of my

> intent…Through juxtapositions of nineteenth century images and texts on racial differentiation and categorization with contemporary self-portraits, I hope to suggest to the viewer that such precedents, while seemingly absurd and outdated, still contain a great deal of resonance and power with respect to the way that we read and respond to contemporary images of African American women. (Williams, 2008, n.p.)[20]

Recognizing the embeddedness of race surrounding politics of the body, Williams sought to emphasize the ways notions of race were formed in scientific disciplines in order to define and classify races, which still influence ways of seeing today.

How to Read Character employs various visual strategies to revert the gaze back on the Black body to mimic the historical scientific gaze that has naturalized race and predetermined individual character based on race. The series risks reifying the stereotypical messages about Black people as it exposes the artist-activist's body to a general audience. However, the restaging of past in the present serves as a powerful reminder of the deep racial history in the Western society and its lingering impact. In doing so, the series exposes the manner in which Black bodies continue to be "read" in particular ideological ways steeped in racial history that has constructed notions of Blackness negatively.

The size, scale, and framing of the body in *How to Read Character* has significant meaning when interpreting the series. The large size of the contemporary photographs symbolically aggrandizes the message within the self-portrait to emphasize the significance of meanings culturally attributed to the Black body and the importance of the issues being raised. The series consists of six gelatin silver

prints of self-portraits in gilded frames measuring five feet by four feet. As Collins (2002) explains, “Carla Williams frames the body in gold—the same body previously seen as an object of curious and as evidence of inferiority—and keeps the faith that the museum or gallery setting will honor the gilded-framed body and serve as a site of positive instruction” (p. 30). Both the large size and the gilded frames function to emphasize the innate value and importance of Black people in the world that has often worked to deny them social capital and civil rights. The self-portraits feature Williams’s head, profile, torso, and different parts of her body. Each image is meant to be viewed next to an accompanying photocopy transfer of a historical document (not framed) that measures 22 inches by 30 inches. When viewed online, the images are still presented with a similar scale, in which the self-portraits are larger and more prominent than the photocopy transfers.[21] All the images in the series are untitled. Williams (2017) explains that: “The gelatin sliver photographs and photocopy transfers are meant to be seen in pairs with the transfer functioning as a kind of visual descriptive label and reference to the photograph” (para. 11). Rather than naming each image, the photocopy transfer of historical documents helps illuminate the political message in each image. As Williams (2017) states, “The choice of representation, i.e., scale of the formal portrait, especially the fact that certain subjects were not given this of kind of aggrandizement and importance” (para.11). The size of the contemporary photographs next to the photocopy transfers also demonstrates visually that contemporary images dominate our current perspectives of the world, but history still influences the construction of contemporary images and our

interpretation therein. Therefore, the photocopy transfers of historical images guide the message and interpretation of each self-portrait.

The images in the series blur the sense of time as it emphasizes racial injustice as a major issue of the past and present. It does so by giving the image an appearance that is both aged and contemporary. The gilded frame and the smudging of the photo ink around the boarder of Black and white photographs give it an aged appearance. At the same time, it is evident that the photograph is a contemporary image due to the clarity and sharpness of the print. The image is broken up by subtle boxes that overlay each portrait. The lines appear subtle in some areas and more distinct in other areas of the portraits. It creates an appearance of boxes over Williams's body in a patchwork type style. The combination of the subtle patchwork over her skin and the lighting creates multiple shades of brown/black, ranging from light to dark, similar to the vast range of brown skin tones seen in Black populations. Very old photographs that have not been well preserved will also have lines and markings on them, which may cause some parts of the photo to appear lighter or darker due to damage. Similarly, the straight lines that form boxes on the image gives the appearance of an aged photograph that is slightly damaged from folding and fading color. The artistic representation blends the old and the new to reflect the timelessness of racial trauma in America. The past and present merge to emphasize that Black people are still judged, mistreated, and oppressed based on their identity.

Therefore, Williams's body stands in as a timeless representation of the Black body to draw attention to long-held practices of discriminatory readings of the body. The artistic choices in Williams's appearance and background aid in the political

reading of her artwork and convey the temporality of the images. The background is plain and dark in each self-portrait, which allows for the focus on the body. The self-portraits are difficult to date based on Williams's appearance alone. Like many images of Black colonial subjects, Williams appears nude in all the photographs to call attention to the Black body and its signification over time. The striking absence of clothing also eliminates any reference to time, since clothing styles usually suggest a particular era and can imply social class. Therefore, self-portraits center her body without any additional social context except for the photocopy transfers acting as labels for each image. As her contemporary body is displayed next to historical images of Black bodies, a connection is drawn between the past and present. The viewer is encouraged to see the similarity and interpret the on-going relevance of the historical images today.

Engaging and Challenging the Scientific Gaze

How to Read Character challenges the scientific gaze that constructed narrow and distorted definitions of Blackness and race more generally. Modern science in Western society became increasingly obsessed with classifying and categorizing all forms of life, including human species, from the 16th century onward. As the scientific gaze emphasized distinct racial categories (through perceived differences across groups around the world), it advanced biological deterministic paradigms and elevated White-maleness as the ideal. As a result, the scientific gaze became a legitimizing tool in which all people were measured to lay claims about human intelligence, beauty, ability, and more.

In redressing this history, Williams takes a direct aim at branches of modern science from the 17th, 18th, and 19th century (anthropometry and physiognomy) through her title, *How to Read Character*. By revisiting this literature, she reminds viewers how cultural practices of reading the face and body have developed in the United States. The title of her series comes from Samuel Robert Wells's 1890 book and Orson Fowler's 1896 book, *How to Read Character: A New Illustrated Handbook on Phrenology and Physiognomy*.[22] Although phrenology is considered a pseudoscience today, it was largely influential in the 19th century as it spread the assumption that different emotions, traits, and thoughts can be located in the brain. It was first developed by Franz Joseph Gall in 1876 as the study of the human skulls, which was based on the idea that the brain was an organ that localized different functions and characteristics. To study the human brain, phrenologists would generally examine people's skull by hand and take measurements using special tools, such as a craniometer (Parssinen, 1974). Drawings of individuals with certain traits or temperament were also used to make claims of the connection between the character and physical appearance, particularly the face and head (Hartley, 2005). For example, Herbert Spencer's *Personal* Beauty (1854) makes a direct connection between facial features and mental ability and character. He describes specific facial features that are often associated with people of color, such as large lips and large cheekbones, as "ugly." He claimed such "ugliness" was a sign as inferiority as he argued these features disappear as intelligence increases. Francis Galton made similar claims. In *Human Faculty*, Galton (1883) sought to identify "ideal" physical features and encourage reproduction among individuals that reflected the "ideal typical form,"

while restricting reproduction among individuals who deviated significantly from the ideal. This ideology echoes in an ad for Samuel Robert Wells's book, *How to Read Character: A New Illustrated Handbook on Phrenology and Physiognomy* (1890) reads:

> If you want something that will interest you more than anything you have ever read and enable you to understand all the difference in people at a glance, by the "SIGNS OF CHARACTER" send for a copy…It will show you how to read people as you would a book, and to see if they are inclined to be good, upright, honest, true, kind…people such as you would like to know. (n.p)

Phrenology and physiognomy literature was marketed to the general population in order to advance what they saw as the practical implications of the work.

As a result, phrenology and physiognomy influenced cultural beliefs and practices related to reading the face and head. An example of this is demonstrated in Finnegan's (2008) analysis of reader responses to an early Abraham Lincoln photo that appeared in McClure's magazine in 1895. In this study, Finnegan argues that audiences make meaning of images using "enthymematic modes of reasoning," which she refers to as "image vernaculars" (p. 62). Drawing from their knowledge of phrenology and physiognomy, readers of the magazine discussed how Lincoln's face revealed his character, wisdom, and intellect. They believed it served to explain why he went on to be one of the most memorable presidents in U.S. history. While language in the readers' responses appear overblown to contemporary viewers, they help explain how interpretations of the body are guided by cultural practices of reading and viewing within a particular social context. Cultural practices of reading

the body shift over time as such practices were refashioned based on contemporary beliefs and values, but they are still tied to early assumptions about the body.

How to Read Character makes visual connections between past "scientific readings" of the body and present day "readings" of the body. Image 1 features a profile of Williams's head with her hair braided and twisted into multiple small knots all over her head, known as Bantu knots. Her eyes are closed. Her facial features are well lit in the image to allow focus on her entire head and face. Several push pins, numbered and lettered, are pressed into the photograph, approximately following brain sections shown in the photocopy transfer of a phrenology illustration displayed next to her self-portrait. The photocopy transfer depicts the right profile of a large head with the brain marked into different sections. Three smaller diagrams are featured below displaying the front, back, and left profile views, which also show the brain divided into different section. Like most of the historical documents in the series, the text on the photocopy transfer is faded and worn. However, the word "definition" appears at the top of the page. It appears to be about defining and locating aspects of the human characteristics in the brain—the focus of phrenology. The photo-text pairing of her profile and photocopy transfer reminds viewers that these types of "scientific" documents and empirical studies were used to "prove" racial difference and Black inferiority.

In image 2, Williams shifts to the overt racial messages that underscore phrenology and the implications of science-in-service of oppression. Williams is photographed in a right profile as she looks downward, diverting her gaze from the camera. Her hair is braided in Bantu knots like in image 1. Her face and the top of her

chest are illuminated against the dark background and her shaded shoulder. The image is paired with an image from Joseph Vimont's Alas Phrenologie (1831), which displays the profile of a Black man. Underneath the image, the source is referenced along with the original title in quotes, "virtuous Negro's head." Upon closer examination, various lines and what appears to be pins divide up his head into sections. His eyes and lips are tightly closed. No textual explanation is given why this Black man is viewed as "virtuous." However, this man appears to be in a submissive position as his eyes and lips are closed. The image of the "virtuous Negro" appears in contrast to historical images of White men in the series who are depicted with their eyes open and in a manner that is more typical of a portrait, rather than a specimen.

Symbolically, the image of "virtuous Negro" has limited agency as he is represented as merely a specimen to be observed. During the era in which the historical image was produced, Black people were expected to avoid eye contact with Whites as a sign of respect, which also conveyed a less threating and more submissive demeanor to the White public (Ritterhouse, 2006). Even after emancipation, Black people were expected to maintain the racial etiquette of eye contact for decades (Upton, 2007). Black parents commonly warned their children that to look a White person in the eye was "asking for trouble" (Litwack, 1999, p. 36). As a young Black boy growing up in the South during the 1950s, Moore (2021) describes being taught early in his childhood that making eye contact with White people was dangerous. During a time of strict racial codes, he says, "It never occurred to me to make eye contact with a crocodile, a snake, a bird, a bear, and especially not

a person in White skin" as Black Code set clear expectations of Black acceptable behavior when interacting with White people (p. 6).

Therefore, within the racial context of the series, the photo-text pair visualizes the politics of eye contact and demonstrates that Black people are perceived as more acceptable when they adhere to more submissive behaviors based in racial codes that restrict their freedom and movement. The lack of eye contact functions to limit Black agency as the ability to return the gaze is denied. In this sense, the Black body is "virtuous" when silenced, non-confrontational, and stripped of agency. The absence of eye contact also diminishes interpersonal connection that can be achieved through images (e.g., See Willis, 2021). As a result, the image emphasizes that Black people were treated as objects to be gazed upon and dehumanize through their depiction as a scientific curiosity. The archival image of the "virtuous Negro," therefore reinforces the subhuman status of Black people promoted by White supremacy. By juxtaposing her image next to this archival image, Williams asserts that cultural practices still interpret Black behavior and character through a White gaze informed by racial codes and assumptions of the past.

In image 3, Williams continues to address the racialized messages about the body that have associated White facial features with favorable characteristics and Black facial features with negative characteristics. Williams appears in a side profile with large braids. Her face is darkened, making her features less visible than in other images. Her eyes are closed and her head is slightly lowered. Her mouth is not visible; it is shaded and blends in with the dark background. Her brown bare shoulder

is visible in the light with her chest shaded in the shadow. This positioning makes her braided head the focus of the image.

The shaded side profile in image 3 gives meaning in multiple ways. It functions to make the subject more anonymous, which allows for Williams to represent Black people and the concept of Blackness more generally. The political meaning in the photo-text pair transcends the particularities of the context to the broader issues of race as all Black people are signified through the racist scientific gaze. The lack of eye contact and positioning also further limits her ability to convey a sense of agency. Such positioning simultaneously represents the muted Black voices of the past and exposes the trauma of exploitation. Based on claims of early science, her head and face are supposed to speak for her character, intelligence, and worth. Her hair and skin color convey that she is Black and a woman. Therefore, much political meaning is derived from Williams's Black female body through the signification of her identity, yet little of her body is actually shown. Her partially shown body gestures towards the ways in which Black people are quickly assessed and discriminated against based on their identity in everyday life.

A photocopy transfer of historical scientific literature is juxtaposed next to Williams in image 3 to reveal overemphasized and exaggerated physical differences between Blacks and Whites to support racial hierarchies. Williams addresses such practices by revisiting physiognomy and the discriminatory implications that have been embedded in our culture. The fading of the photocopy transfer (presumably due to its age) makes reading the text difficult. However, the image contains multiple charts that clearly compare heads and faces of various species in an effort to

distinguish the most “superior” beings. To do so, the charts primarily focus on the facial angles. According to Hassin and Trope (2000), the art of reading human traits and characteristics from faces dates back to ancient Greece and many people still report believing the face can be read to identify characteristics. It is for this reason that scholars have argued for the importance of understanding how assumptions about the face and physiognomy influence human interaction, including social cognition (Hugenberg & Wilson, 2013) and the forming of stereotypes (Mason, Cloutier, & Macrae, 2006). One aspect of physiognomy is “facial angle,” which was invented by Pieter Camper in his craniometry studies. He believed that facial angles closest to a 90-degree angle demonstrated more superior intellect. In his literature, he argues that European faces are at an 80-degree angle, African faces are at a 70-degree angle, and orangutans have faces at a 58-degree angle (Schiebinger, 1993).

The photocopy of multiple facial charts shows the visual evidence used to establish racial claims of interiority and superiority. In the chart, a line emphasizes the angle of the faces of various species in the image, including the face of a human, a rodent, an ape, and other small animals. The human is shown with a flat face with a 90-degree angle, while all other species have more angled faces. A clear distinction between humans and non-human mammals is made through the visual comparison. In another chart to the left, there are images of four White men who all supposedly have flat features, similar to the human in the main chart of various species. The men appear portrait-style in a forward-facing position, which does not allow the angle of their faces to be determined. Below these two diagrams, there is another image, which depicts a profile of a middle-age White man with a straight line drawn in front of his

face to indicate a 90-degree facial angle. The large nose of the White man is ignored and the line does not touch the tip of the head to the nose as it does on drawings of Black people and non-human mammals. The placement of images visually suggests that all the White men have similar facial angles due to their race.

Physiognomy has a long history of comparing humans to animals to make claims about human character. For example, Aristotle is credited for the work, *Physiognomonica* (300 B.C.) The work may actually be from an unknown author who studied under Aristotle, but nevertheless the literature demonstrates how racial prejudice was fostered through physiognomy. The literature details how to interpret the body based on clues for animal characteristics, which connects the physical body and soul to one's character. In the text, similar bodies are claimed to have similar character: "There never was an animal with the form of one kind and the mental character of another: the soul and body appropriate to the same kind always go together, and this shows that a specific body involves a specific mental character" (Aristotle, trans. 1913, 1:11-15). Supporting his methods with the observations made by animal experts, the author claims to be able to judge humans based on their appearance. He argues that different human races or ethnic groups have different characteristics similar to the way different species of animals are known for particular characteristics. Drawing from this argument, he proclaims that human characteristics can be interpreted based on the animals they resemble. For example, as absurd as it sounds, humans resembling brave animals were claimed to be brave humans. From these clues, numerous general arguments are made about particular physical features, including hair, eyes, skin color, and facial features. While the text does account for

some variation, groups of people are overgeneralized based on the narrow, biased interpretation of the ancient White male scholar. The interpretations of these characteristics lean to the favor of White men. The analysis conveniently serves racist and sexist ideology, such as this interpretation: “Too Black a hue marks the coward, as witness Egyptians and Ethiopians, and so does also too White complexion as you may see from women” (Aristotle, trans. 1910, 6:12-14). Here both Black people and women are marked as less than the idealized White male, perpetuating prejudice and discrimination.

Similar ideology is infused in the archival image documenting head angles in image 3. To contrast the images of White men on the left, a chart of three dark-skinned heads is compared on the right in image 3. One dark-skinned head appears to be human, one looks like a Jim Crow caricature that blends a human and ape, and the final one looks deformed, which makes it difficult to determine what it should be. Above this chart is a drawing of a Black youthful-looking male. Similar to the comparison of White men, the Black man is compared to dark-skinned animal-like heads to suggest that all Black people have a similar angled face. To further emphasize racial difference, an additional diagram compares a Black and White man side by side. The White face is shown to be flat, like the human face in the center mammal comparison chart, while the dark-skinned mammals are showed to be angled. Therefore, the drawing of the Black man’s head is likened to apes, rats, and other animal heads by lining them up in a row and demonstrating a supposedly similar angle of the face. The intention is clear as the visual comparison attempts to convey that Black people are inferior, and less than human. The human head stands in

for all Whites in the mammal comparison chart, while Blacks are depicted as a different category. This is further emphasized in an additional top-center chart that likens Black people to non-human primates by claiming to demonstrate a similar facial angle. Although the drawing is not shaded any color, the shape of the face appears identical to the dark-skinned faces in the accompanying charts.

Subtle details operate to further dehumanize Black people, while elevating the status of White people. The four White men are depicted with an oval border encircling each of their image, which visually makes them appear more important. In contrast, no images of Black people have a border. Clothing also conveys status. The tops of the collars and ties are shown in the images of White men. The images of Black men are cut-off at the neck to show no clothing, except one, which shows more casual clothing to indicate his lower social status. The White men all appear middle-aged and distinguished, while the Black man looks like a youth. Black men were referred to as "boy" during slavery through much of the 20th century as a way to attack their manhood and highlight their limited sociopolitical status. Making the Black male look more youthful adds to the ideological message that Black people are childlike in ability and intellect, when compared to the older, authoritative appearance of the White men in direct contrast. Black people are presented like another species, while the White men's importance is emphasized through their clothing and the border communicates their importance and higher social status. The visual details make White men appear more "civilized" when compared with the dark -skinned faces and non-human mammals in the charts. The overt racial message implies that

Africans and their descendants are less than human, which also implies they lack the human characteristics and qualities of people with European origin.

Williams positions her body against these messages to expose and challenge the ideology put forth by scientific racism. Although there are images in the series that clearly display Williams's face, Williams chooses to minimize the appearance of her face in image 3. In doing so, the shadowing effect works to darken the appearance of her skin and minimize her features. Her shadowed face symbolically infers the lack of significant meaning in the face as it cannot be fully "seen" as having specific meaning to an individual's character or the collective character of a racial group.

Although physiognomy claims to focus on facial angle as evidence, the racial implications are obvious as Europeans and Africans are generalized into specific groups (Hartley, 2008). The diversity within the two racial groups is muted and angles are exaggerated. While the racist bias in the historical images is overt, the contemporary body of Williams functions to further question interpretations of Black embodiment based on these ingrained racist practices. Schiebinger (1993) asserts that physiognomy was the "primary instrument of racism in the 19th century," as "the facial line became the most frequent means of explaining the graduation of species" (p. 150). The work of 19th century scholars flourished and eventually laid the foundation for paleoanthropology (Schiebinger, 1993). The scientific language of facial angles is not widely used to define racial difference in our current era, but the racial ideological implications endure.

Like audiences of the 19th century, contemporary audiences construct meanings based on the body that have been influenced by long-held traditions of

White supremacy, sexism, and classism. These views continue to be supported through loose and inaccurate understandings of scientific evidence related to human genetics, the body, and racial differences. Dar-Nimrod and Heine (2011) argue that there is a prevalence of "genetic essentialist bias," which means that people have a cognitive bias associated with essentialist thinking when they view genetics playing a role in human behavior. People with genetic-essentialist bias tend to believe in "natural" traits of social groups. According to Dar-Nimrod and Heine, "Learning about genetic attributions for various human conditions leads to a particular set of thoughts regarding those conditions: they are more likely to be perceived as a) immutable and determined, b) having a specific etiology, c) homogeneous and discrete, and d) natural, which can lead to the naturalistic fallacy" (p. 800).

Some scholars use the concept of "essence" to explain how people associate attributes and behaviors with genes. People display psychological essentialism when they believe that there is a "nature" or "essence" to a particular group that causes the group to "be what they are" based on their genes. Medin and Ortony (1989) argues the perceived essence of a group is often unobservable and indescribable, so people use an "essence placeholder" to overcome the abstractness of the essence (pp.184-185). Dar-Nimrod and Heine (2011) contend that "'genes' (or at least the way that most laypeople conceive of genes) often serves as the placeholder for this imagined essence, and this has important implications regarding how individuals respond when they encounter genetic information about people" (p. 804). Ultimately, loose understandings of biology allow individuals to draw inferences to fit the stereotypes about groups.

Such thinking leads to prejudice and discrimination of social groups as they naturalized behavior as having a genetic link that is associated to a collective social group. Dar-Nimrod and Heine (2011) argue that: “These essentialist biases appear to be exacerbated when people perceive groups as sharing a common genetic makeup, providing fertile ground for the growth of stereotyping and prejudice” (p. 808). In addition to genetic essentialism, researchers have analyzed a variety of factors to predict stereotyping tendencies, including political affiliation (Altemeyer, 1988), social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), and a measure of entity theory of self that analyzed the extent to which people see human attributes as fixed or immutable (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). Of these predictors, genetic essentialism bias appears to be one of the stronger predictors of stereotyping. Keller (2005) found that belief in genetic determinism, or the idea that “the fate of each person lies in his or her genes,” is positively correlated with prejudice, negative racial stereotyping, nationalism, and patriotism. In sum, people who believe a group shares a common genetic “essence” that influences their attributes and behaviors are more likely to hold prejudicial bias and engage in stereotyping.

Studies have shown that the general public has limited knowledge about science, but it does not prevent them from forming strong beliefs related to scientific topics (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). For example, Lanie et al. 2004 showed that over 50% of those surveyed did not know that genes were located in cells, yet studies reveal that people tend to still offer genetic explanations for human behavior across a range of behaviors. Most people encounter scientific arguments and empirical

discoveries in media, rather than reading the studies directly. The findings are often oversimplified, stripped of nuance, and sometimes sensationalize, which makes it more challenging for the public to make sense of scientific information (Scheufele & Krause, 2019. As a result, there is a lot of misinformation on science and the body that is perpetuated within American culture, making individuals more susceptible to long-held stereotypical beliefs about race and genetics.

As *How to Read Character* reminds us, racially biased "scientific" discourse dangerously spreads inaccurate information and encourages prejudicial thinking and behavior. Scientific racism of the past may seem absurd today, but so are the on-going practices of judging and defining Black people based on prejudicial bias embedded within our cultural practices. Contemporary representations of race have been refashioned and biological discussions on race have been nuanced, but intersecting systems of domination continue to reproduce oppressive, normative notions of Blackness put forth by scientific racism.

Visualizing the Intersections in Black Female Embodiment

In addition to attending to race, *How to Read Character* accentuates traumatic representations of the hypervisible Black female body in U.S. visual culture. Fleetwood (2010) explains Black female hypervisibility as "both historic and contemporary conceptualizations of Blackness as simultaneously invisible and always visible, as underexposed and always exposed, the nuances of which have been depicted in art, literature, and theory" (p. 111). Williams attends to these nuances in her series as women are notably absent from the photocopy transfers of historical documents in all images, except one. Their absence draws attention to the tendency of

modern science to construct the female body as "the other," while normalizing maleness as the standard. Women, too, are treated as a sub-human category, in which they appear irrelevant in some scientific literature (McAllister, 2000). But at the same time, the Black female body is centered in scientific racism as their bodies are used as proof of White superiority and male superiority.

How to Read Character reveals that representations of the Black female body in scientific racism is complicated by the intersection of race and gender. In image 4, Williams revisits the history of Sarah Baartman, who is one of the most widely discussed cases of scientific exploitation. Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa who is also known as the Hottentot Venus, served as a living and postmortem specimen for the most prominent biologist of the early 19th century, George Curvier. Baartman's curvy body captured the fascination of White audiences on both sides of the Atlantic (Holmes, 2016). Used to support notions of racial difference, Baartman was displayed in live exhibitions like a caged animal for the entertainment of White spectators between 1810 and 1815 (Thompson, 2008). To add to the spectacle that portrayed her as an animal, she was accompanied by an animal handler who forced her to move, sit, and stand on command (Altick, 1978).

Baartman was not the first or only African woman to be displayed in Europe, but Willis (2010) notes that "Baartman was the most *imaged* of these women, and it is the plethora of visual representation that makes her so significant" (p.6). Willis explains that "What she presented visually—even exaggerated and distorted—had a much greater audience and extended life and impact than her physical self ever could

have" (p. 6). Her image continues to be recycled in art, fashion, and media by contemporary imagemakers (Willis, 2010).

In image 4, Williams pairs her body next to Nicolas Huet le Jeune's and Leon de Wailly's watercolor illustrations of Sarah Baartman to challenge historical and contemporary imaging of Baartman that reduce her to an oddity and perpetuates on-going visual violence of the Black female body. In 1815, Curvier commissioned the artwork by the two artists to document Baartman's body. As L. Collins (2002) notes, Nicolas Huet le Jeune's presents Baartman in a more clinical approach. She is featured as standing in a strict profile with a few pieces of grass at her feet. The image emphasizes her buttocks as it is centered in the image with details given to her curves and crevices. Her large buttocks contrast the rest her relatively smaller body. It is evident that the artist's interest is to indulge the fascination associated with Baartman's body, particularly her buttocks. His approach implies that Baartman's value to science rests in the empirical study of her generous posterior (L. Collins, 2002).

