

Black Women's Counter Narratives: Art and Activism in a 21st Century American Struggle

VESTA A.H DANIEL
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

ADRIENNE WALKER HOARD
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

Abstract

America has the look of a broken thing. In an era of systemic racism, domestic terrorism, police brutality, gender bias and misogyny, many Americans would like strategies that enable personal and collective healing accompanied by an enabling morality. One approach to accomplishing these things is to engage in the stories that confront the myth of Americanness as inclusive and safe. Focusing on the benefits of telling stories of Black women in America, the disruptive and constructive capacity of *counter narratives* help to illustrate how we can eschew culturally destructive behavior and replace it with conscious and ethical evolution.

Introduction

What is the story that we tell ourselves about the identities and realities of Black women in America? Who is empowered to tell that diversified *explanatory story* (Hammond, 2014) and to testify about the importance of our own truths and those of our mothers without negative consequences? Our premise is that in order to engage insightfully in the American drama, the *counter narrative* of Black women can be explored through a *womanist* lens that helps to point out the need for tactics that will allow us to care for ourselves and to thrive as creative agitators who improve society in a time of unparalleled distress. While we cannot provide the overarching resolution to our current national angst, our purpose here is to point out how Black women's stories can uncover paths to an enlightened society that values equity and equality. The following observations are made in a time of



pandemic that causes us to hold our children and elders closer and to be bolstered by our resilience and creativity as we attempt to enable social transformation and a brighter future.

Telling womanist stories

The counter narrative, versus the master narrative, is a more reliable story for Black women. Hammond (2014) offers that

There are two types of stories in operation in society. First there is the dominant culture's *master narrative*. This is the explanatory story society tells as to why things are the way they are. It's the national myths like "America is the land of opportunity" that we all grow up hearing and believe even when we know it's not true in reality. It spins a story about why some people experience social and economic advantages and why others are disadvantaged. It sells us on the idea of being a meritocracy while playing down the impact of racialization and implicit bias. There are explicit negative stories about certain groups of people such as "Those people don't care about education." (Fill in the blank about who "those people" are).

Then there's what we call a *counter narrative*. It's simply a narrative that counters or reframes the master narrative by highlighting other parts of the story, by telling the story from another perspective, or rejecting misconceptions or half-truths in the master narrative. The counter narrative is a form of identity development and affirmation that has a long history among different communities of color, growing out of colonialism (https://crtandthebrain.com/the-first-six-weeks_create-a-counter-narrative/).

When the stories, the counter narratives, about communities inhabited by Black women, men and children are missing, the information about how all other communities work is missing, as well. Also, the cultural and social function of counter narratives is to demand social change by pointing out the collective stories of marginalized groups. As a Black woman, I understand that the intersectionality of those two realities is indissoluble. I identify with Black women all over the world although we are not a homogeneous group. We are often the spokespeople who address issues of gender, race and class in society with the expectation of not being heard.

However, womanism is a social theory that, unlike feminism, fortifies, validates and elucidates the details of Black women's lives by taking into account both



racism and sexism. Womanists can love other women sexually and/non-sexually according to Alice Walker who used the term in the short story “Coming Apart” in 1979 and made more formal theoretical statements and definitions in her 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*). Related to *Black feminism*, “it is a multidimensional approach to liberation” (Peterson, 2019). It focuses on black women mostly and includes the relationship between people, the environment and the spiritual dimension. Hudson-Weems notes in her 1995 text *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*:

Africana feminism, is problematic, as it naturally suggests an alignment with feminism, a concept that has been alien to the plight of Africana women from its inception. This is particularly the case in reference to racism and classism, which are prevailing obstacles in the lives of Africana people... (p.19).

In order to tell our stories and how Black women make meaning within the American story, it is important to consider the current variables influencing our existence. Notably, at this moment the United States is getting an intimate view of the disappearance of its democracy. In an ecosystem of systemic racism, administrative indifference and inhumanity at the highest levels, normalized depravity, judicial manipulation of the law to support voter suppression, government-sanctioned physical and psychological violence against people of color and the poor, domestic terrorism and, gender bias, we are living in a society that has the look of a broken thing. On November 3 of this year, America will participate in a presidential election of unnerving consequence. Beyond the accompanying election of the vice-president, other down ballot officials will be elected as well. Depending on the results of the election, healthcare, voting rights for Black people and the right for a woman to determine the status of her own body will be in jeopardy among other human rights. In addition to white voters who feared and reacted against the loss of their privilege for decades, is the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) which has disproportionately sickened and killed black and brown people in the United States and elsewhere. One wonders if the U.S. president (admittedly) did not create an aggressive and well-informed attack on the virus because so many of the casualties affected black and brown bodies.

Moreover, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC): Social determinants of health have historically prevented people of color from having fair opportunities for economic, physical, and emotional health. (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>). In the United States, as of September 29, 2020, there are 7,129, 313 total cases of CO-



VID-19 and nearly 210,000 total deaths. The total number of cases in the world is over 34 million with over one million deaths. We lead the world in coronavirus infections and deaths. As of September 15, 2020 there are 98 African Americans per the general population of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths compared to 47 per 100,000 among the population of whites (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1122369/covid-deaths-distribution-by-race-us/>). And, in addition to the terror and devastation of COVID-19 in Black and brown communities, police in the U.S. killed 164 Black people in the first 8 months of 2020. This is at least one Black man or woman every week of 2020 according to CBS News (<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/black-people-killed-by-police-in-the-u-s-in-2020/>).

Within this context, “[b]lack women have the highest rates of homicide in the country”, says Kimberle’ Crenshaw, a professor of law at UCLA and Columbia Law School and the executive director of the African American Policy Forum. She says she has “repeatedly seen the killings of Black women go unnoticed” (Young and McMahon, 6/16/20). This observation brings us to the case of Breonna Taylor.

Why Black women in America protest

Black women’s activism is not new. From nineteenth century abolitionists to contemporary women’s rights advocates we have been leading and participating in “the artistic, philosophical, and activist practice grounded in black women’s lived experiences” (Peterson, 2019). Notably, the three Black women who founded the “#Black Lives Matter” movement in 2013 are Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza. The resistance movement is a worldwide phenomenon. Garza (who is also the founder of the Black Lives Matter Global Network) states that the movement is fighting to “dismantle a system that was designed to criminalize Black people, that was designed to criminalize poor people and people of color and other oppressed people”(Lim, 2020). Tarana Burke, a Black woman from New York founded the now international “#Me Too” movement in 2006. The mission of the movement is to “raise awareness of the everyday woman, man, trans person, child and disabled person. All the people who are not rich, white and famous, who deal with sexual violence on [an] everyday basis” (2020, Gill and Rahman-Jones). The “#Say Her Name” movement was conceived in 2014 by the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies to bring attention to