Leon de Wailly departs from the strict clinical approach of his colleague to paint Baartman in two different views on a hill. One view depicts her front-facing as she stands on a hill surrounded by a grassy landscape. Her ample hips, breasts, and mammilla are centered in the image. A second much smaller image appears in the background. A slightly tilted back-view shows a partial side-view angle of Baartman's backside. The expanding landscape surrounding Baartman situates her outside the context of exhibition or the scientific study of her body. The image subtly hints at her life in Africa before she was taken to Europe (Collins, 2002). Her large

eyes peer back at the viewer. While the expression on her face appears to be neutral, the eye contact created with the viewer allows Baartman to connect with the viewer on a more personal level that the strict profile does not allow. At the same time, her nude body is still positioned to allow for the examination of her body and fulfill curiosity. Rather than focus only on her buttocks, Leon de Wailly illustrates all the elements of her body deemed different and freakish by the Eurocentric scientific gaze of the 19th century.

Sarah Baartman died at age 25, shortly after these images were commissioned. Following her death, Curvier dissected and preserved her body in jars for further study, which allowed him and the scientific community to shift the focus on her genitalia—an area he said he resisted while she was alive (Young, 2011). In 1825, Curvier published a report based on his study of Baartman's body and included the watercolor illustrations by Leon de Wailly and Nicolas Huet le Jeune. L. Collins (2002) writes: "In his report, the esteemed scientist focused on the woman's already fetishized body parts and stressed her racial difference and subhuman status by drawing attention to alleged similarities between her body and manners and those of a monkey or ape" (p.16). The commissioned artwork depicting Baartman ultimately acted as art-in-service for Curvier's claim of the African woman's sexual deviance and inferiority. Several of her body parts, including her brain, skeleton, and genitals went on display at Musee de l' Homme in Paris, where they remained on display for museum patrons until 1974. It was not until 2002, after much protest and a demand from the then-current South African President, Nelson Mandela, that Baartman's remains were finally sent home to her final resting place (Holmes, 2016; McGeal,

2002;). Collins (2002) argues, “The matrix of visual exhibition, dissection, and display” of Baartman’s body make “apparent the hunger of the powerful to fix subjects of interest, to restrain them in order to capture what is through to be the essence of their difference and the reason for the subordination” (p. 17).

Williams restages the exploitative trauma Sarah Baartman was exposed to by photographing and framing her nude body and pairing it with a photocopy transfer of Baartman’s commissioned illustrations in image 4. Williams captures her bare buttocks in a slightly tilted profile view, which also reveals the bottoms of her waist and thighs. The rest of her body and face are out of view. The centering of her posterior reflects the obsession with Baartman’s buttocks in the past and present to link it to continued fetishizing and objectifying of Black women’s bodies in the present. Although the commissioned images of Baartman included her entire body, Williams crops the rest of her body out to highlight the purpose and aim of the original images. Baartman was not viewed as a whole person, but rather a collection of body parts exploited for profit, entertainment, and science.

Baartman was subjected to the trauma of exploitation while alive as a specimen put on display, an object for artistic reproduction, and as a specimen for scientific study. In death, the representational trauma continued as her image and physical body were used to spread racist beliefs about her and Black women more broadly. Gilman (2002) argues that Baartman’s “sexual parts would serve as the central image for the Black female throughout the 19th century” (p. 18). The ideological basis was simple. If Black women could be shown to be different, it was sufficient to claim their inherent inferiority and justify the trauma and exploitation

inflicted upon them. Scholars argues that Black women's bodies were the focus in scientific claims to establish racial inferiority for not just Baartman or select Black women but was a way to purport the pathology of all Black people (Gilman 2002; Saini, 2019). For example, in *Studies of the Psychology of Sex*, Havelock Ellis (1905) discusses the buttocks of different races and ranks their racial superiority based the on the width of women's pelvis. This claim was initially advanced by Willem Vrolik in 1826 and echoed by R. Verneau's study of the pelvis in 1875.

Therefore, ideological notions of Black women's sexual perversion and inferiority was established and maintain through the comparison between Black women's and White women's bodies. These differences justified their treatment and degraded them to sexual objects. Peterson (1995) contends that "the Black women's body is always public, always exposed. In contrast, her White female counterparts of the 19th century, those women deemed worthy to define notions of femininity, purity, and morality—were hidden away" (p. 3). At the same time, White cultural constructions of Black womanhood portrayed Black women as overexposed, inadequate, and grotesque (Henderson, 2010; Saini, 2019). Black women's bodies have been frequently defined in excess in terms of size, sexuality, and masculinity, which pit them at odds with idealized forms of White femininity and beauty (Tate, 2015; Springs, 2019).

A legacy of demeaning Western representations of Black women endures in the 21st century. Although Williams's artwork was initially situated in the context the early 1990s, contemporary images of Black women have not changed much. The continued exhibition and circulation of the series allowed the artwork to challenge on-

going representations of Black women. In doing so, Williams's buttocks draw attention to the cultural practices that continue to overexpose, hypersexualize, and subjugate Black women. Black women continue to be represented in U.S. visual culture in objectifying ways that reflect the dominate group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination. From movies to music to film to social commentary in news, Black women's bodies are frequently portrayed in hypersexual ways that associate them with deviance sexuality (Gammage, 2015; Lomax, 2018). For example, Gordon-Chipembere (2011) says:

> Contemporary Black male hip-hop artists and White producers corroborate with historical myths of the hypersexual Black woman's body, refusing to challenge ideas of "grotesque" or "deviant" Black female sexuality. In an attempt to capitalize on the Black women's bodies, which are already encoded with a legacy of lascivity, reduce Black women to one essential body part: their buttocks. (p. 172)

How to Read Character complicates discourses about the Black female body and sexuality during the surge of hip hop's popularity in the mainstream in the 1990s. In 1989, 2 Live Crew's released their most successful album, *Nasty as They Wanna Be,* which sparked controversies over its provocative album cover and videos highlighting Black women's butts and their sexual availability. The rap artists faced a brief legal battle over the images for obscenity and others critiqued them for encouraging sexual violence against Black women (Crenshaw, 1997). In 1992, Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back" became a hit, which is a rap that begins with two White women critiquing the "grotesque" size of a Black women's butt. Their

commentary is followed up by a rap that objectifies the Black female body and fetishizes over the myth of the "big butt Black woman." References to the rap are still seen in clothing, posters, and other forms of popular culture today (Lomax, 2018).

Williams further emphasizes the objectification of the Black female body in image 5. In the image, she photographs her nude body in strict profile depicting the top of her head down to her thighs. Several red pushpins segment her body into parts from her shoulder down to her thighs. A butcher's diagram of a cow is paired with her image, which depicts the cow's body divided up into various sections to aid in its dissection for consumption. The head and feet of the cow are absent as the more marketable and consumable parts of her body are all are relevant. Each section has a corresponding number to identify each section in the key below the animal's body. Many letters are missing a name of the corresponding body parts, but "Neck," "Arm or shoulder", "Rib," "Flank," "Rump," "Round," and "Hind" are all identified. Like the cow, Williams illuminates the similarities in which Black women are reduced to "a collection of parts." Her message is clear. Her body, the Black female body, is marked and treated like a piece of meat, ready for consumption.

How to Read Character reveals the ways in which the Eurocentric scientific gaze have initiated and advanced racist and sexist ideologies of the Black body. Yet the interplay between the past and present call attention to how contemporary cultural image-makers continue to perpetuate these ideologies through the representations of the Black body. As a result, it is not only the dominate culture, but rather, intersecting systems of domination that promote the production of such images by various sources and individuals, including Black people and women. Therefore, Black women also

participate in the reproduction of "controlling images" that function to distort the ways Black women view themselves and other Black women (Collins, 2002). As Gordon-Chipembere (2011) puts it "similar to Cuvier's methods with Baartman's postmortem body," Black women also dissect "their bodies into parts in order to attract—and possibly gain stardom from—a capitalized male gaze" (p. 172). For example, in the 2010s, the most popular Black female rap artists in mainstream, such as Cardi B. and Nicky Minaj, gained popularity through the hypersexualization of their bodies with a particular emphasis on their ample behinds. In 2014, Minaj sampled Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back" on her *Anaconda* album and she appears on the cover in a G-string squatting with her fully exposed buttocks centered in the image. The album cover is reminiscent of the once controversial 2 Live Crew album cover. The ways in which Black women's bodies are exhibited as sexual body parts has changed, but the pornographic exhibition of their bodies in mainstream culture continues. Such images work to make sexism, racism, classism and other forms of oppression justified as they normalized the objectification of the Black female body. The representation of Black women's sexuality can be empowering when voiced from Black women expressing and owning their sexuality on their own terms. Therefore, the critique here is not of sexual representations, or of Black women expressing their sexuality, but the network of forces that maintain limited representations of Black women with the focus on their bodies and sexuality to the exclusion of their subjectivity and agency. The representation of Black women's sexuality can be empowering when voiced from Black women expressing and owning their sexuality their terms.

Black women's bodies continue to be critiqued in public discourse in a unique manner that is situated within a sociohistorical context that has always placed them at odds with Western notions of femininity, sexuality, and beauty. Drawing from the musical reference and continuing the focus on the Black female butt in the 21st century, *Salon Magazine* entitled a 2008 article: "First Lady Got Back." In the article, the commentary of Black women is used to fixate attention on the First Lady's "booty," rather than her impressive list of accomplishments. Harris-Perry (2013) called the article of the now-former First Lady, Michelle Obama, "one of the most profane" recent discussions of the Black female public body. Unfortunately, this article does not reflect a small segment of discourse on Michelle Obama, but rather demonstrates an example of the widespread discussion about her arms, hips, and butt (Henderson, 2010). As Gordon-Chipembere (2011) explains: "The exhibition of Michelle Obama across the American imagination relates directly to the entrenched assumptions around how Black women's bodies are allowed to enter into this 'imagination' and made visible" (p. 173).

However, the imaging of the Black female form in U.S. visual culture is complicated. On one hand, Lomax (2018) notes that a song like, "Baby Got Back," reproduces racial myths and demeaning associations of Black womanhood. But on the other hand, Black women also re-imagine themselves against the negative associations with a large behind to feel a sense of pride about their bodies. Celebrating the beauty of the Black female form is empowering for some. Lomax (2018) argues that Michelle Obama looks like "kinfolk; like one of us" (p. 3). Although the constant fragmenting and sexualizing of Black women is exhausting,

Black female agency allows them to pushback against reductive readings of their bodies to re-imagine themselves on their own terms. In this same sense, Williams's Black female body re-interprets the Black female form as an image of beauty and strength. Her series questions the gray areas of representation in which there is a constant "pull and tug" between appreciating Black sexuality and beauty as a form of self-love and pride against the backdrop of cultural messages that are still steeped in racial myths.

A brief glimpse of Black women's representations in the United States context in the last decade demonstrates that Williams's political intervention in *How to Read Character* is still very much relevant. The objectification of Black female bodies is no longer shocking and such imagery continues to be commonplace in U.S. culture. The trauma inflicted on Baartman's dissected body endures in the symbolic dissection and degradation of Black women that obscure their personhood, which ultimately has emotional, material, social, and political consequences in the lived experiences of Black women.

By intervening in the scientific narrative about Blackness with her Black female body, Williams troubles the White gaze and the male gaze of the Black female body. In her analysis of feminist performance art, Schneider (1997) explains how art that relies on the nude female body exposes the meanings and messages encoded on the female embodiment:

> Contemporary feminist performance artists present their own bodies beside or relative to the history of reading the body marked female, the rendered consumptive in representation. In this sense, the contemporary explicit body

> performer consciously and explicitly stands beside herself in that she grapples overtly with the history of her body explication, wrestling with the ghosts of the explication. (p. 52)

Drawing from Schneider' works and expanding it to consider Black women cultural producers, Fleetwood (2010) uses the concept of "excess flesh" to theorize on Black women's engagement with performance art and visibility. The term refers to strategies that "doubles visibility: to see codes of visibility operating on the (hyper)visible body that is its object" (p. 112). "Double visibility" is an approach that encourages the viewer to see the Black body from a critical stance, in which historical and contemporary coding of the Black female body is brought to the forefront. In this sense, it provides a lens to which to see the Black female body anew through the multiple layers of signification that has fought to claim meaning over the Black female body. Fleetwood (2010) argues that such strategies do not eliminate the dominant gaze, but instead draws attention to "historical attempts to regulate Black female bodies, to acknowledge Black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility, and to challenge debates among Black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representations of Blackness…" (p.112). Similarly, Williams does not offer a corrective to representations of the Black body, but rather exposes the coded meaning marked on the Black body through her political photo-text pairings. In doing so, *How to Read Character* spotlights the regulatory systems that limit representations of Blackness in narrow and demeaning ways. In the process, Williams' Black female embodiment troubles the dominant visual culture and visual practices of seeing.

Empowering the Black Body

Although Williams illuminates the racist messages in scientific racism, the series avoids merely featuring the Black body as a site of pain and oppression. Williams utilizes her Black female body to give voice to the trauma in the Black experience, while critiquing the systems that continue to inflict physical and symbolic injury against the Black body. In the process, her Black female body becomes a source of resistance. Peterson (1995) says, "The Black female body might well have functioned as what Elaine Scarry called the 'body in pain,' whereby the powerless become voiceless bodies subject to pain and domination by the bodiless voices of those in power" (p. 21). In her analysis of Black female speakers in the 19th century, Peterson details how Black activists have sought to alleviate the pain of oppression by transforming the body into a source of power. Focusing on the power of speakers, Peterson argues that "most generally, the human seeks to alleviate pain by giving it a place in the world through verbal articulation" (p. 21). Black women activists have also used images to respond to representational violence that attack their image and identity. For this reason, Lange (2020) points out that Black women reformers of the late 19th century created portraits of themselves to construct positive notions of Black womanhood, while emphasizing their elegance, education, respectability and community. Such verbal and visual articulations reclaim a space and allows for self-definition. Williams, too, pushbacks against oppressive images and messages that contribute to intersecting dominations of Black people through her series.

Williams looks directly into the camera in image 6, making it the only portrait of her face that is not displayed as a profile. She appears slightly off centered against

a white background. Her shadow appears to the left of the frame as the light enters from the right. She is juxtaposed next to a document entitled, “How to Read Character,” which features a line-up of men’s profiles and an essay. The essay is mostly illegible, but a key underneath the men’s profiles help indicate that the essay is comparing the different men. Names of men appear on the key. A “King,” a “General,” and an “Emperor” are also listed. Last on the list are “Afrikans.” The man on the far-right appears to be the Black man in reference. While the other men in the images are referred to by name and sometimes rank, but only “Afrikans” is listed for the Black man. Once again, Africans are represented as a homogenous group, in which the image and biased analysis of one Black person applies to all Black people. The individual Black person is reduced to a mere category to be narrowly defined as unequal and inadequate. The discourses and practices of scientific racism have embedded the notion that the Black body reflects reduced individual and collective worth. The direct glare in Williams’s eyes give a challenging look that encourages the viewer to question the meanings associated with Blackness and identity. Using an “oppositional gaze,” her stare symbolically confronts the negative messages that have been marked on her body through scientific racism and its legacy in contemporary visual culture.[23]

Hair is another symbolically significant element to the politically empowered message of the series. Hair has and continues to be a significant part of Black culture as “a cultural activity and practice” (Mercer, 2000, p. 112). Williams’s hairstyles choices of box braids, twist-outs, and Bantu knots are timeless hairstyles throughout the African diaspora[24]. These styles have carried over from Africa to the United

States as Black slaves maintained these cultural styles (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). For example, Byrd and Tharps (2014) recounts Black hair practices of African slaves recently arriving to American colonies as told by Stedham (1796, 1992), a Dutch soldier and traveler, to demonstrate that even in the midst of one of the most dehumanizing moments in history, Black people clung to their pride, connected to their culture, and asserted a sense of identity through their hair. The hairstyles presented in this series are representative of the styles wore by Black people in the 19th century. Marcus Garvey, leader of the United Negro Improvement Association, "made the reclamation of an African-based aesthetic a central tenet of his political platform" (Byrd, & Tharps, 2014, p. 38). He called on Black people to maintain their "natural" African hairstyles as a mode of political resistance to White aesthetics during the 1920s and 1930s. The Black Power Movement of the 1970s continued the charge with Afros becoming an icon image associated with Black pride and empowerment (Asante, 2013; Ogbar, 2005).

Since then, African-inspired styles have both waned and increased in popularity over the years but have always been common in Black communities (Banks, 2000; Thompson, 2009). In his discussion of everyday Black political practice in "First World" societies, Mercer (2000) contends that "Black peoples of the African diaspora have developed distinct, if not unique, patterns of style across a range of cultural practices from music, speech, dance, dress, and even cookery, which are politically intelligible as creative responses to the experience of oppression and dispossession" (p. 112). Byrd and Tharps (2014) argue that Black hairstyles are an element of such Black cultural expression as Black hair continues to symbolize Black

consciousness and identity. Similarly, Williams relies on her natural hairstyles to further politicize her body against discourses that interpret her body as unequal and inferior.

Although African-inspired styles are generally valued for their beauty and cultural heritage in Black culture, they are often viewed negatively in mainstream culture. As Mercer (2000) explains: “If racism is conceived as an ideological code in which biological attributes are invested with social values and meanings, then our hair is perceived within this framework that is burdened with a range of negative connotations” (p. 113). In the process, Black hair has been used by oppressive social structures to justify Black pain and punishment. Although Black hair has been appropriated in American culture to some extent, often by White women celebrities seeking to draw attention with a new look, Black women have continued to be reprimanded, harassed, and fired for wearing the same styles (Rentelen, 2005).

Some discriminatory practices, such as workplace policies, require strict avoidance of Black hairstyles in order to maintain employment. For example, the U.S. military has long excluded hairstyles popular to Black women on their acceptable list of styles, such as multiple braids or twists (Rhodan, 2014). Other policies create challenges to participation. For example, the International Swimming Federation (FINA) banned Soul Cap, a Black owned swim cap brand designed to cover Black natural hair, at the 2021 Olympic Games in Tokyo and all local competitions for swimmers of all ages going forward (Lewis, 2021). The brand gained popularity among Black female swimmers due to its inclusive design that fit thick, curly, voluminous hair and encouraged Black female participation in the sport. Critics have

connected the decision to a larger issue of race in a sport that has a long history excluding Black swimmers (Lewis, 2021; Subramanian, 2021).

Hair discrimination has a major social and economic impact on Black people, particularly Black women. Heighten awareness of hair discrimination against African Americans has garnered public attention in recent years. News reports at the local, national, and international levels also indicate that from preschool to high school Black children, especially Black girls, continue to face harsh consequences for wearing Black cultural hairstyles at school, including in-class punishment, detention, suspension, removal from school activities, and even the unauthorized cutting of a Black girl's hair by school staff (e.g., Bennett, 2017; Holohan, 2016; Kelleher, 2010; Krishna, 2016; News 6 Orlando, 2013).

As a result, California became the first state to ban hair discrimination under the CROWN Act, which stands for Creating a Respectful, and Open World for Natural Hair.[25] The CROWN Act expanded the definition of race in the Fair Employment and House Act (FEHA) and state education code to ensure protection from race-based hairstyles in the workplace and in public schools on July 3, 2019 (Crown Act, 2021; Meara, 2021). A year later, it was passed by the U.S. Congress and as of 2021, 13 states have passed the Crown Act at the state level. Dubbed "Hair Independence Day," July 3rd became "Crown Day," an unofficial holiday to celebrate Black natural hairstyles and commemorate when the legislation was first signed into law (Meara, 2021; Davis, 2021). Seeking to end hair discrimination that Black proportionality impacts Black women a coalition of Black hair activists, businesses,

politicians, and the Dove, the personal care brand, continue to work to get hair discrimination laws passed at the state level (Crown Act, 2021).

Research indicates Black women are disproportionately burdened and policed by hair policies at work. According to Dove and the Joy Collective (2019), 80% of Black women report feeling pressure to straighten their hair in order to fit in at the office, and 85% report that they feel judged more harshly on their looks than other women. The study supports Black women's perceptions of discrimination as Black women are 3.4 times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional in ratings of professional hairstyles (Joy Collective, 2019). There is also an emotional impact of such discrimination. Black people report feeling sadness early in their development due to social rejection and discrimination related to their hair (Clemons, et al., 2020). Therefore, celebrating Black hairstyles and protecting Black people's right to express their racial and cultural identity through their hair is particularly important to Black women.

Despite attempts by the dominant culture to repress Black expression and pride, Black hair expression continues to be a powerful cultural and political practice that embodies the struggle for Black liberation. Hair is not only one of the most visible signs of race, but it is also encoded with social markers of gender, class, sexuality, and even religion (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Therefore, Williams attends to the rich source of socio-political meaning of Black hair by accenting her identity through her selected hairstyles. In image 1 and image 2, Bantu knots double as pushpins that mark and label Black character. But at the same time, the Bantu knots allow for Williams to further articulate her Blackness in self-defining ways as she

connects her Black female body to Black cultural political practice. Her hairstyles link Black people across the diaspora through communal hair practices. Like all of her political commentary in the series, her Black female body challenges historical and contemporary representations of Blackness beyond U.S. boundaries.

Due to the black and white color of the photo, her hair racially identifies her body perhaps in even more pronounced ways than her skin color. At first glance, some of the images could appear to be *about* hair as her hair dominates the photographs, especially in image 3. In image 3, she could have tied her hair back in a ponytail or bun, or even use Bantu knots as seen in other images, to reveal her head in an image addressing phrenology. However, she uses varied Black hairstyles throughout the series. This approach punctuates her artistic and political choices related to Black hair in the series. In doing so, Williams signals towards a source of pain and trauma in the Black experience to redefine Black hair and the Black body as a symbol of value and high status to be framed and admired as a work of art. Overall, the Black female body is positioned up against the harsh gaze of the past and present to interrogate practices of seeing to re-interpret Black embodiment in our current era.

Conclusion

How to Read Character reminds us that science, as one of the most powerful institutions in the United States and in countries worldwide, has played a significant role in contributing to racial bias. Through the re-examination of human exhibitions and scientific illustrations, the embedded cultural of practices of reading Black bodies is re-politicize in the present to acknowledge on-going trauma. Each photo-text pairing in the series further enunciate the assumptions attributed to the Black body in

a slightly different way based on physical characteristics encoded with meaning based on race, gender, class, and sexuality. For marginalized people, the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality has a profound impact on their daily lives. Seemingly benign profiles of humans have been used in scientific discourse to construct categories of race and racial hierarchies. Some contemporary scholars have even argued that craniometry images comparing European, African, and animal heads are not racist (e.g. Gould, 1994), yet evidence suggests the early modern studies based on craniometry were biased by prejudice as data was likely exaggerated.[26] Contemporary scholars dismiss phrenology as a pseudoscience, but craniometry and anthropometry has had a significant influence in the modern sciences and continues to be used today in biological sciences (Schiebinger, 1993; Pilloud & Hefner, 2016). *How to Measure Character* challenges biological deterministic views that stereotype, homogenize, and discriminate against Black people.

While challenging historical and contemporary ways of viewing and interpreting Black embodiment, Williams's approach takes a "look back" at Black trauma to view anew the political climate of the present. In doing so, the series further problematizes cultural memory surrounding early conceptions of race and its connection to contemporary discourses on the Black body. By turning the gaze back on scientific racism and contemporary issues of race, the series critiques the enduring legacy of racial ideology advanced in scientific racism as it still contributes to on-going readings of Black bodies, emphasizing the need to dismantle and alter the course of these lingering representations.

Chapter 2: Bearing Witness in Carrie Mae Weems's Photography

Trauma in the Black diasporic past is often relived in the present through historical images of Black bodies. Images of Black people enduring slavery, exploitation, and discrimination over time convey the evolving emotional, physical, and symbolic injury inflicted on Black people. While textual accounts are indeed powerful, scholars have noted that photographs are particularly effective in communicating pain (Axtman-Barker, 2021; Padfield, 2021). For this reason, visual images of human trauma intensify the messages of pain and injustice beyond texts alone. Images also transport us to a time and place to see the world through a contemporary filter condensing larger moments of history to generate a sense of the time or event (Kroes, 2007, p. 4). Through this process, historical images trigger memories of past events whether experienced directly or indirectly. Such images function to continuously reproduce messages about the past (Kroes, 2007). In our collective memories, historical images reproduce multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives about the past and its relationship with the present. This "plurality" challenges the idea of the collective singular history, which opens possibilities to understand previously unseen insight to the past (Ricoeur, Blamey, Pellauer, 2009). For this reason, historical images are salient components of cultural memory as they function to generate, reinforce, and challenge our views of the past through visual culture. As a result, historical images are particularly fascinating as the tension between historical and contemporary politics forge new perspectives to interpret both past and current national trauma.

In reproducing collective memories of Black trauma, archives offer a glimpse in the past through historical documents, images, and other artifacts. Traditionally, archives have been viewed as collections of objective resources. However, critical scholars have challenged this notion by recognizing the inherent power dynamics in the process of collecting and interpreting archival works (Parry-Giles, 2010; Morris, 2006). Rather than seeing the archive as "a site of singular discovery" that offers "material proof of the past," Biesecker (2006) contends that the archive "best be understood as a scene of double invention" (p. 124). The ways in which individuals and organizations select and make sense of archival works is tied to power and ideology. Similarly, Taylor (2003) contends that archives have always sustained power. Although the archive functions to preserve artifacts across time and space, the value, relevance, and/or meaning of archival artifacts change over time because of the changes in contemporary interpretations (Taylor, 2003). Therefore, archival images of Black people have the potential to generate new perspectives in the collective remembrance of physical and emotional trauma of Black life in the United States.

Black political artist-activists highlight the embeddedness of politics in the archive as they grapple with historical images of Black trauma and the marginalization of such photographic memories. By re-politicizing archival images and documents, artist-activists re-examine the past and interpret anew the meanings and messages associated with Black embodiment. The photographic art series entitled, *From Here I Saw What Happened…and I Cried* (1995-1996) by Carrie Mae Weems, is an example of such strategy. Her project was commissioned as a direct response to an exhibit, *Hidden Witness: African American in Early Photography*, at

the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1994. The exhibit showcased rare archival images of Black people in the United States from the mid-20th century. It was at this exhibit that Weems encountered several of the images in the series, including early images of enslaved Black people in America. Katriel (1994) calls museums "sites of memory," which can help people recall and shape constructed remembrances of the past. However, museums and institutional displays are also rhetorically constructed and further frame the meaning-making process for audiences. As Katriel contends, "The meaning and the texture of these sites of memory . . . are shaped by the historicized context in which they are located" (1994, p. 3). The historicized context of museums and institutions lend authority to the messages and meanings interpreted by viewers, which makes how the images are presented and what they help viewers recall particularly important and potentially problematic.

It is the circulation of these images in visual culture that has inspired Weems's response through the series to counter predominantly White voices shaping the narrative of Black trauma. Archival images in the series represent historical racial trauma endured by Black people. The photo-text installation calls attention to the pain of the past and present by representing collective Black emotional, physical, and representational injury inflicted on Black bodies through systems of power.

This form of trauma has been theorized as "racial incident-base trauma" (Bryant-Davusm 2005), "societal trauma" (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005), "insidious trauma" (Root, 1992), "intergenerational trauma" (Quinn, 2007; Connolly, 2011), or "normative trauma" (Brown, 2007). As Bryant-Davis (2007) points out: "A stressor does not require physical contact for it to be severe or traumatizing" (p. 137).

Instead, the concept of race-based trauma provides "a more precise description of the psychological consequences of interpersonal or institutional traumas motivated by the devaluing of one's race" (p. 137). Critical scholars have made the case that Black people living in a White supremacist society can experience race-based trauma derived from multiple sources and through everyday experiences, leading some to experience extreme levels of race-based stress (Degruy, 2005; Roots, 1992). Such trauma does not always include physical violence or threat of violence, but it results in emotional distress nonetheless that takes a toll on the mental health and well-being of victims. Other scholars have noted the commonality between race-based trauma and other forms of trauma (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Connolly, 2011). Some scholars are hesitant to make associations between emotional stressors and racism, including PTSD, for fear of pathologizing victims or blaming victims (Carter, 2007). However, the labeling of the emotional injury to victims of racism would not prevent those seeking to blame or minimize victims from doing so. In the United States, these attempts to conceptualize the emotional toll of racism, classism, and sexism as they intersect with the Black experience are helpful in understanding the collective Black trauma.

In her photo-text installation project, *From Here I Saw What Happened and Then I Cried* (1995-1996), Weems re-appropriates 33 historical images to grapple with the history of Black suffering and its contemporary legacy.[27] In particular, she critiques the ways in which the Black body circulates within visual culture while failing to interrogate Black trauma and injustice. Piche and Golden (1998) conclude that her photo-text installation presents "an alternative history" to critique Black

representation (p. 29). She rejects the decontextualized circulation of archival images of the Black body that ignore or minimize underlying oppressive messages related to race, while boldly and critically "re-reading" Black representation through archival works. Her work is both critical of past practices and contemporary complacency surrounding Black representation. In doing so, she uses the images already in circulation to present an emotionally-charged critique designed to promote social change.

This chapter draws from critical theories on race, gender, and class to study the relationship among collective memory, bearing witness, cultural trauma, and the Black body. To do so, I explore how the photo-text art series intervenes politically in the construction of collective memory about the historical traumatic treatment of African Americans to reemphasize the need for political action. First, *From Here* intervenes in the circulation of the Black body as a "metadiscourse" to resist racially-charged and demeaning constructions of Blackness that continue to endure in our current era. *From Here* ultimately challenges the historical and contemporary representations of Blackness and the signification of Black bodies through systems of domination. In the process, such images politicize the collective remembrances of national Black trauma, rendering the complicity of the contemporary era in such commemoration and retribution. Second, the artwork invites viewers to "bear witness" to that oppressive past, constituting witnesses as political activists and educators charged with re-inscribing such racist history into the nation's collective memories of the African American experience. Third, the Black political artwork functions to promote Black healing through messages of empowerment and collective

belonging, continuing the artist-activist work that has long been part of the Black American political landscape.

Bearing Witnessing to Enduring Collective Black Trauma

The images of Black bodies in visual culture are abundant. From news media to social media, many of these images are traumatic representations of Black pain and injury. Similar to the images that inspired Weems, such images typically appear without critical reflection on the connection between past and present Black oppression. Weems's engagement with the images re-appropriates representations as a metacommunication about the ways in which Black bodies have been depicted over time to serve racial ideologies. By re-framing and re-reading, *From Here* intervenes in the circulation of the Black body to challenge limited and derogatory constructions of Blackness developed over time through imagery aimed at dehumanizing Black people. In an interview about her artwork, Weems explains her interpretation of the original archival images in her series:

> The photographs were made for very, very different reasons originally…They were intended to undercut the humanity of Africans and of African Americans in particular. This way of looking at the African as a subject says a great deal more about Anglo-American photographers than it does about the African subject. When we're looking at these images, we're looking at the ways in which Anglo-America, White America, saw itself in relationship to the Black subject. (Epstein, 2010)

Through this quotation, Weems demonstrates a keen sensitivity to how photographs are framed for a specific purpose and how they were used to construct notions of

Whiteness and Blackness in America. Weems felt compelled to make the racially-charged, political messages within the images more overt. She was motivated to incorporate these photographs in her artwork to explicitly expose the ways the images were created and framed by 19th century and 20th century contexts that sought to mark Black Americans as inferior (Piche & Golden, 1998). Weems helps to highlight the original purposes of the archival images by re-interpreting their meanings from a contemporary point of view, accentuating the political uses they served historically. To do this, *From Here* features 33 toned and framed archival photographs in mostly chronological order to (re)collect the origins and progression of mediated constructions of "Blackness." From slave images to more contemporary images of the mid-20th century, Weems uses period photos and texts to transport her viewers back in time through emotionally-charged visual narratives drawn from the archives.[28]

While *From Here* re-instantiates the history of the African American experience into the nation's collective memory, it presents an opportunity for viewers to bear witness to historical injustice and connect this injustice to current oppression. The concept of bearing witness provides a framework for understanding this process. The images become not just pieces of "history," but part of the past that must continue to be heard, shared, and re-witnessed (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000). According to Hesford (2011), "Witnessing atrocity has come to mean not just the experience of the survivor but a general mass-mediated experience," which can function to regenerate and renew political engagement against acts that allowed the atrocity to occur in the first place (p. 56). For this reason, rhetoric of witnessing often invokes a social, political, and moral imperative that places a sense of obligation on to

witnesses to preserve collective memories of atrocities and tragedies and prevent similar events from happening again. In the process, rhetoric of witnessing functions as a persuasive mode of influence that moves the public to adopt and advance the lessons of historical atrocity (Vivian, 2017). Therefore, observers who become witnesses take on the "psychic and social responsibility to bring the dead into the present, a responsibility that concurrently involves learning to live with, and in relation to loss" (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000, p. 3).

Through the engagement of memories, Landsbergs (2004) contends, that witnesses take on "the scars of the past" to form their own "archive of experience" to allow them to learn from history (p. 100). From this perspective, bearing witness reduces the distance between the individuals and the past, while promoting an identity between witness and individuals from the past. Hesford (2011) contends that witnessing does not require identification with the audience in the traditional rhetorical sense, however, share experiences through modes of identity allows the message to further resonate with the viewer (p. 111). As a result, witnesses gain a sense of the pain from the past and begin to see the past as it may be experienced from others. Such witnessing starts to shrink the temporal and physical distance as well as they connect and re-remember a time other than the present.

From a rhetorical perspective, to bear witness is more than observing; it requires individuals to confront the past and take on the burden of the past. In his book on collective memory, Wertsch (2002) distinguishes re-experiencing from remembering. Re-experiencing "assumes that the individual or group merges with, or is part of the past event" and "in its extreme form…the distance with the observer and

event dissolves" (p. 46). In this sense, time collapses as groups or individuals are able to emotionally connect to the past as if it were happening in the present. Vivian (2017) takes a slightly different point of view, in which he refers to the rhetoric of witnessing is inherently as "a-kairotic" or "unpunctual" as messages are generally focused on a future effect of not allowing history to repeat itself. "Witnessing," as observed by Vivian (2017), "must retain this temporal character, propinquity must not exhaust its dynamics or capacity for rhetorical effect, in order for acts of witnessing to perpetually communicate so-called universal lessons of historical atrocity and tragedy" (p. 173). Ultimately, both perspectives demonstrate that witnessing invokes a connection to the past in order to make meaningful changes in the future either through prevention or intervention.

By engaging the concept of bearing witness, *From Here* uses a visual-textual narrative of an unjust past to visualize Black trauma as not just a series of horrific events of the past, but an on-going process tied to legacies of Black oppression that endure today. The series invites witnesses to seek what can be learned from the silenced experiences of the marginalized and to recommit such images to the national memory. For example, slavery and the history of racism consist of complex traumatic events that have left unhealed wounds in America (Degruy, 2005, Gilroy, 1993; Walcott, 2000). *From Here* encourages viewers to recognize the race-based trauma in this visual project to make links to current day material, social, and political conditions that impact the lives of Black people. However, *From Here* does not do all the work for viewers, because bearing witness is acknowledging what you may have overlooked before, what you did not want to see, or what was too painful or

uncomfortable to comprehend or accept. In the process, witnesses move beyond voyeurism or merely sympathetic observers to being called to action as agents of social change engaged in the strategic practice of remembering to re-create a historical consciousness.

This chapter conceptualizes bearing witness as intrinsically political. *From Here* re-politicizes both historical Black representations to spotlight its embeddedness in historical and contemporary Black trauma. Therefore, bearing witness to trauma means remembering as a "strategic practice" and making the "difficult return" to learn how to live with and against the past (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000). Once individuals become witnesses, their collective memories of the past may change to reflect the new insights gained through witnessing. As heirs to the atrocity of slavery and systems of racism, witnesses become political actors who must address the past and its current implications in order to pass on the remembrances of the atrocities as a means of on-going retribution to those wronged in the past.

The act of bearing witness can carry privilege as some will not have the opportunity to witness because of the power inherent in the ability to see. Art in particular is often more accessible to those with socioeconomic privilege and the series relies on some cultural literacy of her viewers. Despite this limitation, Weems makes her art series, *From Here,* accessible through multiple mediums. The physical installation of the series is periodically on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), which owns all but three of the prints in the series.[29] The electronic version can be viewed online at Carrie Mae Weems's website that displays other e-versions of her artwork as well as information about the artist.[30] All the

images were reprinted for viewing in a book called, *Carrie Mae Weems: Recent Work, 1992-1998*. In this analysis, I refer to images reproduced online at Weems's website, published prints of her work, and photos of the physical installation.[31] Although each medium offers a unique experience with the artwork, all three mediums highlight the negative historical representations of African Americans in U.S. culture.

Bearing Witness to the Evidencing of "Difference"

As the viewers' gaze moves through these images, they are bombarded with image after image of intriguing photographs that emphasize how Black people have been depicted throughout history. The series also gives a sense of timelessness to the historical images as they still reflect on-going beliefs about Blackness through images and messages that are simply refashioned within our contemporary world. By collecting the decontextualized images of Black Americans, *From Here* creates a sense of a unified Black body and a unified Black traumatic experience by recontextualizing them within their historical eras of oppression. No individuals are explicitly recognized on an individual level to constitute their personal identities, which reifies the notion of collective Blackness. While the time period changes, the overarching racialized message of Black inferiority and dehumanization endures over time. The visual representation mimics a brief walk through time as the image captures various moments of Black history.

The archival photographs in the series are presented without any information about the time, place, situation, or individuals in the images, but it could be assumed that based on the historical milieu of these images that they were taken approximately

between 1850 through 1970. Without explicit context listed in the images, the subjects in each image is interpreted more broadly. Rather than centering an individual narrative of trauma, the individual is minimized as the series accentuates the anonymity of the individual to place focus on collective pain inflicted on the Black body. A majority of the images would not be known to the average viewer, since they are not iconic images of Black history. Yet, at the same time, the images have a sense familiarity as they look like other images throughout history. Such approach is a political move that visually constructs a Black narrative of trauma to recapture and reinterpret an unjust past. The construction of a collective Black body emphasizes the far-reaching impact of racism that has resulted in tremendous consequences for African Americans collectively.

The series begins with a 1925 portrait of Nobosodrou, a Mangbetu woman in Belgium Congo photographed by Leon Poirier and George Specht.[32] Nobosodrou, who was also the wife of the Chief, appears bare-chested in profile view adorning a simple necklace and an intricate, grand crown-like hairstyle. Her profile to the camera makes her appear as though she is looking towards the photographs that follow, directing the gaze of the viewer toward such historical images. The following words overlay the woman's image: "FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED" (image 1). Following Nobosodrou's image begins a series of 31 altered archival photographs of Black people in America starting with rare slave images ending with the same image of Nobosodrou only reversed; she now looks back towards the other images, with her own vision functioning as bookends to the exhibit. The words this time read: "AND I CRIED" (image 2).

The arrangement varies slightly based on the viewing location of the images. In the physical installation, viewers often walk down a wall of images that are lined up in chronological order, but some installations stack two images together. Another common installation is to group similar images, creating several groupings in a row.[33] In each arrangement, viewers are confronted with the grand impact of the numerous prints, positioned one after another. Similarly, on the website, viewers are required to scroll horizontally, instead of the more typical vertical scroll design, to follow the gaze of Nobosodrou as they scroll across the screen. As viewers examine the images in the book, they are invited to turn page after page of images that emphasize the vast range of demeaning images of Black people. Whether physically walking by the exhibit, strolling across on the website, or flipping through each page, each medium has a linear feel, fostering a mimetic progression through time as a means by which to confront these atrocities.

The images share other similarities in terms of pictorial form. Most of the images are portrait-style. Some, though, include groups of people at events; others feature cropped images from larger scene shots. Weems says, "I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice…. I used images that were preexisting, and my intervention was to reinscribe them by making them all consistent, in terms of size and scale and format and color" (*Open Ends*, 2000).[34]

By using strategic choices related to color, framing, and text on archival images, Weems presents a searing political narrative of race in America. Most of the images are toned blood red—signifying the pain and trauma of the Black experience

in America. The meaning of red came to the Christian West through biblical Greco-Roman and Germanic traditions that associated the color with evil, fire, war, and blood (Pastoureau, 2017). Today, red is still frequently interpreted as an emotionally intense color that is associated with blood and violence in western cultures (Pastoureau, 2017, p. 61). For this reason, red functions as a reminder of the blood that was and continues to be shed during struggles for racial justice in the U.S.

The circular Black matte border framing each of the red-toned images operates in three important ways. First, it gives the viewer a sense of looking through a camera viewfinder, further positioning the viewer as a witness past and on-going oppression against Black people. Second, it exposes the camera as a tool of exploitation to deny Black Americans their rights and freedoms by using imagery of the Black body as "evidence" of racial inferiority. Third, the stark Black background draws the eyes toward the red-toned image that mimics the appearance of a target. The target-like red circle created on each image may generate memories in which people of color were targeted by racial profiling and other forms of domination. For these reasons, color and framing work together to communicate anger and outrage over Black trauma. By recognizing the multiple layers of racism that have constructed notions of race and connecting it to the emotions generated by the images, emotional distance is reduced between observers and the observed, as the viewers witness the oppression of the time. In the process, viewers bear witness to widespread consequences of racism that are pulled into the existing political context through the recontextualization of such racist images and memories.

Weems then uses bold writing in grey and white capital letters that overlay each photo to narrate the series. The indignant tone of the text labels the various stereotypes, offensive names, and labor positions thought appropriate to Black people throughout various times in history. The diverse images of Black people in different places over time produces a brief visual genealogy of oppressive messages about Black bodies. The written text appearing on all the images in the series read like a paragraph that critiques the visual representation of African Americans, helping to enforce the visual messages and making the political message of the art more explicit. The text overlaying each image simultaneously refers to the historical subjects in the prints and the contemporary Black subject, creating a sense of temporal fluidity and connectedness among the past and present. The use of first-person pronouns in Weems's narration directly addresses a Black audience signified through racist messages about the Black body and politicalizes a Black historical voice against Black oppression. Viewers are thus invited to recognize the collective past as it affects African Americans in particular, but all of humanity in broader sense of social justice.

Text overlays each image using the method of sandblasting. This method suggests a sense of permanence to these labels and messages because this requires the text to be cut into the glass. Therefore, just like the text, the racist messages are not changing easily. The overlaying glass does not change or obstruct the photo and therefore it is not a part of the original image. Similarly, the labels and messages are not intrinsically a part of Black identity, but rather racist notions placed upon them.

Unlike other images in the series, the witness, Nobosodrou, is toned blue and is framed by a thin, Black border, which creates a visual contrast between the woman and the remaining images. Blue is associated with royalty, divinity, and authority (Pastoureau, 2018). The color is frequently associated with the Virgin Mary in Christian artwork and stained glass (Pastoureau, 2018). In contemporary culture, it is a popular military color across the world due to its positive and powerful associations. It is also seen as a unifying color, since it is the more prominent color seen on Earth from space. In the exhibition of the series, the African witness is further positioned as an onlooker through the larger size of her image. Her size image may reflect her higher status that she retained in Africa, while her kin are reduced to stereotypes and positioned in a lower social status. All the other images, besides the witness, are the same size (images 2-32). This creates symmetry among the images in which each narrative has equal representation. Together, the size differences, border, and color all help to emphasize her distinctive role in this textual-visual narrative as a witness. The audience is invited to bear witness with her as she observes the historical injustice against African Americans throughout history. The title and Nobosodrou's positionality in the series suggest she is moved to tears as she watches the pain inflicted on African Americans through U.S. history. Her blue tone helps to reflect her sorrowful mood as if she has "the blues."

Nobosodrou's queen-like status also symbolizes a weeping motherland crying for her abused children in the United States. Africa is represented as nurturing and loving, while also in mourning over the loss of fellow Africans and their on-going pain. The collective pain of all Black bodies is connected in the struggle of racial

oppression worldwide. While emphasizing the African and African American connection, the historically exploited and degraded constituent is positioned as a place of home and care, overlooking the political context of Africa. In the process, the notion of Africa as the motherland is emphasized and romanticized as it overshadows African colonial trauma and pain. Africa is wounded, but through the loss of millions of Africans into slavery, not through the localized trauma in Africa. In a sense, this glorifies Africa as a place free of trauma and racialized violence. Yet in the image, Nobosodrou stands on colonized land where she may have experienced racial violence at the hands of colonizers or other Africans vying for resources and power. Weems places Nobosodrou in a place of privilege as the onlooker looking upon the horror that she did not have to experience firsthand. While Weems does not provide any context for Nobosodrou within the series, her status as a wife to the chief still gives her greater social status among others, which is represented through her regal appearance and her role as an onlooker in the series. The imagery also plays on the notion of possibilities through the idea that people of varying social statuses, including community leaders and royalty, were among those enslaved. While the series is limited in its reflection of Black trauma in Africa, Africa is nonetheless used as a unifying symbol to represent home, mother, and collective Black pain.

Bearing Witness to Scientific Racial Exploitation

Appearing after the first image of Nobosodrou, daguerreotypes of the African-born and American-born slaves begin the Black narrative of trauma in the United States within the photographic art series. The daguerreotypes are some of the most circulated images of archival photographs of the 19th century, known as the Zealy-

Agassiz daguerreotypes (Blight & Rogers, 2010). They were commissioned by the Swiss-born Harvard anthropologist, Louis Agassiz, who is also known as "the father of American biology" (Barger & White, 2000). Upon moving from Europe to take a professorship at Harvard, Agassiz toured the East Coast and encountered his first significant contact with Black Americans (Collins, 2002). In a letter he wrote to this mother, Agassiz described both the fascination and repulsion he experienced as he observed the Black Americans that served him in his hotel (Gould, 1981). As Barger & White (2000) explain, his "emotional reaction cemented his beliefs, not grounded on an empirical evidence, and influenced his subsequent writings and teachings on the subject of the origins of humankind" (p. 80). As a mentee to George Curvier, the naturalist who studied Sarah Baartman and put her on display in Europe, Agassiz had observed Africans before but never up-close as servants and slaves. His increased contact with Black people helped to fuel his interest in "sorting and classifying" different races in order to make claims about biological differences and White superiority (Wallis, 1995). To pursue this goal, Agassiz commissioned Joseph T. Zealy to take photographs of African slaves he observed while visiting the home of a colleague in South Carolina (Collins, 2002).

These images served to construct Black people as inferior subjects of scientific inquiry, which subverted their personhood by treating them as specimens. Seven slaves, Renty, Delia, Drana, Jack, Jem, Alfred, and Fassena, were photographed in varying stages of undress from front to back to capture scientific records for the naturalist (Lamm, 2007). The nudity of the slaves in Zealy-Agassiz images were not by choice as it was not typical for African Americans to be seen

bare-chested in public, but it is consistent with the Western view at the time that interpreted Black men and women as immodest and sexually deviant. Barger and White (2000) describe some of the Zealy-Agassiz daguerreotypes as including full frontal images that expose the bare bodies of slaves. They also argue that these images were likely taken in a saloon or other public place; if true, the setting served to further rob the individuals of privacy and exploit their bodies. In this sense, the camera functioned as a tool of sexual violation and the photograph becomes the evidence of the crime. According to Meehan, "These images, then, at least as commissioned and circulated, reflected an ideology of polygenesis—multiple creations accounting for the hierarchy of races, White over Black most specifically" (p. 148). In studying these daguerreotypes, Trachtenberg (1989) also notes that these images are "not 'representative…of an imagined and desired America, but examples or specimens of a 'type'—a type, moreover, of complete otherness" (p. 54). Agassiz hoped that these images would be the visual proof needed to help confirm his hypothesis on polygenesis, and ultimately classify Black people as inferior to all others (Meehan, 2008). These images became a part of a collection of photographs, drawings, charts, and scales that worked to support racial claims of Agassiz and his colleagues. Eventually, the images ended up stored away for over a century.

Since 1975 when the daguerreotypes were rediscovered in the Harvard archives (Wallis, 1995), the images have received a considerable amount of scholarly attention and public interest that continues today (Blight & Rogers, 2010). Many people come into contact with the images through mass media and museums. As some of Harvard's most requested items, the set of fifteen daguerreotypes are now

described as among the “most important and controversial objects” at the Peabody Museum of Archelogy and Ethnology at Harvard University (Peabody Museum, 2016).

Weems’s use of the daguerreotypes in her project was initially met with conflict as Harvard University threaten to sue her over her use of the images within her series, *From Here…I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. In response to Harvard’s legal pressure, Weems challenged their authority over the circulation of the images by saying: “I don’t think I have a legal case, but I think I have a moral case that might be really useful to carry out in public” (Art:21). As slaves, the individuals were limited in their ability to contest to their nude image from being photographed. Although no laws protected slaves from the will of their slave owners at the time, the circumstances in which the images were obtained were unjust. Therefore, the use of slave images brings about questions of content and ethics when reproduced for contemporary viewers. Harvard continues to control the circulation of the Black slaves’ bodies by deciding how and where they can be displayed to the public. Weems seems to hint at a belief that the narrative of trauma in Black representation is worth reproducing and re-exposing Black bodies for view when done so critically. Weems recognized the law was probably not in her favor, but she decided that there is a “larger story to tell” that might be instructive through a court case regardless of the legal ramifications against her. After further consideration, Harvard ultimately decided not to sue her (Shanahan, 2016). Although the discussion of the daguerreotypes did not play out in court at that time, the conflict over the images nevertheless highlights implications over the circulation of Black historical trauma.

Their images continue to expose the painful past of unjust race relations in America both as part of the art series and as the original archival images. In 2019, the daguerreotypes reemerged in international news when descendants of Renty and Delia, a father and daughter photographed in the commissioned daguerreotypes, filed a lawsuit against Harvard, charging them with profiteering and exploitation. The lawsuit filed by Tamara Lanier with the support of her family calls the images "spoils of theft" and likens Harvard's control over the images to the equivalent of slavery (Schuessler, 2019). Once again, this latest court case regenerates questions over "ownership" of the images. A public, academic, and legal debate continues as some believe historical images such as these should remain with institutions for expert care and safeguarding of the fragile artifacts (Hartocollis, 2019). Others call for reparations as White dominated institutions continue to profit from exploitation of Black people through their dominion over Black images and other artifacts (Herndon, 2019).

The case also brings forth broader questions related to representations of Black trauma in the archive. Like the Zealy-Agassiz daguerreotypes, many (if not all) Black archival subjects appearing in the series were likely photographed without their explicit consent, especially given the racial power dynamics of the historical time period. On one hand, the reproduction and continued display of Black bodies in the moment of trauma carries the risk of repeating the symbolic trauma through its representation. As Smith (2019) points out, the exploitative archival images are re-circulated again through the series. While Smith recognizes the potential of the series to subvert, she also argues the "significations layer one on top of the other, yet none

of them wholly disappear" (p. 50). This has the potential to perpetuate the original sentiments of the images. On the other hand, the display and critique of Black imagery give voice through the representation of trauma as resistive political work by the artist-activists, such as Weems. Ultimately, representations of Black trauma can both reinscribe and subvert racial meanings (Smith, 2019). This analysis focuses on the political potential of the series to challenge such meanings.

To address Black trauma, the photographic art series begins with the Zealy daguerreotypes. Over the four red toned daguerreotypes of Delia, Renty, Jack, and Drana, the words read: "YOU BECAME A SCIENTIFIC PROFILE/A NEGROID TYPE/ AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE/ & A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT" (images 2-5). Delia appears first. She was born a slave in America to her African father, Renty. She is captured with her eyes lowered as she appears in a profile view to the camera. Her profile reinforces the textual message overlaying her image: YOU BECAME A SCIENTIFIC PROFILE. She faces the same direction as Nobosodrou as she continues to direct the progression onward to other images in the series. She appears stoic and serious. Her eyes convey a sense of sadness as she stands exposed for the image. Her lowered eyes look as though she might be deep in thought or imagining herself elsewhere, rather than watching something in particular. Her image spotlights the ways in which a simple image of a Black person was meant to support racial motives with "scientific" evidence. Her father Renty is the third image in the series. Both Nobosodrou and Renty were born in Congo, a central African country with close ties to the mid-Atlantic slave trade. Although both Nobosodrou and Renty were born in Africa, their perspective in the series differs due to their location and

positionality. Nobosodrou looks on and weeps, while Renty gives a piercing stare to the camera with a pained but powerful expression in the style of the portrait image.

In spite of the power dynamics at work, Renty, Jack, and Drana "look back" against politics of the dominant gaze. Renty's eyes convey strength and a sense of agency despite his enslaved status, while his aged face demonstrates the many experiences he has lived through to get him to this moment. Jack, who was born in the West African Country, Guinea, appears in the series after Renty facing the camera in a similar portrait style. Jack's face looks tense as he stares into the frame. His daughter, Drana, is next in the series. She appears front-facing and also looks directly into the lens. The work of Foucault (1978) and hooks (1995) theorize on the possibilities of resistance despite overwhelming structural domination. Foucault says, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (p.95). Even within interlocking systems of domination, Black people have always sought freedom. According to hooks, "The 'gaze' has been a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally…In a resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking"—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist (p.116). The confrontational stares of Renty, Jack, and Drana confront as he captures their photographs and symbolically confronts the present-day viewer. Their eyes give the sense that they are staring back at their viewers. The direct stares of Black slaves to Whites in the mid-1800s would have been against social conventions of the time. Their haunting stares also remind viewers of America's painful past that marked Black people as inferior, exploited Black people as chattel,

and denied Black people civil rights for much of the country's history. In doing so, their eyes and their facial expression also tell stories of pain yet resilience.

The text pushes the viewer to re-remember scientific racism through these historical representations and the lingering force of such discourse. Over Renty's image reads: "A NEGRO TYPE." This emphasizes that Renty's Black body was used to label him as an inferior race or "type"—an ideology so persuasive that it continues nearly 170 years after his photo. "AN ATHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE" appears over Jack's chest. This image gestures towards the many debates within modern science and pseudo-sciences, including classifying Africans as subhuman. In Drana's image, her bare breasts are exposed to the camera and her undraped clothing can be seen gathered at her waist. Across the top of her chest on the image reads: "& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT." Drana's image calls attention to the politics of photographic practices that capture images of Black people for science and entertainment. As the Black body becomes a visual subject captured permanently within photography, it added another layer of surveillance practices used to oppress Black people.

The Zealy daguerreotypes visualize the ways in which Black enslaved people and their descendants have been constructed as a "race" by a scientific tradition that was preoccupied with classification. Black people's personhood was subverted by classifying them as a "type," a specimen, and a race with photographs serving as "proof." *From Here* reminds viewers of the original purpose of these early slave images. These words remind the viewer that what was of interest to Agassiz was not *who* these people were, but *what* function they served in the nation-state. Unlike

ethical anthropological approaches, which seek to learn and understand diverse groups of people, *From Here* emphasizes that Zealy and Agassiz had racist aims that reduced the Black body to a specimen for economic, social, and political motives. According to Edwards (2015), such practices linger in anthropological methodologies today. In her essay on the history of photography in anthropology, Edwards (2015) argues that there is tendency to assume that anthropological methodology, theoretical orientation, and political entanglement are now "better" than approaches decades or centuries before. However, she argues that the histories and practices are long and deep, which requires a constant critical approach to problematizing "evidence" from photography. By illuminating this history and lingering contemporary bias, Weems emphasizes the Black body's embeddedness in long histories of signification through anthropology and other scientific branches.

The Black Laboring Body: Bearing Witness to Black Labor Exploitation

From Here tackles the construction of Black bodies through the lens of labor by revisiting the history of Black exploitation. The series draws attention to racist discourse that has defined Black bodies as laboring bodies to be valued for the work that can be accomplished by them, while challenging such ideology and representation. Barger and White (2000) suggest that Agassiz was interested in comparing the types of labor roles and the physical appearance of slaves, which is perhaps why he labeled his images of slaves with their labor position.

Black people were seen for their function, rather than recognized for their humanity. Slave images in general were often labeled as property with the slave master's name, their role on the plantation (e.g., driver, field hand, kitchen worker),

and sometimes their name (Barger & White, 2000). Therefore, slaves were literally and figuratively labeled as laboring bodies. The caregiving and physical labor role of Black people, specifically women during slavery, are addressed in the close-up portraits of four Black women in images 6-8. In image 6, a woman is wearing period clothing of the 19th century as she looks into the camera with the word "HOUSE" over her image. She has a deflated look in her face. In the next image, a woman of a similar time period looks around to the camera as she gathers sticks outside (image 7). Her piercing stare looks out into the frame. The words "YARD" overlay her image. It appears as though she was actively working as the photo was taken, but looks up as the photo was shot. She does not look pleased to have her photo taken, but her role requires her to comply. In image 8, a woman looks into the camera with an irritated and somewhat angry expression against a solid red background. The word "KITCHEN" overlays the image. People typically did not smile in photography during this time period (Trumble, 2004), but the strong negative emotions in the images are still striking. They appear more than stoic; they appear pained. As portraits, these photographs may appear more benign without the text, but the text directs the meaning-making process to demonstrate that the discourse of racism has defined Black identities in narrow and limited ways to deny their humanity and emphasize their role as workers, labors, and property.

Building off the slave roles, the series re-reads the ways in which the Black female body has been positioned as "the help" throughout history. In image 6, a middle-aged Black woman wearing a headscarf stares back into the camera in a challenging matter with the words: "YOU BECAME MAMMIE, MAMA, MOTHER

& THEN, YES, CONFIDANT—HA" (plate 29). This image emphasizes the various trusted roles that Black women served in White households as caregivers. The popular and pervasive mammy stereotype can be linked to discourses that constructed Black women as submissive yet "natural" cooks and mothers (Wallace-Sanders, 2008). The word "HA" places emphasis on these caregiving roles, particularly that of "confidant." Whites in this sense were vulnerable to Black women as they had the ability to retaliate by tampering with their food or harming their children. Therefore, while treating Black women as sub-human, White people still relied on them in significant ways, including seeking emotional support from them as their confidants. "HA" is then also used to recognize the arrogant absurdity entrusting the people you treat the worst in society, while hinting at the potential ways Black women did use these roles to enact resistive strategies.

Black women served these roles out of necessity due to slavery and then later as domestic workers when economic oppression still limited opportunities for Black employment for decades to come. Following slavery, Black women were still limited to service work as they were not offered equal educational opportunities in elementary and secondary schools, and then also prevented from attending many colleges and universities (Hine, 1990). Many professions were also denied to Black women on the basis of race and gender (Branch, 2011). Therefore, race, gender, and class functioned to suppress Black women's economic freedom.

Today, Black women are still overrepresented in service work through lingering interlocking systems of oppression that constrain their educational and occupational options (Branch, 2011). Although educational opportunities have

expanded for Black women through the work of activists in U.S. liberation movements, systematic structures have not eliminated the prevalence of racist, classist, and sexist ideology that views Black female bodies as laboring domestic bodies. Black women are overrepresented in the service professions, while Black college educated women are among the largest population of the underemployed (Branch, 2011; Williams & Wilson, 2019). This reality demonstrates the continued racialized economic oppression faced by Black women and their families.

Similarly, Black men have faced their specific history of economic oppression. In image 7, an elderly man wears what appear to be military medals with the words: "DESCENDING THE THRONE YOU BECAME FOOT SOLDIER & COOK." This image refers to the diminished social standing of Black men within Western society. Black men were slaves to Whites and soldiers to a government who did not recognize them as deserving of equality. These words implicate the government, institutions, and private individuals who benefited from the labor of Black people, while reducing them to the lowest status on the social hierarchy. In fact, even after serving in the American Civil War, World War I, and World War II, Black soldiers were denied the same benefits offered to White soldiers. For example, the G.I. Bill, which provided financial support in the form of cash stipends for schooling, low-interest mortgages, job skills training, low-interest loans, and unemployment benefits, allowed many White soldiers to secure financial stability within the middle-class. Yet many Black soldiers did not receive any veteran benefits after their service. This was especially true for Black soldiers in the South. Discriminatory practices of red-lining in the housing sector, segregation within

universities, and violence targeting Black military veterans provided additional barriers (Cole, 2020; Rothstein, 2017). The reference to a cook also suggests the practice of assigning Black men to limited roles within the military to prevent professional advancement.

Bearing Witness to the American Racial Imagination

It is evident from the series that the stereotypes and messages about Black identity are vast. *From Here* turns to the specific ways in which Black identities are constructed in the American racial imagination. *From Here* continues the metacommunication about Black manhood and stereotypes with the words: "DESCENDING THE THORN…YOU BECOME TOM/JOHN & CLEMENS' JIM." The wording appears over the image of young Black men in 18th century clothing. In this sense, the series recognizes the inherent value in Black personhood, while framing the ways Black identity has stereotyped and turned into caricatures. Uncle Tom and John Clemens' Jim refer to fictional characters in slave novels by White American authors. Both have been criticized for being two-dimensional Black caricatures who played into negative racial stereotypes. In particular, Uncle Tom was seen as excessively obedient and content in his life of servitude. He was a happy laboring slave. Now, the term "Uncle Tom" is used a derogatory term to refer to Black people who betray their race by being complacent to racial injustice and servile to White people. Jim is a run-a-way slave from Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Like Uncle Tom, Jim is a controversial character in American literature. While some see Jim as complex and compassionate, other see his character as simple-minded, gullible, and willing to put his interests and safety over Huck, a White character.

Towards the end of the series, “YOU BECAME BOOTS, SPADES, & COONS” appears over an archival ad for the boot shine ad, which are all racial slurs referring to Black people. Overall, the collection of photo-text demonstrates the ways in which cultural discourse worked to reinforced beliefs of Black inferiority and further position them in subservient roles.

In general, cultural roles and positions that did not work to benefit White domination were distorted in the American racial imagination. For example, although slaves attempted to hold on to African cultural practices, many were interpreted as deviant and evil, which forced African Americans to engage in these practices in secret or else eliminate them from their culture. In capital letters, over two of prints of Black women read: “BORN WITH A VEIL YOU BECAME ROOT WORKER JUJU MAMA VOODOO QUEEN HOODOO DOCTOR/ SOME SAID YOU WERE THE SPITTING IMAGE OF EVIL” (images 18-19). Both images 18 and 19 appear damaged and worn, making the details of Black women in the images harder to see. Symbolically, the damaged images stand in for attempts to strip and fade African culture and identity, while diminishing Black cultural knowledge. These roles played important positions in Black communities as they refer to healers and religious leaders that engaged in a blend of multiple indigenous, naturalistic practices from Africa (Ben-Jochannan, 1991). These cultural roles move beyond physical labor to require practitioners to have specialized knowledge, making them more than a laboring body. For this reason, Black knowledge and culture were marginalized and African religions were associated with “dark” arts. Thus, the suppression of cultural

and religious practices became another form of cultural domination to reduce Black people to merely working bodies, void of knowledge.

Bearing Witness to Black Sexual Exploitation

The series addresses many forms of Black trauma, including evidencing the ways in which sexual exploitation caused individual and collective Black pain, while distorting Black identity as hypersexual. A photograph of a Black man in a suit is pictured with his penis exposed for the camera with the words: "ANYTHING BUT WHAT YOU WERE HA." The image is a cropped reproduction of Robert Mapplethorpe's Man in Polyester Suit (1980), the subject was the photographer's lover. Weems uses a consensual sexually explicit image, rather than an image of sexual violation. However, the image stands in for sexual exploitation of Black bodies. Like in the Agassiz images, this image promotes the fascination with sexual anatomy of African Americans. The genitals of people of African descent were of great interest to naturalists, like Agassiz and Curvier, who used photographs and illustrations to make claims that Black people had wild, animalistic sexual desires (Asim, 2007). At the time, this image was very controversial and once again the Black body was caught up in a public debate over sexuality and bigoted notions of sexual deviance. Once again "HA" is used in the series to highlight the ironic yet pervasiveness of the racist myth. There were Black rapists to White victims during slavery and the Jim Crow era, but they were rare (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1998). Yet American popular culture has long depicted Black men as rapists through films and literature, such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *How the Beast Sleeps*. This myth operated as a means to control Black masculinity and sexuality, while serving as an

excuse to lynch and incarcerate Black men. The five Black males, known as the Central Park Five, for example, were jailed for the brutal rape of a jogger despite a lack of substantive evidence. While racist social discourse perpetuates the myth of the Black rapist, it is White men who are more likely to hold the social and political power to avoid the consequences of rape. Many contemporary examples of accused White male rapists, such as Brett Kavanaugh (Hauser, 2018) and Brock Turner (Lam, 2019), reveal the continued lack of sexual justice for women due to White patriarchy.

The series reminds us that while Black men were marked as rapists, Black women were labeled as inherently "promiscuous" (Lomax, 2018). The words, "YOU BECOME PLAYMATE TO THE PATRIARCH," appears over an image of a nude Black woman lying on a bed with her legs casually spread and her hand on her thigh. She looks off into the distance (image 20). In one sense, it appears to be a woman resting while nude in her bedroom. Her pose might be similar to a person relaxing in a hammock. But framed through the lens of racial violence, it becomes clear that Black sexuality has been warped into notions of twisted sexual deviance. The Black female body then becomes misconstrued as an object ready for sexual exploitation.

The next image depicts a dark-skinned Black woman and a light-skinned child who appears White. Continuing the sentence from the previous images, the words read: "AND THEIR DAUGHTER" (image 21). Image 20 and image 21 combined suggest the Black women were victims of sexual abuse or at the very least engaged in sex with a White man—whether forced or unforced. The mixed-race offspring that were the result of both sexual coercion and perhaps non-forced sexual relationships, undermined Agassiz's notion of different origins of humankind across race. Contrary

to Agassiz's hypothesis, "mulatto" children were as healthy and as capable as others. Weems pokes fun at Agassiz's theory and his obsession with classification in an image that shows the physical diversity in the Black community as a result of such sexual relations. In one of these images, the words read: "OUT OF DEEP RIVERS MIXED-MATCHED MULATTOS A VARIETY OF TYPES MIND YOU—HA SPRANG UP EVERYWHERE" (image 24).

In sum, the racial signification of Black bodies defined Black people in limiting and controlling ways. These limitations included portrayals of sexual deviance and promiscuity, beliefs about physical abilities that came naturally, claims about the absence of intellectual abilities, and views that about a mysterious and threatening nature that needed to be tamed. As other scholars have argued, these claims developed out of the racial imagination of the time and were supported through the visual and textual "evidence" of naturalists, like (Collins, 2002; Morris-Reich, 2016). These claims propelled notions of what was "natural" to certain races. The residue of slavery and scientific racism still influences the current conceptions of race. Today, these claims linger in our culture through the mediated representations of African Americans and the many cultural stereotypes assigned to them.

Visualizing Resistance and Healing

Through the confrontation of trauma, the images are reimagined as evidence of strength and pushes witnesses to be empowered to invoke change. A sense of collective belonging and understanding promotes the healing process from trauma, often reinforcing resilience. The visual progression of an African woman in Africa to African slaves in America, to numerous other images of African Americans, and then

back to Nobosodrou visually connects Black Americans to their African home and the ancestors they were forced to leave behind. The Black American and African kinship is emphasized and constructs a collective sense of belonging. Numerous studies have begun the work to analyze intergenerational trauma stemming from historical trauma in Native American (Brown-Rice, 2013; Evans-Campbell, 2006; Brave Heart, et al., 2011) and Aboriginal populations of Australia (Williamson, et al., 2014). The systematic destruction of indigenous population has resulted in cultural loss, including a loss of language, land, traditions, freedoms, and the lives of their people. Trauma studies on survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants are also beginning to delve deeper into the impact of historical trauma for Jewish populations (Jacobs, 2017). Other studies have looked at historical trauma in the lives of refugees (Kinzie, 2017). Similarly, there is a need to investigate the psychological, economic, physical, and social impact of historical trauma within Black population in the United States (DeGruy, 2017; Tulley, 1999).

Tulley (1999) identifies three protective and healing mechanisms within the Black community to address Black historical trauma, which include "a reconnection to the power within oneself, witness through reframing the trauma story, and commonality in a supportive community" (p. 24). These strategies are present within the series as it gives voice on the resistive agency of Black people during times of race-based trauma. In *From Here,* Weems substitutes her voice for the historically voiceless, reinterpreting the Black body. Viewers are called as witnesses and there is a representational witness. The sense of connection through a collective Black body enduring the pain of the past and present together create a common struggle. Kinship

ties that were broken during slavery are visually reconnected to transcend space and time through a visual genealogy of the Black American experience. The imagery of Black people in Africa and the United States narrates a history that interlocks their pain, while visualizing their collective persistence for liberation and healing.

An image of "Whipped Peter" appropriated in the series as a representation of Black persistence against oppression. The widely circulated archival image produced in 1863 helped to galvanize support for the abolition movement. Peter, who escaped slavery in Louisiana, reveals his severely scarred back to the camera as he looks to the side and slightly over his shoulder. The raised crisscrossing keloid scars on the back of the former slave calls for a sense of unease and outrage for the violence inspired by hate and exploitation. The words overlaying his image reads: "BLACK AND TANNED YOUR WHIPPED WIND OF CHANGE HOWLED LOW BLOWING ITSELF—HA—SMACK INTO THE MIDDLE OF ELLINGTON'S ORCHESTRA/ BILLIE HEARD IT TOO & CRIED STRANGE FRUIT" (image 17). Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington are referenced as artist-activists in their own right who have spoken out against Black oppression through their music and advocacy. Billie Holiday's song, "Strange Fruit," directly connects to the topic of pain in "Whipped Peter" through its discussion of lynching and racial violence.

Even as a badly wounded victim of trauma, Peter's body symbolizes resistance as he exposes his pain to advocate for change. Cambridge (1992) argues that "Black skin is a surface of traces. Outwardly, it bears the mark of exclusion upon the skin. In fact, what Black skin denotes is…an outcome of traumatic histories of racialist transgressions" (p. 110). Furthermore, he adds that "the Black body is not

only a natural, physical body, but a political and cultural body upon the surface of a which are already imprinted multiple historical subjections" (p. 110). Just like Peter's scars, bearing witness is recognizing trauma but gestures towards the possibility of healing through action. It also passes on the heritage of political activism as scars on Peter's skin that reflect a history of resistance.

From Here pays homage to this history along with the resilience of Black people to push for social progress in several images. The words over two images reads: "YOU BECAME A WHISPER A SYMBOL OF A MIGHTY VOYAGE & BY THE SWEAT OF YOUR BROW YOUR LABOURED FOR SELF FAMILY & OTHERS/FOR YOUR NAMES YOU TOOK HOPE & HUMBLE/ BLACK AND" (images 15-16). Image 15 has a different tone than other portraits in the series. A proud-looking uniformed Black man poses with a musical instrument. He conveys a sense of authority and strength with a dignified appearance he looks into the frame. The musical instrument also symbolizes culture, talent, and knowledge. Here these images challenge degrading messages about Black men as the narrative visualizes the hard work and resilience of Black men that is often overlooked. In image 16, a group of Black men dressed in slacks, button-up shirts, and ties are seated next to each other. They are looking down towards another Black man who appears to be shining shoes or providing some type of service. Text overlaying the image reads: "FOR YOUR NAMES YOU TOOK HOPE & HUMBLE." Through the image, Black people are defined as humble through their willingness to work hard in service positions, but "hope" and desire more opportunities beyond such roles. These images

celebrate Black people in the sense that they have endured but still carry on for themselves and loved ones.

The series looks specifically at Black men representations within some images, the same is done with several images of Black women. An elderly Black woman in 19th century clothing is seated next to a White family of a father and two daughters. The words over the image reads: "YOUR RESISTANCE WAS FOUND IN THE FOOD YOU PLACED ON THE MASTER'S TABLE-HA" (image 25). The image gestures towards everyday forms of resistance and rebellion used by Black women in captivity. "YOU BECAME THE JOKER'S JOKE & ANYTHING BUT WHAT YOU WERE HA," reads over the next image, which depicts African women wearing tribal lip plates while surrounded by smiling White people and a clown. This image refers to the demeaning practice of exploiting Black people as entertainment through circus shows and fairs. Black identity and culture were turned into a joke to laugh at—further diminishing the Black body.

"SOME LAUGHED LONG & HARD & LOUD" overlays a 1967 image by Garry Winogrand of a White woman and Black man walking while holding monkeys in suits (image 27). This image was used to criticize miscegenation and laugh at long held racial associations between Black people and monkeys. Such associations within U.S. visual culture continue. For example, President Barack Obama was frequently depicted as a monkey in memes on social media and in political cartoons during his tenure. Similarly in 2019, an archival photo of a White couple with a dressed-up baby chimp was tweeted by a reporter in the United Kingdom with the caption, "Royal baby leaves hospital" (Ducey & Feagin, 2021). The image attempted to poke fun of

the baby of mixed-race royal couple, Meghan Markel, Duchess of Sussex, and her husband, Prince Harry (Ducey & Feagin, 2021). The photo generated attention as a racist action in the U.K. and the U.S. Although these images are labeled as racist, there is limited critical discussion on the relationship between such images and deep history of systemic racism in public discourses.

Despite the efforts to systematically oppress Black people, African Americans have always used various forms of resistance in the struggle for liberation. From music to social protests, *From Here* draws on Black collective memory to re-remember the strategies used to empower and uplift Black people in times of despair. From slave hymns to hip-hop music today, Black music has been one of the creative ways used by Black people to share political beliefs and challenge the status quo. The music of Billie Holiday is referenced twice in the series. Once, as mentioned with her song, "Strange Fruit" (Meeropol, 1939), but then again with "God Bless the Child" (Holiday & Herzog, 1939). The sheet music to "God Bless the Child" appears over a picture of a well-dress Black girl posing in a sitting position with flowers in her hands. Some of the words to the song can be read by looking closely at the image. The song has been interpreted to indicate that religion has no influence on how people treat each other (Bratcher, 2007). This may refer to the ways Christian slave owners were often criticized for being the harshest to their slaves, such as in the Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative of a Slave* (1845), but also how religion has not prevented racism against Black people. The song also refers to economic independence as Black people were given few avenues to secure economic independence after the abolition of slavery. It is believed Billie Holiday wrote the song with Arthur Herzog, after

Holiday had an argument with her mom over money. Holiday was bankrolling her mother's restaurant, but her mother refused to give her a small loan (Bratcher, 2007). Similarly, Black people allowed for a thriving American economy through their labor, but never received economic benefits from that labor. Therefore, "God bless the child that has his own" may gesture at the ways in which Black people have had to fight over any opportunity for advancement (Holiday & Herzog, 1939). After re-remembering Black suffering through a visual genealogy, the series emphasizes collective Black resistance as part of the collective Black identity, promoting a sense of empowerment to witnesses. "RESTLESS AFTER THE LONGEST WINTER YOU MARCHED & MARCHED & MARCHED" is inserted over the profiles of Black soldiers. Next, in the last image of the narrative, a group of well-dressed Black people, including children, sit very closely together on the ground. It appears to be a political sit-in or social gathering. They are dressed in clothing of the 1950s or 1960s. The words over the image reads: "IN YOUR SING SONG PRAYER YOU ASKED DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL" (image 32)? *From Here* recognizes Black communities worked towards changes through activism, while using Black spirituality and art as sources of comfort and support in the face of trauma. Black churches or community spaces were a place of solace and hope, while also being central organizing institutions for Black liberation movements.

Conclusion and Implications

From Here invites viewers to take the difficult return back to many sources of trauma in the African American experience, including American slavery, racial violence, sexual exploitation, and cultural loss. This chapter has discussed how

Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and Then I Cried* appropriates 33 archival images of oppression to rearticulate our understanding of the complex history of Black oppression. Weems encourages the viewers to reflect on a wide-range of topics, including stereotypes, scientific racism, contemporary social issues, historical events, and Black sexuality. The number of images in the series helps to re-remember the magnitude of messages, images, and constructs used to contain Black bodies, forcing their submission. Weems gives the viewer the opportunity to see these images in relation to each other, which allows the viewer to witness the larger visual narratives of Black experiences and feel the pain of their treatment.

The emotionality expressed in the collection through text, color, and representations of individuals in the series work together to reduce the emotional distance between viewers and the subjects. The piercing stares of individuals in the photographs communicate the pain, humiliation, frustration, and a range of emotions that can be imagined by the viewer through the image and text. The intense emotions that can be read in their eyes hint at the painful stories that were their lives. Although the agency of individuals in the series was constrained by power structures of the time, the oppositional gaze of the individuals looking back reveals a sense of agency that urges the viewer to hear their silenced stories.

From Here reminds us that the images of African Americans in the 19th century and much of the 20th century were created literally and metaphorically through the lens of oppressors. Through the Western gaze, early images of Black people were often framed as the uncivilized and sexually-promiscuous African or the destitute, submissive, and sometimes rebellious slave. The visual-textual narrative of

Weems's photo-exhibit intervenes in the circulation of images of African Americans to constitute us as witnesses, complicating our understanding of race and racial myths, while also inverting the conception of who functions as deviant in this re-interpretation.

Weems's artwork also expands beyond African American oppression to expose unjust crimes against humanity. Although Weems's art frequently features Black subjects, bell hooks (1994) "encourages us not to see the Black subject through the totalizing lens of race…she consistently invites us to engage the Black subject in ways that call attention to the specificity of race…without privileging it as the only relevant category of analysis" (p. 31). Piche and Golden (1998) contend that Weems "has [also] insisted on the Black subject being treated as part of the fabric of the larger society. What affects Blacks, affects all" (p. 11). Weems pushes her audience to feel solidity with the oppressed and anger towards systems of oppression. The systems of domination that have oppressed centuries of African Americans have not operated in isolation of other places, people, and other matrixes of oppression. *From Here* shows us that art can urge viewers to be self-reflective of their understanding of history and weary of discourses that stress division, difference, and hierarchies. The series simultaneously constructs viewers as witnesses and political activists who must re-remember and never forget such acts of national atrocity as a means of commemoration and retribution that forgetting disavows. By looking at systems of meaning, Weems's artwork encourages viewers to question systems of power in relation to gender, identity, culture, class, sexuality, and race. *From Here* continues the legacy of political art established by earlier activists and reminds us why political

movements, like the Harlem Renaissance, recognized the importance of art in the political arena.

However, as hooks (1995) points out, U. S. citizens are socialized "to think of racism in personal terms," in which "individuals could think of it as having more to do with inherent prejudicial feelings than with consciously mapped-out strategy of domination that was systematically maintained" (p. 108). Furthermore, hooks adds, "the message that television sends then is that the problem of racism lies with Black people—that it exists in our minds and imaginations" (p. 112). *From Here* challenges such notions, and through the progression of these images reveals the complex, pervasive system of racism that includes centuries of discourses that have formed how Americans think and talk about race and racism.

To acknowledge slavery as trauma inflicted on Black people throughout the Diaspora is to accept the consequences of slavery as unfinished, unhealed, and unresolved. This can be difficult in a culture that privileges the present over the past and the celebrated over the shameful. However, once this is acknowledged, individuals can commit to taking responsibility and committing to social justice regarding this trauma. By the exposing, acknowledging, and sharing of an unjust past, viewers can assist in the intervention of collective memories that have silenced and marginalized.

Chapter 3: Resistance and Empowerment in Black Lives Matter Photography

Gut-wrenching visual images of police brutality in various forms of news and social media continue to serve as routine reminders that Black lives are not treated equally. Images of unarmed Black people being brutally kicked, punched, choked, and even murdered by police officers are prominent in 21st century visual media. Modern technology from officer body cameras to individual camera phones has exposed larger segments of the public to these racialized violent realities, resulting in many Americans viewing these images monthly, weekly, and sometimes daily. These visual images have generated increased scrutiny of police behavior more recently as it reinforces the prevailing practice of excessive police violence against Black people (Blackwell, 2015; Williams, 2015). But as Baumgartner and Shoub (2018) point out, racist policing policies, such as Stop and Frisk and the War against Drugs, have long targeted Black and Brown communities—frequently creating tense relationships between officers and community members.

We watched Eric Garner die after gasping, "I can't breathe" 11 times, while in the clutches of an illegal chokehold over allegedly selling single cigarettes in New York in 2014. Later that year, we watched 12-year-old Tamir Rice get shot and killed in a Cleveland park within two seconds of police arrival when they assumed his toy gun was a weapon. We watched Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota bleed-out in his car on Facebook Live in the presence of his girlfriend and her 4-year-old daughter in 2016. He was shot after the police officer asked for registration and they informed the officer there was a registered gun in the car. In 2020, we watch George

Floyd call out for his mother as an officer kneeled on his neck for 9 minutes and 46 seconds, ultimately murdering him over a claim that he used a counterfeit $20.00 (Levenson, 2021).[35] He laid lifeless for the last two minutes and during that time no attempts were made to resuscitate him (Macaya, et al., 2020). In between these deaths, there has been many more senseless deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police, including dozens that have generated national attention and many that have not.

Research supports what many living within Black communities have already known—that being black increase one's risk of police brutality. Black men, women, and children are all more likely to be killed by the police than other racial categories. Police killed 164 Black people in the first eight months of 2020 (Mapping Police Violence, 2020). In fact, police violence is a leading cause of death for young Black men in the United States (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019; Mapping Police Violence). Black people are more likely to be unarmed but they make up 28 percent of all police killings, while only comprising 13 percent of the population (Mapping Police Violence, 2020). Despite statistical data, visual evidence, and public outcry, the officers involved in the shooting of Black Americans rarely face legal consequences.[36]

In response to on-going police violence, Black Lives Matter protests have erupted across the nation. On June 6th, 2020, protests peaked with more than 550 protests across the nation despite a global pandemic caused by COVID-19 (Buchanan, Quoctrung, & Patel, 2020). They continue at the time of this writing, making it what some are calling the largest movement in U.S. history (Buchanan,

Quoctrung, & Patel, 2020; Johnson, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement originally emerged in 2013 in response to the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by a neighbor. For many, the lack of legal consequences for Trayvon Martin's murderer was just another example that Black lives do not have the same legal protections and social value in the United States. Deeply filled with grief over the outcome of the case, Alicia Garza wrote what she calls "a love letter to Black people" on Facebook to affirm their worth. Her friend and fellow activist, Patrisse Cullors, supported her messaged with the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter (Hillstrom, 2018). From there the slogan and hashtag, "Black Lives Matter," developed as a rallying cry to assert Black worth and call attention to racial inequalities. Another fellow activist, Opal Tometi joined with Garza and Cullors to turn the affirmation into a national and international movement (Hillstrom, 2018).

The three self-described "radical Black organizers," Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi say they created Black Lives Matter, Inc. as a global resource to affirm Black worth, amplify Black voices, and organize activist communities against oppression (Black Lives Matter, 2020). While Black Lives Matter is closely associated with protests against police brutality, the movement takes a much more intersectional approach to justice than those addressed in mainstream media.[37] Currently, they continue their fight for civil and human rights, but their yearly focus often includes specific actions to respond to the immediate political concerns of that year.[38] They are also working towards radical reform of our policing system to restructure our strategies for public safety. Therefore, Black Lives Matter activism not only advocates against police excessive force, but also the prevailing

anti-Black policies, structures, and ideologies embedded within the U.S. culture that limit the freedom, progress, and safety of Black people. Black Lives Matter has become shorthand to recognize that Black people have been and continue to be a part of one of the most devalued social categories in society and this legacy of Black oppression must stop. As an affirmation and organizing tool, the phrase and hashtag is now used by numerous organizations to advance the conversations around anti-Black racism. Businesses and other organizations also use it to demonstrate support for the movement and add to the movement's visibility.

Black Lives Matter utilizes social media to post images, art, and information about the movement to mobilize supporters, promote community events, and connect with other chapters. Images and art are integral part of the movement's social media and online organizing efforts. Images help draw attention to textual arguments and information when attached to posts and articles, but images also convey their own visual arguments about racial justice. The images of such work are widely shared among political photographers, the Black Live Matter community, and the general public through social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook.[39] As a result, Black art and photography function to further heighten visibility and articulate messages of the movement.

The work of Julian Plowden serves as a contemporary example of Black Photographers capturing the Black Live Matter movement, while toddling between activist-participant and political artist. Artist-activists are committed to the political cause while visually framing aesthetics that capture the meaning and message of the movement. While photojournalists may proport a claim of objectivity, artist-activists

are transparent about their ideological leanings, making their political perspectives more transparent. In 2014, the emerging artist-activist began capturing compelling photographs of Black Lives Matter protests in various cities as he traveled to attend protests. Like generations of Black artist-activists before him, he felt compelled to join fellow activists and use art as a medium to engage in political advocacy for social change. Plowden's photography originally generated national and international attention from his first protest in Atlanta, Georgia. His images provide a perspective of the movement that visualizes the intensity and passion of protesters through images of empowerment.

In this chapter, I analyze the images in an online collection of Julian Plowden's work entitled, *Project #ShootBack* (2014-2020) which appear on his social media pages, such as Facebook and Tumblr, and his website, Candid Atlanta. The project originally included only Plowden's photography, but he has since included several images from other artists within the collection to create a collective of Black visual voices around police brutality. He describes his project as a "living project," since he occasionally updates, edits, and removes images (Plowden, 2020). However, this project focuses on photography taken by Julian Plowden within the collection. The title of the project refers to using photography to "shoot back" against police brutality. None of the images or captions appear to call for violence, instead the project encourages using activism through visual, performative, and textual forms to actively work against systems of injustice. Some of the images have also appeared in various exhibitions, including the Louvre Museum, Paris, France in 2016. He describes the project as an informal photojournal account of his experience as a

"young documentarian exploring the realms of Black identity within the movement" (Plowden, 2020). He is a self-described "street photographer," who explores history and its connection to the present (Plowden, 2020). Plowden's work exemplifies the type of captivating political photography being produced by Black Lives Matter photographers of various levels of experience and training.

This chapter draws from critical theories on race, gender, and class to study the relationship among political photography, cultural trauma, Black embodiment, and the Black Lives Matter movement. More specifically, I explore how Julian Plowden's *Project #ShootBack* constructs a visual history of the Black Lives Matter movement to challenge negative portrayals of the movement and call for united action for racial justice. First, the collection engages memory to offer a haunting reminder of the past and the compelling need to heal racial wounds through political activism. Plowden's photography in particular expresses key arguments within the movement to construct an empowered vision of Black activism rooted in uplifting strategies to resist domination. Second, the collection politicalizes Black emotions to express the importance of the movement, garner support, and emphasize the need for change. Third, the images visualize an intersectional movement of inclusion and ally-ship across race, class, gender, and sexuality, symbolizing the potential for radical change. His messages of empowerment and healing appear directed towards Black people, but other messages work to garner support from allies.

Visualizing Historical and Contemporary Black Racial Trauma

Modern policing stems from slave patrols and night watchers used to control Black populations and capture Black slaves who tried to escape. As Turner,

Giacopassi, and Vandiver (2006) explain, a legally sanctioned law enforcement system emerged in the United States during slavery "for the express purpose of controlling the slave population and protecting the interests of slave owners." For this reason, "the similarities between the slave patrols and modern American policing are too salient to dismiss or ignore" (p. 186). These patrols later became police departments, which were largely designed to control Black people and the working poor, while preserving the interests of the elite.[40] Therefore, the troubled relationship between African Americans and police is not new. As Butler (2017) points out: "There has never, not for one minute in American history, been peace between Black people and the police" (p. 2). Institutionalized racism has thus been embedded in modern American law enforcement from its inception (Butler, 2017).

Once Black bodies were no longer official commodities through slavery, racial trauma continued as Black people remained largely disenfranchised and subject to racial violence to maintain prevailing systems of power. The notion that free Black people were to be feared was pervasive in American culture. Therefore, without slavery, other methods took hold to control Black populations.[41] In fact, historians argue that the extreme violence against Black people worsen through the rise of domestic terrorist groups who resisted Reconstruction efforts; Ortiz, 2005; Ore, 2019). Lynching, for example, functioned as a form of racialized terror to keep Black people "in line" and discourage them from seeking liberation (Alexander, 2010; Ore, 2019). These forms of racial terror live on in the formal and informal policing of Black bodies. For example, Ore (2019) compare's George Zimmerman's profiling, stalking, tracking, and hunting of Trayvon Martin as a contemporary form of lynching

that targets, disciplines, and restricts the movement and freedom of Black people, especially when Black people occupy spaces traditionally reserved for whites.

The legacy of these practices continues throughout every aspect of our justice system from policing to punishment.[42] People of color and the poor are still more likely to be held in jail over minor offenses with scant evidence (Embrick, 2015). This increases their risk for death. In fact, 4,998 people died in jails before they even got their day in court between 2008 to 2019. Such individuals include Harvey Hill who was brought in for trespassing and ended up beaten to death by guards after he threw a lunch tray (Eisler, etc., 2020).

Much in the same way Black people were presumed guilty and killed without due process though lynching during Jim Crow, Black people who are killed in the street during police interactions are also denied justice and ultimately punished with the death penalty in our present era. Recognizing the parallels of racial lynching of the past and police brutality of the present, activists, lawmakers, and scholars advocate for police reform. The United Nation's Working Group on Experts on People of African Descent declared anti-Black police brutality to be a part of a tradition of lynching in the United States in their 2016 report. The group defined lynching as "a form of racial terrorism that has contributed to a legacy of racial inequality that the US must address" (United Nations Working Group, 2016, para.18). Similar to the arguments made by critical scholars, they argue that "contemporary killings and the trauma it creates are reminiscent of the racial terror associated with lynching from the past. Impunity for state violence has resulted in the current human rights crisis and must be addressed as a matter of urgency" (para. 15). Similarly,

Alabama's Equal Justice Initiative (2017) drew similar conclusions, stating that lynching "profoundly impacted race relations in this country and shaped the geographic, political, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in ways that are still evident today" (p. 3). Black people are subject to what Alexander (2011) refers to as "the New Jim Crow," which has resulted in harsher sentencing, higher bails, and increased monetary sanctions resulting in higher penalties for crimes and more long-term consequences for Black people. For these reasons, overhauling our current law enforcement system is a major focus on the Black Lives Matter movement to end system-wide anti-Black policing and abuse.

Visualizing an Unjust Past in the Present

Project #ShootBack uses images to provide a haunting reminder that unhealed wounds of the past are still festering in the present as racial equality have not yet been achieved. Powerful political images can reignite a collective desire for political change as racial trouble of the past is once again made visible in the present. Gordon (2008) uses the metaphor of "haunting" to describe and explain "the meeting" of the living with the turmoil or trouble of the past. "To be haunted," as she puts it, "is to be tied to historical and social effects" (p. 190). As a concept, haunting attempts to describe "the process that links an institution and an individual, social structure and a subject, and history and a biography" (p.19). The images in the collection make visual connections between the past and present, reawakening racial justice advocacy as citizens are confronted with the injustices of the past still very much present in our current era. In this sense, citizens are "startled by the past" through the reminder that the racial trauma, trouble, and oppression are still lingering in the present. Our

troubled past of racism continues to lurk in our formal policies, informal practices, individual organizations, larger structures, and everyday interactions. By visualizing continuing trouble, it reminds us of what was lost and what was never achieved in the first place. I interpret Gordon's metaphor of "haunting" as a process that interpolates viewers into activists "seeing again" those injustices of the past and inviting activists to imagine what could have been and what could be, if allowed to heal from the past through the pursuit of justice.

Fueled by collective urgency, Black liberation movements have drawn from the political force of images to both haunt and inspire new generations to continue the fight for justice. In an analysis of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Johnson (2007) argues that images of violent abuse of civil right protesters functioned as "image events" to challenge racial segregation and show the world the barbaric nature of American racism. Keenly aware of the power of images, Martin Luther King Jr. strategically planned for the rhetorical force of the images to appeal to the conscience of White moderates during the context of the Cold War and concern over the global perception of the United States. In another analysis, Johnson (2013) argues that an emotional image of James Meredith laying shot on the ground by an unknown gunman during a march for Black voter registration served as a microcosm of racial tensions in 1966. The image functioned as a centerpiece of the national discussion on race and integration, ultimately propelling public discourse on the topic.

These examples demonstrate that racial atrocities are brought to life through images. Such images give texture to public memories. For example, the image of 14-year-old, Emmett Till's body in his casket visualized the horrors of racism that words

could not fully capture. After seeing the image in newspapers and magazines, Black people came together in horror and outrage (Gorn, 2018). Visualizing such atrocity and tragedy galvanized the then-fledgling Civil Rights Movement (Gorn, 2018). In his analysis of the rhetoric and memory of Emmett Till, Tell (2019) argues that "racism works most powerfully at those moments in which it is difficult to distinguish racism from the natural environment, when historical revisionism is driven by soils of prejudice at the same time" (p. 10). Using this perspective to understand police brutality today, it becomes evident that minimal visibility of the depths of anti-Black police violence and its consequences to the larger public combined with complacency has allowed anti-Black policing to be an accepted practice often indistinguishable from "protecting the streets." Therefore, powerful political images of racial atrocity intervene in public consciousness to demand that the evils of racism be made visible.

Visualizing the Legacy of Black Activism

Project #ShootBack reveals the ways in which Black Lives Matter activists continue this rhetorical tradition by strategically using images to punctuate the political arguments of the movement, highlighting the injustice faced by Black people today. In doing so, the collection articulates key political arguments within the movement and appeals for the support from national and global citizens. The first entries into the evolving online collection were of images taken in August 2014 when Plowden attended a march in Atlanta, Georgia. Protesters gathered in response to the killing of at least four unarmed Black men by police during a one-month span between July and August of 2014. A black and white photograph taken by Plowden depicts Black men and women marching down the street side-by-side with their arms

linked together. A middle-aged Black man in the center of the image wears plaid dress pants, a striped tie, a suit jacket, a rimmed formal hat, and Black horned-rimmed glasses that are reminiscent of those made popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Another man marches next to him in a double-breasted suit with a tie-clip, also reflecting a common style from the past. A woman to the center-left wears a classic Black shift dress as she marches with her dress, shoes in her hand. In the second row of protestors, another man sports a suit with horned-rimmed glasses.

The combination of the black and white image with older style clothing of these protestors initially conveys an image from an earlier time period. Yet, upon closer examination, other protestors in more modern, casual clothing are also visible in the photograph, blurring the time period for the viewer and connoting conflicting styles. The blending of the old and new with the formal and informal as the protesters walk arm-in-arm visually links the historical Civil Rights Movement with contemporary activism for racial justice. The image reminds viewers that the struggle to end racial discrimination is not over. Instead, protestors today continue the march started by activists generations earlier.

Viewers are pushed to connect past racial trauma of previous generations with racial suffering of today. In this photograph, a sign in the foreground displays two Black hands with white text that reads, “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” The sign helps to focus the protest on recent shootings of unarmed Black citizens by police officers as protesters march in solidarity with other protests happening throughout the nation.

By visually connecting the past with the present, Plowden’s photograph draws on the collective memory of the Black liberation movements, such as the modern

Civil Rights Movement, to locate current Black activism within the persistent struggle of Black activism to end racial oppression. Some images take a more direct approach to emphasize the continued struggle. In another image taken in 2014, a Black woman holds a sign that reads, “50 years and the Struggle is Still Real” as she stands at a march in front of Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Her sign uses African American vernacular to note the continued presence of racial injustice and references civil rights activism in 1965 when activists relentlessly marched for justice at that very site. The bridge, named after the known Ku Klux Klan leader and former U.S. senator, has become a symbol in the Civil Rights Movement for both resistance and struggle. Three civil rights marches attempted to make the long 54-mile march from Selma to Montgomery over the Pettus Bridge to advocate for voting rights for people of color. The first march became known as “Bloody Sunday” when police attacked the peaceful activists by beating them with clubs, kicking them with horses, and exposing them to tear gas (Pratt, 2017). The second march was halted by a federal injunction, resulting in Martin Luther King Jr. deciding to turn around at the bridge and seek federal protection for the march. During the final march of 1965, activists were finally able to complete the journey with 25,000 activists entering the capital of Alabama in support of voting rights on March 25, 1965 (Wilson, 2018). It is during these events that visual history of this era was captured at this site. Some of these images would later become iconic to the movement as they spotlighted racial injustice, leading to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. O’Rourke and Pace (2020) argue that iconic images of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s brought forth the different social and political realities experienced by Black people and White people, amplifying how

fellow citizens experience democracy and justice differently within society solely based on race.

On one hand, the bridge is a symbol of triumph as it was the site of resistance to injustice and persistence for civil right activists. On the other hand, it is a site that serves as a reminder of the extreme violence faced by Black activists and allies—violence that continues to threaten the safety of activists today. The name of the bridge still celebrates a known racial terrorist, allowing evil to lurk through representation. Black people and allies are taunted with the symbolic representation of racism literally over their heads as they travel through the bridge. Therefore, the image of the woman holding the sign visually connects the racial trouble of the past to the present as the names of racial terrorists remain celebrated throughout U.S. cultural practices, allowing racist ideology to persist in the present.

In this same image, the woman on the Pettus Bridge is surrounded by a large crowd of people of from multiple generations gathered on the bridge to march. Behind her stands three Black women who appear to be a mother with her daughters based on the age difference. They squeeze in for a photo as a man takes their picture in front of the bridge. The elder of the women is old enough to have lived-through the civil rights activism of the 1960s. Symbolically, the elder stands in for the older generation that walked those marches in 1965. She is still active in the struggle with the next generation. Although the image does not appear violent like, the images of "Bloody Sunday," the presence of the multigenerational protesters enacting activism on this historical site, reinforces the message on the sign, "the struggle is still real."

Symbolic “ghosts” of the past reveal themselves in the image indicating the “unfinished business” of racial justice.

(Re)visualizing Black Empowerment as Agency for Change

Although the collection invites viewers to re-remember memories of racial turmoil and its connection to the present, the images also draw on collective memories to connect current advocacy to an enduring legacy of Black power and collective agency. Empowerment is conveyed through numerous symbols of Black liberation movements of the past. The raised clenched fist, Black beret, afros, sunglasses, the snarling Black cat, Black leather jacket, poised rifles on the shoulder, and ammunition belt over the chest have come to be associated with the Black Power Movement, and the Black Panther Party in particular (Rhodes, 2017). According to Rhodes (2017), the Black Panther Party’s “unique deployment of theatrical and visual performance was an articulation of outsiderism and Black pride that blurred the lines between politics and culture” (p. xi). Using their style of dress, music, poetry, speech, music, dance, art, and journalism as political tools, they exemplified “the imaginative ways Black people have fought against exclusion in a place where they are always outnumbered and outgunned” (p. xi). As cultural symbols the Black Panthers and the Black Power Movement are easily recognized, allowing current activists to draw from the energy and politics of Black empowerment from the past and reassert it in the present. While Black Panthers were not without controversy, they offer an example of more recent direct action, community services, self-defense, and youth engagement that resonate with many frustrated Black activists today. The strategic dismantling of the Black Panther Party’s organization by enforcement agencies coupled with

continued anti-Black backlash contributed to the organization's decline (Ogbar, 2019), but their legacy still offers inspiration and source materials for contemporary Black American activism. For this reason, the iconography of the Black power movements of the past are deployed as symbols of Black pride and resistance in the Black Lives Matter protest images of *Project #ShootBack*.

Black Americans' intense desire to see themselves in positive, heroic, and self-assured ways is a product, at least in part, of the enduring Black power representations (Rhodes, 2017). As critical race theorists have pointed out, the visibility of Blackness is not only a problem with how White people see Black people, but how Black Americans see themselves. For this reason, imagery and cultural references to the Black Power Movement and the Black Panthers continue in popularity as sources of inspiration and empowerment.

Many symbols from the Black Power Movement are expressed in the appearance of individuals in the collection who are highlighted in the framing of the images. According to Rhodes (2017), these symbols are just as salient and potent now as they were through the 1950s to the 1970s. The raised clenched fist is particularly visible in Black Lives Matter activism and it has regained popularity as a symbol of unity and empowerment in the fight for social justice more broadly. In an undated black and white photograph, uploaded in 2015, two protestors are depicted from the shoulders up gesturing Black empowerment with raised, clenched fists. The activists appear to be in a gathering or protest since other people are seen in the background as they all look onward to a focus point. The overexposed shot shadows the people in the image creating a silhouette effect. Even with a shadowed image, the activists

appear to be Black males as their darker skin contrasts their White shirts as they appear darker than other individuals in the image. The background is blurred making it difficult to distinguish a location. No context is provided. Plowden's social media pages assert that the lack of context is intentional (Plowden, 2020).

The image is decontextualized as a political strategy to imply a universality to some of his images. The elements of the image make it a challenge to date the photograph. Although it is posted within his collection as his work, without context, the image could easily be interpreted as an image from 1970 or 2020. In this sense, the image conveys a sense of timelessness of Black power. In doing so, the simplicity of the photo allows the image to stand in for Black empowerment and justice in general to transcend a particular time or place. Even as silhouettes, they appear to be engaged activists looking forward with a sense of commitment and seriousness. The darken silhouette of the activists also make them unidentifiable, making them essentially anonymous. The anonymity of the individuals combined with the elements of the image helps them represent Black political activism across time and space in both the past and current pursuits of justice and freedom.

The single gesture of a raised fist functions to connect multiple generations of activists in the same fight for change. Similarly, a full-color photograph of an indoor rally focuses on a single Black fist in the air. The edge of the person's face is barely visible as the symbol of empowerment is the central focus. The foreground of the image depicts a blurred group of people. A blurred but distinguishable Black woman is centered at the bottom of the image with large earrings—a style frequently associated with the 1960s and 1970s and Black culture. A Black man wearing a

colorful scarf around the edge of his afro stands next to the woman. Hands are clapping and other fists can be seen in the air, demonstrating solidarity and support of the message or scene outside of the frame. Once again, the older style of clothing, blurring of the background, and focus on the fist communicates the on-going legacy of Black liberation movements.

In another image, the sense of Black empowerment is visually passed down to the youngest generation as a little Black toddler raises her fist in the air as she sits on her dad's shoulders during a march. Her hair is styled in "afro-puffs" as she wears a lavender shirt, covered in White hearts with her back to the frame. An urban skyline of buildings is in front of her as she is surrounded by other protesters marching forward in Atlanta during August 2014. Plowden reflected on that day, saying he saw the toddler lift her fist multiple times before he captured the shot (Sweeney, 2015). At first, he was not sure if the child was intentionally raising her fist in this way, but as the child continued, he took the photograph (Sweeney, 2015). The child embodies the legacy of Black activism. Symbolically, her physical presence portrays the next generation sitting on the shoulders of elders. She stands in for younger generations as she watches how we respond to continued hate and inequality. In seeing the path set by everyday leaders and activists ahead of her, she follows their lead.

Black youth have a strong visual presence in many of the images in the collection as an embodiment of the next generation of Black empowerment. They also remind us of the need to create a more just future for our children. One image shows a little Black boy around the age of four who appears to be walking with his mom to a rally. Protesters with common Black Lives Matter signs appear in front of

them as they walk to join the group. Their backs are to the camera. The little boy holds the woman's hand and his other hand is clenched in a fist. He could be holding something in his hand. However, within the context of the rally, it gives the sense that he is ready to lift his fist to demonstrate his empowerment, joining a cause to resist anti-Black practices that already impact his young life.

Another Black boy who appears to be around nine years-old marches with a sign high in the air that has the words "Black Lives Matter" with a logo of a clenched Black fist. The angle of the image makes the Black boy's body a focal point as he leads the group. His message is followed by other supporting arguments, including signs that read "NOT A RIOT" and "You can choose your occupation not your skin! Silence is Violence." The first message works to challenge opposition who criticize Black Lives Matter protests and associate it with rioting and looting, a common practice to discredit the movement and shift the focus away from the central issue of racial injustice. Opposition to the movement has also retorted back with "Blue Lives Matter" to dismiss the affirmation towards Black lives. The signage, therefore, highlights the false equivalency attempting to be made by adversaries. The embodiment of the Black boy leading the way serves as a reminder that if things do not change, injustice will continue to impact future generations. The anti-Black political culture of United States continues to impact the education, safety, and treatment of Black children as well as the lives of their loved ones. Therefore, Black children are inherently involved in the politics and motivations of Black activists working for a safer world for Black children.

Afrocentric symbols of Black pride, self-love, and resistance are displayed in the embodied performance of Black activists throughout the collection. Ongiri (2009) argues that Huey P. Newton, co-founder to the Black Panther Party, understood the importance of a "visual shorthand" to function as a visual articulation of the movement's politics. For example, Afrocentric hair styles, such as the afro and braids, are prevalent in images throughout the series to affirm Black aesthetics and visually connect messages of Black empowerment. In his analysis of Black diasporic aesthetics and resistance, Dash (2006) argues that the afro, in particular, became a symbol of Black radicalism and political resistance to oppression. He says, "never had a hairstyle struck so much fear into White America as the afro did," when it gained popularity during the Black liberation movements of the mid-1960s and 1970s (p. 27).

Therefore, afros are more than a hairstyle. The more recent popularity of the afro, and natural hair styles more generally, come at a time when Black people are seeking to push back against anti-Black cultural standards and discrimination due to their expressed Blackness. Black bodies are publicly targeted, policed, and disciplined through their hair. Recent cases of Black athletes facing hair discrimination spotlight this issue. For example, a Black high school wrestler was required to cut his dreadlocks in order to finish his match in New Jersey in 2019 (Stubbs, 2019), and a Black softball player in South Carolina was forced to cut her beaded braids in the middle of a game in 2021 (Asmelash, 2021).

Despite discriminatory practices surrounding Black hair, braids, afros, curls, and other natural Black hairstyles are not only a stylistic choice, but frequently a

political expression Another example of this is seen within *Project #Shootback* through a 2020 Black and white image of a Black man and woman glaring into the camera sporting large afros, while one holds a sign saying, “Black Lives Matter.” Their Black bodies, direct serious stare, and hairstyle help communicate the message of empowered Blackness. The woman is wearing a t-shirt with a graphic of Colin Kaepernick, a Black National Football League (NFL) player who sat and then kneeled in protest of police brutality and racial inequality during the National Anthem proceeding football games in 2016. The visibility of Kaepernick’s image in the collection functions to show solidarity with Kaepernick and locate him within the current battle for civil rights, while recognizing the sacrifice he made to draw attention to racial injustice. His kneeling protests and advocacy helped bring awareness to the movement, but at a great cost to his career as a professional athlete due to the NFL’s attempt to silence his message.[43] Kaepernick became a polarizing figure as the opposition to his activism attempted to frame his civic performance as “anti-American” and attention-seeking, which ultimately ended his career in the league and he was never picked up by other teams (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020). It was not until tremendous pressure from the Black Lives Matter movement activists and allies that the league and its culture changed to at least pay lip-service to the cause. The NFL has now backpedaled on their stance of Kaepernick’s protests, now admitting they were wrong for challenging his on-field protests (West, 2019; Maadi, 2020). Many teams adopted social justice messages on their unforms and signage during the 2020 season.

Kaepernick's image on the woman's t-shirt in the image reshapes his afro into a Black clenched fist. In doing so, the image re-politicizes Kaepernick's embodied performance through the "afro" and the Black power fist, emphasizing their rhetorical power as political symbols. "As the spotlight on [Kaepernick's] activism grew, so too did his locks," points out McDonald (2018). First, "a mass of short curls, then cornrows, then a bigger crown of still-defined curls and, finally, a billowing, uncontrolled, woolly, seemingly semi-sentient mass that doubled as a silent trigger of White fragility" (McDonald, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, the graphic of Kaepernick with his large afro adds another layer of meaning to reference his kneeling protest and the significance of Black political embodiment.

Like Afrocentric hairstyles, visual references to African culture, symbols, and words were strategies from the historical Black Power Movement that continues within the Black Lives Matter movement to affirm Black worth and articulate Black resistance. For example, an image uploaded in 2020 to the collection depicts two Black men during a rally at an unspecified location. Both men are wearing masks, but their body language gives the appearance that they are having a conversation as one leans his ear closer to the other. Both embody the fashion and aesthetic of earlier Black liberation movements. One is wearing a Black beret with sunglasses and the other has a short curly afro with Black brow-line glasses. One shirt has the word, "Ukulwa" across a graphic of a shield and spears. In smaller letters the words, "Zulu" and "to fight" appear on the shield. The other man wears a shirt that has "JULY FOURTH" crossed out and "JUNETEENTH" written under it in slightly bigger text, accompanied by the date "6-19-1865."

Both shirts draw from moments in Black history that reflect Black struggle and resistance. The reference to the Zulu word for fight reminds us of the renowned warriors from the Zulu tribe, the largest ethnic group in South Africa, who are known for their fierce fighting spirit and strong cultural identity (Laband, 2004). The other shirt reminds us that U.S. Independence Day is associated with freedom, but Black Americans were still in bondage at the time. Juneteenth celebrates when the last slaves were freed in American slavery, making it a holiday that reflects Black American freedom (Taylor, 2002). By crossing out July 4th, it visually asserts that Juneteenth should be a significant holiday in American history as it reflects a time enslaved Black Americans gained their freedom from bondage.[44] Artifacts like t-shirts have become ways for activists to visually express their political views in the everyday performance of their identities. Since the Black body is already a site of political contestation, Black activists use the visibility of their bodies to amplify Black political voices and challenge competing ideologies.

The interplay between Black history, American popular culture, and Black activism is used to further the message of the movement through a Black visual public sphere. A Black photographer is captured holding his camera to his eye while wearing a backward facing baseball hat, depicting Marvel's *Black Panther*. The angle of the shot shows the view over his shoulder, allowing viewers to see the subject of his shot, which is a gathering of men, women, and children wearing masks and holding signs. The protesters are blurred in the foreground, making the capped photographer the focus on the image. The logo of the Marvel character appears on his

cap and the silver claw necklace is on the brim with his short afro spilling out of the edges of the hat.

The *Black Panther* hat over the head symbolizes the political thought and cultural inspiration from the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Organization, and the Black Panther fictional narrative on Black artists and activists. Black popular fiction of *Black Panther* creates an imaginary world to reimagine the faith of Black people free from fighting against the limits of racial oppression. *A Black Panther: Nation Under Our Feet* (2017) by cultural critic and writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates's is one significant example. The award-winning novel directly connects the comic book character to the real-life Black Panther organization, creating a fictional world of Black freedom fighters seeking to save Wakanda, a Black high-tech intellectual utopia. In Disney's cinematic version of the Marvel character, *Black Panther* (2018), they bring the story to the big screen and make many associations to the organization as well. Although the film has been critiqued for utilizing glorified fantasies of Africa, Asante and Pindi (2020) points out that the film's political and economic success lies in "its ability to present universal concerns of power, pride, and humanity from global Black perspectives" and provide a "welcome shift from the dominant White gaze" (p. 220). The film builds from the "shared histories among African Americans, diasporic Africans, and continental Africans of the Middle Passage by imagining a transnational Blackness that resists the cultural dislocation, estrangement, and alienation experienced by Black bodies everywhere" (Asante & Pindi, 2020). The Afrofuturistic (re)imagination presents an interconnected past that taps into the pain of the present and hope of the future. Touching on museum politics,

economic injustice, racial discrimination, European colonization, and Black reparations, the movie and comic packs a political punch. For these reasons, Black Panther associations hold cultural significance for Black culture in many forms and continue to symbolize Black pride, resistance, and empowerment against oppression.

Therefore, a visual reference to the Black Panther character within the movement is more than a display of one's favored comic book character. It reflects the strategic interplay between politics and culture by the Black Power Movement that has allowed for an enduring critique of U.S. political culture that lives on in popular culture today. The iconology of strength and empowerment from these symbols represents the need to fight despite of what can feel like unconquerable injustice and barriers. The fierce agency of Black activism continues to fight forward, like the fictional Black Panther and real-life heroes of the past. Sources of hope and racial uplift are important elements of Black activism, particularly because intergenerational racial trauma of the past and present has taken a heavy emotional toll on individuals and communities. Black empowerment helps to provide inspiration in a social context of race-based stress.

Visualizing Black Feelings as Political Resistance

The emotional burden of Black Americans is narrated in common personal stories of Black people's frightening police encounters that generate fear for their safety or loved ones, either experienced firsthand or through their association with others. Worry about police brutality and the emotional burden of racial trauma is an unjust, unfortunate reality of the Black experience in America. Researchers are just beginning to understand the "hidden injuries" endured by Black people from their

experiences as victims or witnesses to police brutality (Graham, et. Al, 2020). According to Graham et. al, (2020), Black people "worry a lot" about police brutality. In fact, Black people report that they worry five times more than Whites, with Hispanics closely following by reporting worry at four times that of White people. The emotional toll associated with police brutality inevitably influences the way Black people live their lives and the ways they raise their children. Black children are frequently socialized to fear and distrust the police from direct messages from parents and caregivers, but also from observing police interactions between other Black people. Popular media has also featured "the talk" many Black parents have with their kids about the police (such as seen in popular TV shows, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Blackish*).[45] References to "the talk" also appear in other media outlets. A video of a Black boy playing basketball in his yard went viral in May 2020 on social media and was picked up on national news, because the child stopped to hide from the police as they drove by (Brito, 2020). Such behavior should not be surprising given that "the talk" often includes instructions to stay safe, which may include proactive avoidance of the police (Graham et. al, 2020). But despite these "talks" on safety instructions, Black Americans know that might not be enough. While these measures are meant to serve as protective measures, they also reveal the emotional labor Black people experience as they worry about police brutality and other issues related to racial justice.

African Americans from various social positions—including athletes, entertainers, politicians, scholars, and everyday citizens—have expressed the emotional distress experienced by Black people due to police brutality and anti-Black

racism. Lebron James, the high-profile Los Angeles Laker basketball player known for his community involvement, is just one of many people using their voice to express the emotional toll of racism in America for Black people. "It's just quite frankly just f---ed up in our community. I know people get tired of hearing me say it. But we are scared as Black people in America. Black men, Black women, Black kids, we are terrified," he said in a news conference (Wise, 2020). His comments followed the shooting of Jake Blake—a Black man shot seven times in the back while walking back to his car containing his three children during a police confrontation in August 2020. James's comments are echoed throughout Black communities as people fear if they or their loved ones will face death during police interaction. The Black Lives Matter movement reflects this concern and the emotions associated with racial tensions in America.

Project #ShootBack captures the range of Black emotions within the Black Lives Matter movement to politicize Black affect in the struggle for social change. The expression of strong emotions is commonly deployed as a rhetorical strategy in social movements to communicate an urgent need for change to citizens and policy makers. Corrigan (2020) describes Black liberation movements of the 1960s as "assemblages of argument and feelings," in which Black activists "negotiated a repertory of emotions to politicize their feelings as rhetorical productions for both supportive and hostile audiences in order to reshape public life against White feelings" (p. xxvi). Similarly, Black Lives Matter emerged out the pain and frustration felt by Black Americans and the desire to end racial oppression. Several scholars have discussed the ways in which Black people are encouraged to suppress

their feeling as a survival strategy (hook, 1995; Cobbs and Grier, 2000). Therefore, public expression of Black feelings is a resistive act in a culture that frequently marginalizes Black emotions. Cobbs and Grier (2000) argue that history of racism has not allowed Black folks to truly feel liberated, which evokes feelings of vulnerability and a range of associated feelings, including rage and hopelessness towards a life of unending oppression. Similarly, Corrigan (2020) argues that Black liberation activism is "steeped in a distinct temporal vulnerability, marking how Black Americans are bound and broke by White power that persistently undermines the production of stable and inclusive identities and institutions" (p. xxvi). This vulnerability continues to shape the feelings accessed, provoked, and deployed in Black Lives Matter as activists seek political change in society.

Black Pain, Worry, and Fear

Pain, worry, and fear are prominent emotions expressed in the images of Black Lives Matter protests featured by Plowden in *Project #ShootBack*. In a 2015 black and white photograph, a young Black man wearing a backwards baseball hat and t-shirt holds up a sign with large handwritten bubble text that reads: "Am I Next? #Justice." The young man is centered in the frame with other Black male protesters surrounding him, all looking in the same direction. Other signs can be seen in the background, including another "Black Lives Matter" sign. The young man has a serious and somewhat solemn facial expression as he looks forward. His face is composed but there is a sense of sadness and pain in his face. We see the hand of one man holding the sign, while the other hand points to the sign to further draw attention to his message. The simple question packs powerful meaning as a question that

resonates with Black people across the nation, because they too have pondered the same question and it is frequently seen at Black Lives Matter protests.

Although worry is a negative emotion that causes distress, discomfort, and fear to individuals and communities, it is also an important emotion to politicalizing Black pain and trauma. As a rhetorical strategy, worry can appeal to the humanity of potential allies and sympathizers. It also can be a source of comfort to other Black citizens as a reminder that they are not alone in their worry and pain. Such imagery is akin to emotional support groups as they gather to share in their grief. Black activists accordingly share their pain and trauma as they seek healing (Scott, 2017; Black Lives Matter, 2021). True healing cannot be achieved without justice, but it can function as a unifying emotion as other activists connect through shared pain as they call for justice.

The use of "#justice" on the sign focuses the young activist's purpose toward seeking justice for those killed by police, deploying the worry and pain of Black Americans towards productive action. The social media strategy of hashtag use is also interconnected with his live enactment of activism. Today's social activists are a generation of savvy social media users who are keenly aware that photos and videos from protest activities are taken and potentially shared across digital platforms. Like generations of civil rights activists before them, they use strategies to add visibility to the movement and their message. Hashtags have been shown to have various functions within contemporary social movements. They guide or frame the interpretation of the movement through their use (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2016). They are used to connect like-minded people in digital spaces, thus increasing a

movement's organizing potential (Sommerfeldt, 2013). Mundt, Ross, and Burnett (2018) also argue that hashtags are used to "scale up" support for expanding and strengthening the Black Lives Matter movement internally. Hashtags have been particularly effective in the Black Lives Matter movement with #BlackLivesMatter being one of the top three most used hashtags on Twitter from 2013 to 2016 (Anderson, 2016). But as this demonstrates, other related hashtags are used by activists in the Black Lives Matter movement, such as #Ferguson which was the number one hashtag in the ten-year history of Twitter in 2016 (Anderson, 2016). For this reason, most people find out about Black Lives Matter protests through social media and word of mouth.

The activist's image with his "Am I Next" sign has been reproduced on social media platforms allowing the physical space and digital space to interact to express an additional layer of symbolic meaning. Plowden shares the image with the protester's chosen hashtag. As a result, the protester ultimately guides in the digital spread of this message by using the hashtag, signaling the interplay between digital and live activism.

Additional text on the sign reflects the worry felt by Black people regardless of other social identities, such as class, profession, neighborhood, or criminal record. In the lower right corner of the sign reads: "Morehouse supports Ferguson." The reference to Morehouse College suggests that he is a college student of the prestigious, historically Black and all male college. College students have historically been a major part of political protests in the United States, such as the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (known as SNCC) during the Civil Rights

Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the young man is visually connected to the tradition of Black student advocacy as representing an institution that produces Black male college graduates, including the legendary civil rights activists, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis. His identity as a Morehouse college student potentially positions him with a socioeconomic advantage through higher education that is still not been easily obtained by all Black Americans. A tradition of educational inequities steeped in racist policies and practices has and continues to limit equal education opportunities for Black youth. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are important to the history of Black liberation in this country, because they initially were only institutions admitting Black students due to segregation and discrimination. But despite his identity as a college student, his Black young male body still reads as "thug," "criminal," and a potential threat through the lens of White supremacy. Class discrimination frequently determines how individuals are treated in society, but for Black people, race and class are inextricably linked. As a result, Blackness is often associated with a lower-class status, functioning to complicate and deepen Black people's experience with discrimination. Furthermore, social class does not eliminate the risk of police brutality for Black people. As Perry (2019) asserts, "police kill middle-class Black children and adults too. Not with the same frequency, but class is no prevention. It is a reduction of the odds at best." The combination of his textual messages, facial expression, and his embodied enactment of activism in the image demonstrates the everyday trauma of fearing death by the police as a Black youth.

Most parents worry about their teen and adult children when they leave the house, but the worry of police brutality is a unique burden to parents of Black and

Brown children. Uploaded in 2015, another image of the collection depicts a crowd of activists gather with signs at a protest rally. Signs dominate the frame, and many can only be partially read, but one large sign is centered in the image. It is a handwritten sign with big, red text on white poster board that reads: "STOP KILLING OUR SONS." The message is clearly directed at the police and structures that support state-sanctioned violence against Black people.

Behind the sign stands a Black man holding an American flag while wearing an American flag bandana tied around his head. Since the Black Lives Matter movement has expanded as an international movement, the flag helps locate the protesters specifically within American politics. The man's positioning makes the American flag appear directly above the dominant, white and red sign. This placement combined with its symbolic meaning, conveys the message, "America, STOP KILLING OUR SONS," as it hangs at the corner of the sign. The wearing of the flag also identifies the Black man as an American. Black people have long fought to have equal status as citizens, while for much of American history they were not fully recognized as citizens with full rights and liberties as White Americans. So, while the flag expresses national identification and patriotic pride, it also serves as a reminder of America's history and the continued need for change in order to create a safe and inclusive American society. The on-going social, emotional, and political injury caused to Black communities due to discrimination in their home country adds to the emotionality felt by Black Americans. For this reason, feelings of love for their country and the pain of racial trauma can create complicated feelings towards notions

of patriotism and belonging. Ultimately, many Black Americans do not feel safe at home, in their own country.

In this same image, other signs surround the larger centered sign. All these signs are orange with printed Black text, and they are much smaller in size than the prominent sign. Many of the signs are repeated with the same messages. Similarly, messages convey the burden on Black parents, elders, and community members looking after younger generations, such as "Protect & Defend our Youth against POLICE Brutality" and "Justice for Michael Brown, Jr." The first of the two messages turn the attention towards members of the community, directing them to "protect" and "defend." These are activities generally associated with the role of caregivers and parents, but in this case Black youth must be protected and defended against the racist state. The second sign uses the abbreviation for junior when referring to Michael Brown. The use of the suffix reminds you that he is someone's son, since the suffix directly connects him to an elder with the same name. Junior is also often used to distinguish the age or experience difference between individuals. Michael Brown was 18 years old, just barely out of high school, so the messages help to emphasize his youth and mourn another Black youth's life being cut short. The activists express the worry felt by themselves and fellow community members in caring for and loving Black youth, while urging the community to act by demanding change.

In an image uploaded in 2020, a Black woman holds a sign with the words "I SHOULD NOT BE AFRAID" in the middle of a protest rally. The message is written with red paint in all capital letters on White poster board. The paint of the letters

slightly drips and additional red paint is splatted on the sign, mimicking blood. Given the context and her wording, the red color communicates danger, violence, and the blood of Black lives lost. The words express that the fear she feels should not be normalized, yet it is an aspect of the political environment that many Black people cannot escape. The poster board is missing a piece from the bottom corner and it has worn edges, perhaps because it was repurposed from something else. It gives the appearance that the sign was made quickly with the available materials she had. These features of the sign add a sense of authenticity and urgency to her message. She holds the sign at chest level with her head bowed and eyes closed. Her forehead slightly wrinkles as she appears to be deep in thought, meditation, or prayer. She is surrounded by other protesters and some are wearing face masks, which date the protest during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Most people are facing a focal point out of the frame and some have their camera phones out recording the scene. No other signs appear in the image, making her sign the central message. The dark clothing of protesters, the shadowed faces of some, and the shady trees in the background further highlight the sign. The combination of the striking red and White colors and the emotionality in her face convey strong emotional meaning about the fear in Black communities. Such images function to center Black emotions as a rally cry for action.

Black Joy as Empowerment

Despite the grave reality of anti-Black violence, Black rhetorical expression in the collection of Black Lives Matter protests are not all negative emotions. Black rhetorical expression has always expressed joy against the devastation of racial oppression. Black joy is political resistance as it functions as self-care and offers a

respite from the heaviness of our political climate. “Happy, singing slaves” were often interpreted by Whites as evidence of Black contentment, when it was merely a survival strategy (Blue and Naden, 2001). Audre Lorde (1988/2017) is often quoted for her powerful assessment of survival: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgent, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 130). Black joy functions to express and cultivate Black cultural pride and highlight Black perseverance despite sociopolitical barriers. For example, Lu and Steele (2019) argue that Black social media users use platforms, such as Twitter and Vine, to express and foster joy as an extension of Black oral traditions to challenge dominant narratives that demean and dehumanize Black people. Black visual images in social media are also part of this cultural tradition of storytelling to counter and resist the dominant negative and narrow messages about Blackness in society. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. (2020) affirms these strategies on their website in a message that reads: “By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives” (para. 1). Therefore, both Black pain and Black joy coexist in the movement to collectively resist anti-Black violence.

In the collection, a 2020 photograph shows three Black youth leading the front of a protest march to a meeting point of a rally, while holding a large sign centered in front of them that says: “My Black has a purpose. #BlackLivesMatter.” Two of the youths smile joyfully while looking towards different directions of the scene. The third youth has her facemask pulled down under her chin and she appears to have a pleasant expression, but she also appears to be talking or closing her mouth from a

smile. Behind the youth is a group of adult activists with other political signs, such as "Make it make sense," "Still not equal??," "Liberty," and "Enough." A couple people can be seen in front of the group taking pictures with cellphones, documenting the event. Many people in the image are wearing facemasks, which further highlights the visible smiles of the youth.

Unlike other emotional protest images of sadness and pain, the youth convey a sense of pride and cheerfulness as they use the protest as an opportunity to celebrate collective Black value and the tradition of activism. The words on their sign connect to their emotional expression. They reference the purposeful way they use their Blackness to assert their political views. Black joy does not mask Black pain but operates to find moments of self-love and appreciation of Black agency. Therefore, they use their message and their bodies to express an image of collective determination. As a result, the joyful Black young activists engage in an embodied performance of activism to challenge anti-Black narratives that portray Black youth negatively.

At times, rage coexists with hope and joy in Black activist discourse. A black and white image taken by Plowden in February 2015 voices the anger and the hostility felt towards police officers in Black communities. In the image, a large group of activists gather at Atlanta's CNN building to protest the death of Michael Brown. Protesters surrounding two glass doors, windows, and a large CNN logo outside of the building. Two police vehicles are parked in the mists of the protesters. In the lower center of the image appears a large fabric sign that appears to be over six feet tall based on its proportion to protestors. Strong, blunt language is printed across

the fabric with the words “FUCK THE POLICE.” Protesters create space around the sign, allowing it to be easily read from above or at street level. The angle of the image allows an aerial view of the scene. Next to the sign are two men wearing t-shirts that have words on the back that read: “I’m just young and Black.” The shirt presumably connects the issue of police brutality to their identities as young Black people. Other activists are wearing the same shirt throughout the group. The repetition of the shirt’s wording on multiple Black bodies emphasizes the message that Black people are targeted by police, because of their identity. The strong but concise message of the sign matches the elevated sense of anger felt in the movement.

However, the image conveys much more than rage and frustration. Below the sign, gather a group of four Black activists. One is smiling at her peer as she wears a graduation hat and tassel. A woman next to her expresses joy with a cheerful smile. The other two face the gleeful women with their backs to the camera. Other activists can be seen taking photographs on their camera phones, engaging in conversations, and socializing with fellow activists. In many ways, the crowd could be a scene from a street fair, campus lawn, or community barbeque. Therefore, despite the hostile words towards the police, the scene does not appear particularly mournful or angry. Activists gather in collective unity and the facial expressions of some display joy, support, and comfort through their collective action. “F--k the Police” is thus a rallying cry to Black people to survive and thrive against a system designed to oppress their collective identities. Like Black activists of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Black Lives Matter activists must negotiate a range of emotions to deploy their political strategies. As explained by Corrigan (2020), “Black activists [of the 1960s]

wrote and spoke about the complex web of feelings they were negotiating during the civil rights era, and their discourses are alive with feelings that often seem opposed but are, in reality, fused together for survival." The same can be seen in contemporary Black activism with both Black joy and Black pain being prominently displayed in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Visualizing Inclusive, Intersectional Activism in Black Lives Matter

Through the emotional support of collective activism, Black people can gain a sense of hope and empowerment as they work for change with other activists with a common purpose. However, social movements also have a history of alienating and marginalizing the people they seek to help. For example, Black liberation movements of the past have been scrutinized for pushing Black women to the margins by limiting their roles and silencing their voice (Barnett, 1993). Consequently, historical Black women leaders have not received the same level of recognition as Black male leaders in Black liberation movements (Lombardo, 2019). White feminist movements of the past and present have also been heavily criticized for ignoring issues of race (Kendall, 2021). For this reason, many Black women feel disconnected and unheard in these feminist movements, which hurts opportunities for coalition building and limits the ways Black women benefit from feminist organizing (Kendall, 2021). Similarly, Black women and Black folks within the LGBTQ+ community continue to experience compounding intersectional oppression based on their social identities, including exclusion and invisibility in contemporary Black liberation efforts. Black people's experience with police violence is uniquely informed by class, race, nation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, disability, poverty, mental health, and

sexual orientation. Therefore, a more intersectional approach to racial justice would allow activists to more fully grapple with the complexities of racial trauma experienced by Black people. *Project #ShootBack* reveals the strategies used towards this aim.

Centering Black women's leadership helps visualize a movement informed and built by Black women. Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, is shown speaking at a small community center in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. In the image, Cullors is gesturing with her hands out in the center of the room, delivering a passionate message to an attentive racially diverse audience of adults sitting and standing around her. The room is full of people, a basketball hoop hangs above, and the light shines in from the right. In the dim light, her orange shirt and colorful skirt helps the viewer notice her centered image. She almost blends in within the crowd, which helps to convey the movements more decentralized leadership style. The circular arrangement around Cullors reflects the inclusive aim of the movement to include many voices of people willing to work for the cause. Instead of a close-up of the prominent activist, the image captures local activists, the backbone of the movement, coming together. The intimate setting also shows the movement's continued grassroots efforts. Ordinary meetings of political organizing are often not depicted in U.S. visual culture, because they may seem mundane or unprovocative. However, it is in those moments that activists plan and strategize the important work of the movement.

Plowden expresses frustration over the media's portrayal of Ferguson activists in his collection. In the caption of gathered activists, he describes the work of activists

to include canvassing neighborhoods, talking to politicians, registering voters, and organizing social activities (e.g., block parties) to relieve stress for residents and visitors, but he feels this work is overlooked. Plowden says, “I don’t feel like the media showed the true representations of Ferguson, it was far beyond the scope of what I saw on television.” He went on to say the group was an “impressive” and “persistent force.” He notes that “even though there was noticeable tension in the city, the people were doing everything they could to make it better.” As a young activist, the lack of attention to the significant work being done by local activists was surprising and disappointing to him. Nevertheless, the image functions to counter negative and simplistic narratives that reduced Ferguson activism to violence and looting.

In *Project #ShootBack,* images of Aurielle “Elle” Lucier, a young poet and activist, highlight the next generation of activists stepping up to lead the Ferguson community in a time of need. Several images captured in 2014 feature her leading marches and speaking to crowds. In one image, she stands in front of a large protest rally. She looks onward with her sandals in her hand, signaling tired feet from a long journey. She is wet from a sudden storm, but despite the weather, she and fellow activists marched on. A large gold elephant necklace hangs around her neck, contrasting the darkness of her clothing and resulting in a slight glow effect as it centers her body and the frame. Elephants are symbolic for their strength and great memory, which adds further meaning to the image and reflects the two of the themes seen throughout the collection. She looks forward like she is peering at something slightly out of frame or just deep in thought with her raised fist slightly above her

shoulder. In Plowden's post of her image, he credits her for single-handedly organizing 6,000 activists through one social media post about the event. Since this event, Lucier has co-founded a grassroots community-led political action coalition and has received several rewards for her activism and poetry on social justice. Images like those of Cullors and Lucier in collection visualize Black women's leadership at both the national and local level within the movement.

Building on the tradition of Black women's civil rights advocacy of those before them, Black women leaders disrupt the historical pattern of male-centered leadership to fight for the rights and freedoms of all Black people. The imagery of Black women leaders combined with the strong presence of Black women and girls throughout the series to show the strength and prevalence of women in the movement. From little toddlers to the elderly, Black women demonstrate the fierce tradition of Black female involvement in civil rights advocacy that continues in the present.

The Black Lives Matter movement has been instrumental in bringing this awareness to police brutality, but critical scholars and activists have noted that Black women's experiences of police brutality are still largely invisible in conversations about police violence. Drawing on Black women's personal stories and research, Ritchie (2017) demonstrates that Black women's experiences with police brutality and mass incarceration take many forms, including violence short of fatal force. Despite the similar experiences with police violence, their names are largely unknown in the public. For example, video evidence of Alesia Thomas, a 35-year-old mother of two, shows her bound together by her ankles and hands and then kicked in her genitals by officers (Dillon, 2012). Ritchie (2017) compares Alesia Thomas to Freddy

Gray, a Black man beaten to death by police in 2015 in Baltimore. Like Freddie Gray, Alesia Thomas also died due to the injuries from her beating in 2012. Just weeks before Gray's death, Mya Hall, a Black trans woman was shot to death by police after making a wrong turn onto a National Security Agency property near Baltimore. While Freddie Gray's death did result in national uproar, the deaths of Alesia Thomas and Mya Hall received little attention.

Although there is still much to be done to address the intersectional injustices of Black people, *Project #Shootback* attempts to construct a visual history of inclusion that is more reflective of the intersectional identities within the Black community than Black liberation movements of the past. On the Black Lives Matter website, Garza (2020) says, "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements." Supporting this message of the movement, the collection also calls attention to the marginalized populations of Black people.

The political work of Black Lives Matter has spurred more focused campaigns on marginalized segments of the Black population, such as Say Her Name, a campaign focused on Black women and police brutality, and Black Trans Lives Matter, a campaign attending to violence against the Black trans community. These supporting campaigns and hashtags are visible within the collection. However, Black political activism does not necessarily just fit into one campaign as many efforts work in coalition with each other. For example, a 2020 image in the collection of a White

mother and her teens reflect the various campaigns working to broaden the attention to victims of police brutality. Their signs read, “Stop Killing Black Folx,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “Justice for George Floyd, Laveta Jackson, Erica Collins…” and many others with the hashtags #Blacklivesmatter #saytheirnames. Together the signs locate their activism with the Black Lives Matter movement, while using “folx” to assert the inclusion non-binary genders as well. The mention of numerous women on the sign expands the focus beyond the more high-profile cases of Black male victims to include Black women often overlooked in mainstream media.

Another example of Black intersectional activism is seen through the embodied performance of Mickey Bradford, an Atlanta-based activist who identifies as a Black bi non-binary femme. The image, uploaded in 2015, shows Bradford delivering a speech to a large, predominantly Black audience in the center of a downtown Atlanta street during a halted Martin Luther King Jr. parade. A few fists are raised in the air communicating support, and a large sign appears in the audience that reads, “Black women get killed by the police too.” Their non-binary body is centered in the image with their back to the frame, making their broad shoulders dominate the space at the bottom of the image. Their neck is decorated with a silver chain that dangles downward. Their head centers the image with their high-top short haircut. Bradford’s image is surrounded by the attentive audience looking towards them. Plowden describes “a stern mixed approval of elders” as Bradford delivers a “powerful” message that calls for the inclusion of queer people in the movement to recognize that “all Black lives matter.” The addition of the word “all” to the social

movement's rallying-call is used by some activists to highlight that death and violence towards Black trans and non-binary people is often overlooked.

The hashtags "#translivesmatter" and "#allBlacklivesmatter" are added to the image's caption to further reiterate the need to protect and defend all Black people, including transgender people. The image gives visibility to the LGBTQ+ community and reflects a movement working towards inclusion, while recognizing the continued discrimination faced by Black queer folks from members of the Black community, from law enforcement, and from society at-large. Although the caption does not specifically mention Black women, Bradford's non-binary identity and the visual presence of a sign saying, "Black women are killed by police too" in the background work to advance a visual argument for visibility and attention to victims beyond Black cis gender men to include all genders.

The setting of the interrupted MLK Day parade also functions to visualize the disruption to politics of the past and present. Bradford and fellow activists expressed frustration over the commercialization and pacification of Dr. King's memory and politics. Therefore, temporarily halting a celebration of Dr. King's legacy and the Modern Civil Rights Movement to address Black marginalized populations within the Black liberation efforts allows for reflection on what needs to change. The viewer is visually "behind" Bradford, communicating symbolic support to the speaker's message. Bradford's alias is used in the image description and their face is not shown. In this sense, Bradford stands in for trans and nonbinary activists attempting to intervene in troubling politics of the past that excluded members of the Black community.

Drawing from the messages of the movement, the collection imagines a contemporary Black liberation movement of inclusion, allyship, and intersectional activism to encourage solidarity across identity markers. On the Black Lives Matter website (2021), organizers state:

> **We are expansive**. We are a collective of liberators who believe in an inclusive and spacious movement. We also believe that in order to win and bring as many people as possible with us along the way, we must move beyond the narrow nationalism that is all too prevalent in Black communities. We must ensure we are building a movement that brings all of us to the front. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation. (Emphasis in the original)

Representation of diverse identities invite a wider audience to envision their place in the movement. Messages acknowledge social privileges based on social identities, but they also recognize privileges can be used as resources for community good. For example, a person holds a sign in the air at a protest that reads, "Using my privilege to support your rights," while wearing a hospital mask with "#BLM" written on it with a magic marker. While recognizing not everyone has the same privileges due to social identities, the sign communicates how allies are formed by using social advantages to advocate for the rights of all people.

All people are thus invited to see their role in the movement. A close-up image of a White-passing man at a crowded protest in 2017 expresses pain and distress as he holds up a sign that says, "Stop Killing Our Friends." In one sense, he is speaking for people who are losing their loved ones to police violence. However, in a

general sense, his sign connects communities across identities by simply labeling victims as “friends.” Black victims of police violence are heavily scrutinized by law enforcement to justify their death, often perpetuating controlling narratives rooted in White supremist ideology. “Friends” relabels the narrative of the “thug” often perpetuated in public discourse to re-interpret victims as valued people of the community. Those who experience police brutality are automatically assumed to have been engaging in illegal activity. Notions of respectability politics frequently emerge in discussions of victims, which in short implies that “respectable” and “well-behaved” Black folks do not experience police brutality. This notion undermines the role race and racism continue to play in policing practices across the nation. The simple sign functions to resist a damaging narrative about Black worth and personhood.

By visually constructing victims as our “sons” and “friends,” we are reminded that we and our loved ones could experience police brutality one day (again). Activists in the movement advocate for “Black lives,” but as the organizers have emphasized, structural oppression is interconnected. Racial justice for Black people is a gain for all people of color, and it works to dismantle other connecting forms of oppression like patriarchy. The movement’s visual and textual rhetoric visualizes various demographics working for justice across age, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In doing so, the images offer a glimpse of hope during a period of heightened political tensions in U.S. history as diverse communities unite in solidarity to protest for social justice.

Conclusion and Implications

Black art continues to be an integral part of Black liberation movements. Traditionally, social movement rhetoric largely focused on speeches of leaders in a movement. To understand how messages of social movements are crafted and circulated in our contemporary era, scholarship must continue to expand our scope of social movement rhetoric to explore the diverse modes and mediums deployed by activists. Adapting to contemporary technologies, political art today circulates through digital spaces, often with hashtags connecting them to a movement of activists and allies. Images remain a powerful tool for social justice activism in the 21st century to organize movement efforts, counter oppositional messages, and visualize movement arguments. Non-traditional art spaces, such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram, are now common places for the public to gain exposure to political photography created by grassroot artist-activists. Iconic Civil Rights Movement photography of the past was often taken by hired or freelance photojournalists, whereas Black Lives Matter artist-activists of varying experience and skill hit the streets to share diverse perspectives of the movement (for example, see the websites and social media pages of Amir Aziz, Asha Belk, Dee Dwyer, Alexis Hunley, Joshua Rashaad McFadden, Tony Mobley, Nora Williams, and many others). The prevalence of political street photographers in the contemporary fights for racial justice allows for more voices to challenge and affirm messages related to Black Lives Matter.

Project #ShootBack is an example of an artist-activist response to the shooting death of Black people in America. The collection engages collective memory, cultural

trauma, and Black emotions to visualize the arguments within the movement. Visual parallels between the past and present articulate arguments about on-going racial oppression and invite the audience to see the need to act. Rooted in the legacy of Black activism, the political force of Black Lives Matter images like those of this collection encourage multi-generations of activists to continue the fight for justice. By visualizing themes of resistance, pride, inclusion, and unity, activists of all demographics are invited to see their place in the movement as they unite in the struggle for Black liberation.

Conclusion: Continuing the Legacy of Black Political Photography

Williams, Weems, and Plowden continue the legacy of Black political activism through art. By doing so, they give insight into the social climate of our time and create a visual history of Black political activism for the present and future. Like activist-artists before them, they are keenly aware of the power of visual imagery to contribute to social change. Some of their messages are seemingly designed to help Black audiences collectively grieve through shared memories, while other messages work to galvanize Black folks and their allies. Regardless of the audience, the political force of their images helps to increase awareness and advocate for change across diverse populations by visualizing collective Black trauma and Black activism. Each series also problematizes cultural memories surrounding conceptions of race and its connection to contemporary discourses about the Black body. The artists not only strongly assert that a continued problem exists with race in the United States, but they also explore racial injustices of the past as causes of continued racism in the present. To this aim, these artists demonstrate multiple strategies of resistance and empowerment as a means to expose racial injustice, to critique historical and contemporary systems of oppression, and to raise consciousness as a means of inspiring a real racial reckoning.

In their collective work, the artists use the symbolism of the Black body to remember racial trauma and visualize Black agency. Racial trauma is re-visualized as a means to acknowledge centuries of Black suffering and the need to take action now. The way that racial trauma is portrayed is varied, but it is not presented through

gruesome images of violence. Instead, the images visualize trauma by showing evidence of violence, pain, and exploitation inflicted on the Black body.

In Williams's work, she turns to the trauma of scientific racism—its past and present. By looking at her Black body positioned and photographed in similar ways as Black people of the past, she reminds viewers of the voyeuristic violence inflicted on Black bodies as they stood for drawings and photographs. Her series engages this memory to re-remember how Black corporality was used to make disturbing racial claims that linger in our culture today. Although Williams's body is displayed like a scientific specimen, she is guiding the meaning-making process by using her body to critique this history and its legacy. Therefore, her body is used to reclaim meanings of the Black body, while calling attention to these oppressive and violent acts. Her body represents power and pushes back against systems that demean Black bodies. As Williams demonstrates throughout her series, the way Black bodies are objectified, stereotyped, and exploited in scientific racism still resonates today.

Weems looks at numerous images over time to emphasize the magnitude of racist portrayals of the Black body. She uses her voice to re-interpret archival images of Black people to intervene in the circulation of images that minimize Black suffering. Rather than using her own body like Williams, Weems re-appropriates the images of the past to challenge the original purposes of these images and ideologies they supported. In doing so, she critiques the politics of sight by shedding light on how the same images can be interpreted differently across time due to the subjectivity of the viewers' gaze. The white gaze influenced the interpretation of the images when they were originally photographed and can continue to shape contemporary

renderings. While changing social and political perspectives do influence our interpretation of the past, it is easy to overlook deep ideological messages without consciously engaging the historical context and political intentions behind the original image. Therefore, similar to Williams's *How to Read Character,* Weems *From Here* pushes viewers to consider how the white gaze has been used to subjugate Black people over time.

As a series of archival images, *From Here* does not depict images of present day, which creates historical distance between the images and more recent history. However, viewers are called to bear witness to Black trauma as both a past and present issue that must be addressed and stopped through political activism. The last image, situated right before the Mangbetu woman, ends with a group of Black people and a reference to the biblical story of Daniel. This biblical reference gestures to the ways Black people look for hope, including praying and wishing for deliverance. But this reference also compares Black people's trauma to the undeserving trauma and torture of the biblical character in this story. By ending the series with images of Black people in pain and still seeking deliverance from suffering, the religious reference frames racial trauma as an on-going issue that has yet to be resolved.

Similarly, Plowden engages memories of Black political activism in response to racial trauma. But instead of using archival images like Weems, Plowden stylizes some of his photography to look like archival images. In doing so, Plowden uses visual parallels to depict similarities between past and present oppression. In his images, ghosts of the past continue to haunt everyday forms of racial injustice, but Plowden also captures the fierce spirit of Black activists and allies working together

for political and social change. Plowden draws from the iconology of past Black liberation movements to visually link generations of Black activists in a united struggle.

All of the artists use color to add dimensions of meaning to their work. Both Williams and Plowden use color to reference time. Williams's images are all Black and white to mimic the appearance of early scientific documents. The aged appearance of her self-portraits helps to visually link her contemporary image to past racial traumas. Plowden's images are Black and white, particularly those that attempt to blur the sense of time. Color is often used on images of women leaders and children, which subtly visualizes present and future leadership. Since Weems uses archival images, her images were originally Black and white. She tints the images in the series to add another level of emotional meaning to the series. Red emphasizes the pain associated with Black representation throughout history, while blue is used to convey the sadness associated with bearing witness to Black pain.

Black political artists politicize Black emotions in different ways to express the need for change. Williams attempts to imitate the emotionless illustrations she compares in her series, *How to Read Character*. Since emotional expression is a way humans connect and empathize with one another, the lack of emotion in early scientific drawings help to depict Black people as less than human. The focus on Williams's body rather than her emotionality functions to identify how Black people have been otherized. However, in her front-facing self-portrait, Williams uses her stare to convey Black agency by "looking back" at viewers and challenging the systems of oppression that undermined Black people's humanity. Here she departs

from the docile stare or the downward gaze commonly shown in early scientific renderings. By staring back, she reminds viewers of her personhood and implicates them within oppressive voyeuristic viewing of the Black body.

Weems takes a different approach from Williams. In *From Here*, grief is emphasized through the title and overall narrative of her series. The series encourages the audience to feel the sadness of the witness as they take in Black trauma. Through shared sadness, the series demands social change to stop lingering forms of Black suffering.

Plowden explores a wider range of emotions in his images of contemporary Black activism. Through the facial expressions of protesters and the signs they carry, the series visualizes Black anger, pain, fear, and at times, joy. Each emotion is conveyed slightly differently as it captures the range of personalized responses to Black trauma. Anger is depicted in the faces of frustrated protestors chanting and marching. Pain is visualized in the eyes of protesters pleading for an end to the suffering. Fear is seen in the eyes of protestors wondering if they will be the next victim. Yet joy is present in the collective work and unity of Black people and allies coming together to support each other and fight on for social justice. The signs of the protesters reinforce this diversity of emotions as people take to the streets in search of justice against police violence.

The use of excessive force by the police remains a salient issue in current Black liberation efforts, including the work of activist-artists seeking accountability for such brutality. Activist-artists use paintings, murals, and photography to humanize and memorialize the victims of police violence and to demand justice from local and

national officials. Artwork of Breonna Taylor is an example of current political art addressing police brutality.

Remembering Breonna Taylor

The murder of Breonna Taylor by the Louisville, Kentucky police department captured the attention of activist-artists across the globe (Setty, 2020; Pogrebin, 2020).[46] For months after her murder, 26-year-old Taylor received little media attention and her family struggled to find answers after she became a victim of a "botched" police raid at the home she shared with her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker (Booker, 2021). On the night of her murder, officers pounded on Walker and Taylor's apartment door with a battering ram after midnight. The couple, awakened by the commotion, did not get a response when they yelled out for the people outside their door to identify themselves (Levenson, 2020). Assuming he was being robbed, Kenneth Walker grabbed his gun. As the police forced entry into the apartment, Walker fired one warning shot at who he believed were intruders entering his home. The police in turn "blindly fired" 32 rounds into the home in response, according to official reports from the incident (Oppel, Taylor, & Bogel-Burroughs, 2021). Walker was not injured, but Taylor was hit multiple times (Costello & Duvall, 2021). Walker immediately called the police, since he did not know the shooters were officers until he went outside (Albert, 2020). Taylor laid bleeding to death in the hallway of her apartment well into the morning, while Walker was arrested for attempted murder.

Breonna Taylor's murder highlights how race puts Black people at increased risk for police violence due to racist police and judicial practices. "No-knock warrants," like the one used in this case, do not require police officers to announce

their presence.[47] This type of warrant disproportionally targets Black people (Mencarini, Costello, & Duvall, 2020). In a report released to the public, 86% of "no-knock warrants" in Louisville were issued to Black people. And in some instances, people listed on a warrant may not be accused of a crime, but are contacted because they could know or have known the suspect in the past. False information supplied to the court about drug packages being mailed to her home and her former association with one of the suspects was used to justify the warrant for Breonna Taylor and the search of her home (Costello, 2020; Riley, Green, & Ragsdale, 2020). There are numerous examples of suspects and bystanders being injured and killed during the use of these associational warrants (e.g. see Brumback, 2021; Linly, 2021; and Ockerman, 2021). Although there have been no criminal charges for her death, no-knock warrants have been banned in Louisville, Kentucky in Taylor's honor (Duvall, 2021).

The visibility of Breonna Taylor's killing and the circumstances surrounding this case have received national attention through the work of Taylor's family and other Black Live Matter activists, including the #SayHerName campaign. Visual imagery serves as an important element of activism on behalf of Breonna Taylor's murder.[48] In particular, the artwork of Breonna Taylor featured in a special issue of *Vanity Fair* represents an example of such visual activism. The issue, edited by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is entitled *The Great Fire.* Amy Sherald's painting of Taylor is featured on the cover and portrays Taylor as beautiful and angelic, wearing a teal flowing dress. Sherald is a celebrated Black American painter, becoming the first Black painter commissioned to paint a presidential portrait when she was selected to

paint Michelle Obama's official portrait as first lady. Inside the *Vanity Fair* issue, LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographic exposé, entitled, "A Beautiful Life," captures portraits of Breonna Taylor's family and boyfriend. The portraits accompany a first-person narrative by Breonna Taylor's mom (Tamika Palmer), who recalls being asked if she knew anyone who wanted to harm her daughter on the night of her killing, only to find out on the news that her daughter was killed by the Louisville police (Coates, 2020). Frazier makes clear in the story that her photography of Taylor's life and memory is "a call for justice" and an effort to humanize and mourn the loss of another Black life at the hands of law enforcement (Frazier, 2020).

Frazier honors Taylor by photographing her loved ones and she uses Taylor's memory to demand legal consequences for her murder. Frazier (2020) says, "I can't stop thinking about Breonna Taylor, her murder and unjust criminalization made me so upset that I risked my life and broke quarantine, knowing I am highly susceptible to COVID-19 due to having Lupus, an autoimmune disorder (para.1)." For Frazier, it was deeply important to reclaim images of Breonna Taylor through "humane dignified representations of Breonna and her family members" (para. 1).

Frazier's photography creates a visual history of Breonna Taylor to counter offensive and negative representations of her character as a young Black woman. Black political art is particularly concerned with interrogating current constructions of racial identity and undermining historical representations of racial and cultural difference (Thames & Hudson, 2002). As discussed in the analysis of *How to Read Character* by Carla Williams (Chapter One) and Myra Greene's *Character Recognition* (Introduction), the character of Black people is frequently defined

through their identity of Blackness and their often-false association with crime. Breonna Taylor was no different. In initial media reports, Taylor and Walker were implicated as drug dealers, and Breonna was described as a victim of a "drug raid," suggesting her crimes led to her death (Coates, 2020). Media and police framing of the event also labelled Walker as a criminal shooting at the police, rather than a licensed gun owner using his right for self-defense of unknown intruders (Siese, 2020). Neither Taylor nor Walker were criminals and the main suspect on the warrant was likely in custody at the time of the raid. Walker has since been permanently cleared of all charges (Mencarini, Costello, & Duvall, 2020; Costello & Duvall, 2021).

In an attempt to humanize Breonna Taylor's image, Frazier visualizes her as a caring community servant and loving family member deserving of justice. In one image, Tamika Palmer is pictured with Taylor's Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) jacket wrapped around her shoulders. On her website, which includes these images from the article, Frazier (2020) describes Breonna Taylor as "a hero, an essential worker" and "an aspiring nurse" who deserves justice. In emphasizing the value of Taylor's life, Frazier draws on public sentiment for health care workers during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to visualize Breonna Taylor as an upstanding and hardworking citizen. As Frazier (2020) puts it, "If you look up the very definition of characteristics and attributes of an EMT worker or a nurse, it provides the proof and evidence of Breonna's character" (para. 1). In this case, Frazier draws from valorized symbols and associations within American culture to

define Breonna Taylor's character more positively. Her identity becomes partially shaped through her profession to contrast earlier associations of her as a criminal.

In representing Taylor's character, Frazier asserts her inherent value and challenges assumptions that too often blame the victim. Smiley and Fakunle (2016) argue that the police often exploit "victims' criminal records, physical appearances, or misperceived attributes . . . to justify their unlawful deaths" (p. 350). The loved ones of victims are faced with the task of defending the character and dignity of the deceased. Activist-artists help to speak for the voiceless by intervening in their representations. Willis (2021) theorizes that photographs and words function as a testimony that reflect people's character. Similarly, images of Taylor's memory serve as testimony for her character by representing her family bonds, her community contributions, and her promise-filled life.

In expressing Taylor's personhood, Frazier reinforces the aims of political art to subvert unequal power structures. Kingston (2021) contends that such structures create "hierarchies of personhood," which perpetuate inequalities that render some people more "worthy" than others for legal protections (p.5). In response to such injustice, Willis (2021) conceptualizes Black political photography as a form of activism that undermines existing hierarchies and that denies Black people full personhood. Photographs traditionally were a luxury, which demonstrated one's importance and status (Willis, 2021). Although photography is now accessible to the majority of the public across social classes, the process of representing Breonna Taylor through published photographs taken by a professional photographer serves to emphasize her personal and social importance.[49] The images remind viewers that

Breonna Taylor's life and memory matter. Her family's pain and loss matter. And by extension, Black lives matter.

Within the same image, Breonna Taylor's loved ones, including her sister, cousin, aunt, and friends, surround Palmer in the image as they all gather in front of a large mural of Breonna Taylor's face.[50] Both the jacket and mural of Taylor allows her to be present in the image. Palmer appears comforted by the presence of Taylor's jacket, Taylor's image in the mural, and the embrace of the young women around her. The embracing women demonstrate their strength as they support each other through grief and trauma and work collectively for change. As Frazier (2020) explains, she hopes the image reflects "the unwavering steadfast endurance of Black women in America regardless of the persecution we face on a daily basis."

Other loved ones surround the women in Taylor's family with three signs defining the type of justice they want to see for her death. Each sign names a law enforcement member involved in the shooting with a checklist that reads: Fire, Arrest, Convict. "Fire" is checked off of Detective Brett Hankison's checklist, indicating that he has been terminated from his position, but he has yet to face criminal consequences. Officer Jonathan Mattingly's and Officer Myles Cosgrove's names appear on each of the other signs with none of the action items checked off. The signs help to call for action given the inaction in bringing the offices to justice for Taylor's murder. Since this image was taken, Cosgrove has been fired and Mattingly retired, but no one has been charged with crimes in Taylor's shooting. One of Taylor's friend's wears a face mask in the photograph with the words, "Black Lives Matter." The mask functions to date Taylor's murder during the COVID-19 pandemic and

locate activism for Breonna Taylor within the larger movement of Black Lives Matter. Overall, the photograph engages her memory and visualizes collective action for those in the BLM movement seeking justice on behalf of Taylor.

Another image from "A Beautiful Life" visualizes Black political agency and demonstrates Black collective activism in the face of trauma. Six members of Breonna Taylor's family stand at her grave, surrounded by signs and flowers. The signs read, "Enough," "Defend Black Life," "Say Her Name," and "Arrest Breonna's Killers." All of her family in the photo, including two children, stare into the camera. Their faces are a mixture of sadness and determination to seek justice for their loved one. Their direct stares implicate viewers in their demands, encouraging them to act. Similar to the way images of exploited slaves in *From Here* stare back in resistance and fearful protestors in Project #Shootback plead through their stares, images of Taylor's grieving family looking into the frame help viewers connect emotionally to her senseless death and recognize the need to right the wrongs committed against her. In doing so, the image demonstrates the family's political agency in fighting a system that excuses police brutality and devalues the life of Black people.

By visualizing the family's love for Breonna Taylor, Black love is used to make real the trauma inflicted on Black communities through racist police violence. In another photograph, Ju'Niyah Palmer, Breonna Taylor's sister, wraps her arm around her mom as they both look into the camera while standing in front of Breonna Taylor's apartment. Tamika Palmer is wearing a shirt that reads, "Justice4Bree," with a heart and angel wings accompanying the call for action. Referring to Taylor as Bree creates a sense of intimacy and connection to visualize her as an individual, rather

than another statistic on the news. The heart reflects the love for Taylor and the loving person she is represented to be by her family and community. Angel wings are frequently used to remember the departed, but the angelic reference also helps to shape Taylor's character as a caring and innocent person.

Other images portray the love between Kenneth Walker and Breonna Taylor to challenge negative assumptions about their love and commitment as a Black couple. Frazier (2020) says, "the way the LMPD portrayed her loving boyfriend and fiancé Kenneth Walker was inexcusable. These portraits serve to restore Kenneth's humanity and to honor his love for Breonna, as he was about to propose to her." To reflect their commitment and plans for the future, one image shows Kenneth Walker gripping the ring he bought for Taylor in his fingers as he leans over the hood of his car. In another image, Kenneth Walker stands in the door of his car as he looks solemnly into the camera. The hashtag, #BREEWAY, appears in capitalize letters at the top of his front window. The hashtag is one of many used to circulate Taylor's story and to call for justice. Her death ended the hopes he had to make Taylor his wife, but these enduring images reveal that his love persists and motivates the pursuit of justice.

While images of love are common in U.S. visual culture, Black love is not frequently depicted and prevailing sexual stereotypes of Black people often diminish their commitment to one another (Stewart, 2020). The broader representations of Black men and women shape demeaning cultural assumptions about their roles in relationships. Cooper and McCoy (2009) note that U.S. mass media, scholarly research, and public policy often pathologize Black mothers. In many ways, women

are characterized as un-feminine, defiant, and emasculating, translating into not being as “soft” and loving as white mothers and partners. And because Black men are characterized as lazy, aggressive, and hypersexual (Belle, 2018), they are often portrayed as incompatible with traditional family life (hooks, 2004). Stewart (2020) argues that Black love is undermined by 400 years of American laws and policies, including racial slavery, persistent poverty, racist hiring practices, and mass incarceration. Such laws and policies have impacted Black families’ and couples’ ability to remain a unit. For this reason, the Black Live Matter movement includes campaigns around Black love to center love and connection in Black communities.[51] For many, publicly displaying Black romantic and familial love is a political act as it counters negatives stereotypes about families and celebrates the enduring love between Black people in the face of oppression. Collectively, the images of Breonna Taylor’s mother, boyfriend, and other loved ones emphasize the loss her murder created for her family and for her community.

The images are representative of the type of contemporary Black trauma that Black people face due to lingering forms of racial oppression. Like the artwork of Williams, Weems, Plowden, and Frazier, Black emotions are politicalized in the images of Breonna Taylor’s loved ones. Black pain is shown to illustrate the continued wounds of racism, while Black love shows us how Black people find the strength to keep fighting for change. Through emotional imagery, viewers are called to empathize with the family’s loss and are encouraged to act through calls for justice on Taylor’s behalf. Breonna Taylor has been denied justice so far, but her image has

been reclaimed through political art and the words of her loved ones to assert her worth as they continue to demand justice.[52]

Overall, this project aims to illustrate the significant rhetorical function visuals play in Black liberation efforts to challenge racial oppression, engage public memory, amplify Black voices, and empower Black people. The current political climate enhances the importance of this topic as Black people continue to face tremendous social and political consequences due to their intersectional identities. Racism is so ingrained in everyday life that many of these ideological messages about race go unnoticed. Systems of oppression become naturalized as a "normal" part of American life. For this reason, the images in this project encourage viewers to take an important look at collective trauma inflicted on Black people, and the courageous acts of pushing back against such oppression to provide continued hope and collective agency in the fight for justice.

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End Notes

[1] Ambrotypes are an early form of photography developed in the mid-1850s. It is created by placing a glass negative against a dark background. The background allows the highlights and details in the positive image to be shown. (Forbes, 1989.)

[2] Research demonstrates that discriminatory hiring practices limit the employment opportunities of Black jobseekers. (See Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

[3] Harsher punishment is demonstrated in court sentencing as well. According to a study on 12,000 Black women, lighter skinned Black women received sentences that were 12 percent shorter than darker Black women and their time served was reduced by 11 percent, even when controlling criminal history and other variables (Viglione, Hannon, & DeFina, 2011). Consistent with other research, Blair, Judd, and Chapleau (2004) found that offenders with features that were more stereotypic of black Americans faced harsher sentences than those with less Afrocentric features.

[4] Black students, especially boys and young men, are suspended at much higher rates than their peers in all grades. Black students represent 18% of preschool enrollment but 42% of students suspended once, and 48% of students suspended more than once. "This critical report shows that racial disparities in school discipline policies are not only well-documented among older students, but actually begin during preschool. Every data point represents a life impacted and a future potentially diverted or derailed," said Attorney General Eric Holder (Department of Education, 2014). Education scholars argue that exclusionary discipline practices, like suspension, decrease opportunities for academic success and perpetuates a cycle of failure and promotes a school-to-prison pipeline (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Also see Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S. (2019).

[5] A 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) presented many major key findings that illustrated that there are systematic ways students of color have limited opportunities. For example, 81% of White and Asian students have access to a full range of math and science courses at their high school, while only 57% of Black students and 67% of Latino students have access to those courses. See refences. Also see Tsoi-A-Fatt Bryant, R. 2015.

[6] Black people face tremendous obstacles to home ownership. A history of redlining, higher mortgage rates, higher loan denial rate, lower assessment of property value, and discrimination against applicants receiving public assistance has limited to acquisition of property of Black Americans. Property ownership is one of the biggest contributors to generational wealth, which put black people at a disadvantage to gaining wide-spread economic stability. Black people are also face discrimination in the rental process. (See Taylor, 2019; Reina, Pritchett, & Wachter, 2020; Auspurg, K., Schneck, A., & Hinz, T., 2019)

[7] College educated African Americans have higher unemployment rates than college white graduates. In a report of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, Jones and Schmitt (2014) found that 12.4% of Black college graduates were between ages 22-27 were unemployed, while only 5.6% of all college graduates in the same age range were unemployed. They also reveal that nearly 55.9% of Black college graduates of all ages are underemployed—meaning they hold a job that does not require a college degree. The "Great Recession" has been particularly hard on Black workers and their families, but even before the start of our most recent economic decline in 2007 nearly half (45%) of Black college graduates were underemployed. While the key to American dream is frequently connected to obtaining a college education, Black people of all educational backgrounds have higher unemployment rates than the general population.

[8] In this project, I use various terms to refer to people of African heritage. The Black body (or Black bodies) is used in two different ways. It refers to the symbolic representation of the Black subject in written and visual discourse and the physical embodiment of Black people. I use the term "black people" to refer to the socially constructed racial category that has grouped Africans and their decedents. The term "African Americans" refers to people with an American nationality and African ethnic heritage, including decedents of African slaves and more recent immigrants from Africa or the African Diaspora to the United States. My decision to alternate between Black and African American is political. While "Black" more generally refers to people of African heritage, the term African American clearly links Black people to the continent of Africa and the collective struggle of all African descendants living in American. However, "Black people" and "African Americans" are used

interchangeably. However, I also use Black people to refer to Africans and their descendants more generally when the people in reference include all people of African heritage (e.g. Black people described in scientific literature). When I focus my discussion on the treatment or representations of Black people in America, I use African American, Black Americans, and Black people interchangeably. Although this project focuses on Black people in the U.S. context, the implications of this project may also apply to Black people throughout the African Diaspora.

[9] My definition of myth and ideology as well as the relationship between the two terms are important to my framing of this project. My definition of myth draws from Dorsey's (2013). He says, "Myth is a persistent story of extraordinary historical experiences and protagonists, real or fictive, which explain and empower a community's origin and sense of self" (Dorsey, 2013, p. 5). My definition of "ideology" is influenced by *Ideology: An Interdisciplinary Approach* by Van Dijik (2008). Simply put, ideology represents a system of ideas and beliefs that helps shape people's worldview and their relationships with others (e.g., White supremacist ideology, feminist ideology, etc.). However, Van Dijik complicates this general definition by arguing that "ideologies may be very succinctly defined as the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group. This means that ideologies allow people, as group members, to organize the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, for them, and to act accordingly" (p. 8). In other words, conceptions of the world are produced and disseminated by members of a group and dominant systems of ideas emerge as members decide what becomes the common group consciousness. Van Dijik emphasizes the importance of discourse and social cognition in the study of ideology. Discourse is what allows ideology to circulate and social cognition (public consciousness) is both developed and sustained by ideology. Racial myths are one form of discourse that has been used to by White supremacists to empower whites and disempower Black people. These myths circulate within Western society and create ideological beliefs about racial groups. For example, the narratives of about Black rapists attacking White women or the "headless" people of African are a form of racial myths. My understanding of the relationship between ideology and myth is shaped by Levi-Strauss's "key assumption" about myths. Levi-Strauss (1964) argues that myths can be interpreted in association with similar and related myths, which may reveal a common set of "hidden meanings" (p. 77; 136). I would argue that these meaning are not necessarily, but that are so normalized that they can go unnoticed. By analyzing myths, we can expose "deep" or explicit messages that may not be apparent in literal or surface meaning of a myth. For example, the myth of the large Black male penis may appear to be a benign narrative about Black male bodies. However, this myth operates within other myths of Black hypersexuality and sexual deviance to perpetuate the myth of the Black rapist. Furthermore, ideology is primarily about power. The social and political acceptable of a particular ideology allows those with invested interest to gain power. Racial myths function to spread racial ideology to create and sustain race-based power for Whites and disempowerment for Black people and people of color.

[10] See image of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba here. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/aict/x-gtc210/GTC200_IMG0010?g=art-ic;lasttype=boolean;lastview=thumbfull;med=1;resnum=1670;size=20;sort=aict_ti;start=1661;subview=detail;view=entry;rgn1=ic_all;q1=aict

[11] Columbus brought back at least six of the Arawaks to Europe; they ended up serving as slaves and their bodies were exhibited for Queen Isabella's court. It is believed that at least one lived up to two years on display before he died of "sadness" (See Thompson, 2008).

[12] In June 2015, nine African Americans were shot and killed while attending Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, SC by Dylann Roof. The shooter reportedly said, "You rape our women and you're taking over our country." See Gary, E. (2015). The history of using White sexuality to justify racial violence. Huffington Post. Online. Retrieved July 2, 2015: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/white-female-sexuality-and-racist-violence-a-history_n_7613048.html

[13] Being perceived as threat costed, 17-year-old, Travon Martin his life. He was read as an outsider to his gated community and a potential threat by his neighbor, Andrew Zimmerman, while the teen walked home from a store in Sanford, Florida in 2012. After calling police to report the young Black youth as looking "up to no good," Zimmerman approached the unarmed teen and killed him during an alleged fight. In a controversial trial and verdict, Zimmerman claimed self-defense and was

found not guilty. Trayvon Martin—like the many men, women, and youth before and after his death—was marked by the Eurocentric gaze to signify him as suspicious and "up to no good" with likely criminal intent.

[14] Such as Myra Greene's images discussed in the beginning of this introduction.

[15] Appropriation is an artistic practice of using pre-existing objects or images within a new art piece with little change to the original. See Evans 2009.

[16] If the artwork was analyzed in museums, it would add additional layers of meanings and draw on the diversity of senses, which could yield a more robust reading. However, the majority viewers are likely encountering these images online, which makes the online reading of these images important to understanding the series' implications.

[17] Race refers to socially constructed categories of group membership based on phenotypical traits and ethnic origin. Beasley (2007) says, "Gender typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of sexed identities." In doing, social norms of femininity and masculinity are constructed. I used gender both in the conventional way the society divides sexed identities, but I will also use gender in the analysis to interrogate notions of gender preformed through Black masculinity and Black femininity. Furthermore, I recognize that the performance of gender is complicated by race due to historical and contemporary social conditions that have not always allowed Black people to participate in traditional, White idealized notions of gender. Black femininity and Black masculinity often depicted as "too much" or "not enough" (e.g., See Collins, 1991). I refer to sexuality as sexual and/or romantic feelings for members of a particular sex, but at other times I am referring to orientation. I attempt to clarify in what sense I am referring to in my discussion.

[18] Feminist research is primarily "connected in principle to feminist struggle" (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993, p. 266). Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007) explain that "Feminist research goals foster empowerment and emancipation of women and other marginalized groups, and feminist research often apply their findings in the service of promoting social change and social justice for women" (p. 4). However, Black feminist theory and scholarship has taken a more expansive understanding of feminist research to consider the ways in which Black women's interests are connected to the collective struggle for Black liberation (e.g., Davis, 1981; Collins, 1990). Drawing from Black feminist scholarship, I embrace an inclusive approach to feminist studies to challenge interlocking systems of oppression that impact the lives of Black women, men, and children.

[19] In this project, I embrace my political standpoint as a Black feminist committed to promoting social change and social justice for people of color and women. As a mother to a young boy of African American heritage, I am enraged that our political climate appears to be far from ending discrimination based on race, gender, class, and sexuality. My scholarly interests are motivated by my desire to expose and dismantle systematic oppression to create a more just future.

[20] Based on this quotation, Williams seems to be interested to a broad audience to challenge systems of meanings associated with the Black body of the past and present.

[21] In this analysis, I look at images of the series in multiple sources, which include William's website and the images reproduction on other art websites. I also looked at photos of the series installed in museums. I do not attempt to account for the various locations the series is reproduced in part or whole online.

[22] Wells and Fowler were colleagues who published books with the same title.

[23] Bell hooks uses the term "oppositional gaze" to refer to subversive gazes or stares by the subject of an image into the camera. This "look back" creates a sense of eye contact between the viewer and the subject. Such an approach helps assert the subject's personhood and agency as they look back and visually challenging their surveillance. (See hooks, b. (1992). Black Looks: Race and Representation. Boston: South End Press. Oppositional Gaze.)

[24] The term Bantu was coined by Wilhelm Bleek in *Comparative Grammar* around 1857 to refer to several ethnic groups in Africa who spoke a family of languages. The Bantu terms mean "people" from loosely constructed proto-Bantu. By the 1970s, African nationalists movements preferred the term African over Bantu, and Bantu become more associated with policies of apartheid. However, the term is still frequently used to refer to this hairstyle, which essentially refers to Black identity in the name. See van de Waal (2011) for more on the origin of the word: https://sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive_files/siegfried_huigen_albert_grundlingh_reshaping_rbook4you.pdford - Reshaping Remembrance Top.doc (sahistory.org.za)

[25] According to two Crown Act website, "The Crown Act was created in 2019 by Dove and Crown Coalition, in partnership with then State Senator Holly J. Mitchell of California, to ensure protection against discrimination
based on race-based hairstyles by extending the statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools." The Official CROWN Act (thecrownact.com)

[26] Gould has since changed his stance in his more recent addition of his book published in 2006.

[27] The series includes images of varying size. The physical installation includes 28 works at 26 3/4 × 22" (67.9 × 55.8 cm), four works are 22 × 26¾"(55.8 × 67.9 cm), and the two works at each end are 43 1/2 × 33 1/2" (110.4 × 85 cm). The images online do not depict the same scale as the physical exhibit, but the end two images on end are shown to be slightly larger.

[28] Weems interest in intervening the archive and responding to an exhibit at the Getty's museum suggests she interested in pushing back against institutional representations. Institutions, like museums, rest on their credibility to presents their view. Yet Weems highlights that the matter in which images are presented has the potential to obscure, minimize, or reveal different meanings associated with images.

[29] In Piche and Golden (1998), *You Became an Accomplice* (plate 45), *Anything but What You Were Ha* (plate 50), and *Others Said 'Only Thing a Niggah Could Do Was Shine My Shoes* (plate 52) are not listed as being owned by the Museum of Modern Art and not displayed the museum's website. Why the Museum of Modern Art only owns part of the series is unknown to me.

[30] Carrie Mae Weems's website does not include the following four prints: *House*, *Yard*, *Field*, and *Kitchen* (plates 31-34, Piche and Golden, 1998). The reasons why Weems leaves out of these images from her website is unknown to me.

[31] Individual images of her work or a few from the collection are reproduced online. The nature of the internet reduces the artist's control over the reproduction of their art. This project does not attempt to count for all the possible locations the work may appear. Instead, this analysis looks at the collection as a whole in various modalities.

[32] The Congo is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but at the time Congo referred to the larger Congo Basin, which included surrounding territories.

[33] This difference in arrangement could be attributed to limitations on space within the museum.

[34] However, the size and scale varies across the different modalities of the series. In the physical exhibit, Nobosodrou is larger, which gives the sense she is looking over the images. This size different emphasizes Nobosodrou role as a witness. The size of the Nobosodrou may also be for practical reasons. If the images need to be stacked due to space limitations, it allows her images to still bookend the series and give the sense that she is still looking at the images. Online and in print, all the images have equal size, which conveys that each image is presented with equal importance.

[35] During further investigation of the murder of George Floyd, evidence shows that a former officer knelt on Floyd for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, not the infamous 8 minutes and 46 seconds that has been associated with the movement.

[36] Data shows that 98.3 of police killings from 2013-2020 have not resulted in officers being charged with a crime, according to the Mapping Police Violence database.

[37] According to the Black Live Matter, Inc. website, the focus issues for 2020 were "racial injustice, police brutality, criminal justice reform, Black immigration, economic injustice, LGBTQIA+ and human rights, environmental injustice, access to healthcare, access to quality education, and voting rights and suppression."

[38] For example, in 2021, they are advocating for legal accountability for politicians and domestic terrorists for crimes against citizens, including attempts to overturn the 2020 elections and the January 2021 attack on the Capitol.

[39] In this analysis, I look at images from collection on Plowden's website and his Facebook page. I used Facebook to get date information and additional details that is not always included on his website. Since I am analyzing digital images, size and dimensions are not part of the analysis.

[40] The colony of Carolina was the first to develop the nation's first slave patrol in 1704. This patrol, and others like it that emerged, were designed to maintain the economic order and assist the wealth landowners with recovering and punishing their slaves who were viewed as property.

[41] While lynching was not an official form of punishment, governing bodies and the police often ignored the barbaric practice of hanging Black men, women, and sometimes children based on assumed guilt or suspicion of a crime (Bickerford, 2010). Onlookers watched the lynching of Black people in crowds, some bought their families and children to view the violent racial spectacle as community events. Photographers even sold postcards of smiling white crowds with dangling Black bodies over their heads. Such grotesque keepsakes were mailed to loved ones to allow them to share in the spectacle. Ore (2019) explains that while most served as commemorative mementos for supporters of white supremacy, other images were sent as threats to those who sought to the challenge lynching. Even when Black Americans were executed through the judicial system, they were denied legal standards of a fair trial for much of American history. Such as the case with 14-year-old, George Stinney Jr, who was convicted of rape and murder in South Carolina during a two-hour trial in 1944. This made Stinney one of the youngest people to be executed in the United States. From arrest to execution, it took only 83 days. The trial lasted for 2 hours and it only took 10 minutes for the all-white male jury to return with guilty verdict. After several failed attempts to fit his small body in the adult electric chair, he was seated on a stack of books and electrocuted shortly after his trial without an option for an appeal (Ward, 2012). His was posthumously cleared of crimes 70 years later in 2014 when a judge vacated the conviction, calling it "great and fundamental injustice" (Campbell, 2014). Stinney's case symbolizes many of the common practices that denied Black people fair treatment in the justice system.

[42] The move away from lynching to the death penalty was a demonstrated adherence to modern juridical law during the first half of the 20th century. Bickerford argues it was a "nationalist demonstration of Eurocentric 'civilized' status, an effort on the part of disparate groups of white southerners to join up with the North" (Bickerford, 2010, p. 42). Such move allowed Southern whites to engage in "the spectacle and mood of lynching" while enacting a sense of white moral citizenship (Bickerford, 2010, p. 42). However, the often-swift conclusions and convictions of Black people with limited evidence made death sentencing during this era nothing more than legalized lynching.

[43] Black liberation protests are frequently framed as radical and anti-American to undermine their salience and resist efforts toward equality. Kaepernick has accused the NFL of collusion due to controversy surrounding his kneeling protest, but later withdrew his case as part of a financial settlement and public statement from NFL (West, 2019).

[44] Juneteenth became a federally recognized holiday in June 2021.

[45] See Grey's Anatomy (2018), Season 14, episode titled "Personal Jesus." Blackish (2016), Season 2, Episode 16, titled "Hope."

[46] Several public murals of Breonna Taylor have been defaced. The criminal acts demonstrate the hate and opposition that Black artist-activists continue to face in their pursuit of justice. (See 2021 Sylvestri, 2021; Emery & Weiter, 2021; Associated Press, 2021)

[47] There is controversy of the warrant used to raider Breonna Taylor's home. Police officers claimed they announced their presence, but they also said applied for a no-knock warrant, which means they would not legally need to announce themselves. Kenneth Walker maintains that the officers did not identify themselves. See Mencarini, Costello, & Duvall, 2020. https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/breonna-taylor/2020/11/29/how-no-knock-warrant-for-breonna-taylors-apartment-stands-out/6420376002/

[48] Like many Black female victims of police brutality, Breonna Taylor did not initially receive the same media attention as more high-profile Black male victims. Furthermore, video evidence is often to the only way incidents of police brutality get any public attention. Unfortunately, the are many cases of police brutality that receive no media attention at all. Similarly, months went by before the public knew of Breonna Taylor. A social media post by a family member was used to tell Breonna's story, which ultimately lead to increase attention and public pressure for an investigation into this care. This combined with increased visibility to the Black Live Matter movement after George Floyd's murder helped spread Breonna Taylor's story. Therefore, it is through the persistence activism of Breonna Taylor family and supporters that has brought visibility to her case. See Gupta, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/us/breonna-taylor-black-lives-matter-women.html

[49] Similarly, community murals also emphasize what is important to the community. Breonna Taylor murals visualize her relevance to the Black Live Matter and the need to justice.

[50] It could be argued that Frazier focuses the attention away from the Black body to highlight the sentimental value of the individual within the community. However, I see this message conveyed through the embodied representations of Breonna Taylor and her family members.

[51] For example, a campaign called #BlackLoveLetters amplifying Black love of all kinds is a creative intervention to encourage connection during quarantine, while also supporting the United State Post Service. Supporting the USPS is important to BLM since the postal service was one of the early professional opportunities to Black people that allowed them to enter the middle class after federal desegregation. In 2020, the USPS was under attack during the Trump Administration, so the campaign also serves to encourage people to mail letter to express love and connection (Black Lives Matter, 2021).

[52] Since her killing, the cities of Santa Fe, San Antonio, and Indianapolis have joined Louisville in banning no-knock warrants at the city level, and Oregon and Florida have banned them at the state level (Sanchez, 2020). Laws ending no-knohttps://www.cnn.com/2020/10/10/us/no-knock-warrant-bans-breonna-taylor/index.htmlck warrants after Breonna Taylor's death are 'a big deal' but not enough - CNN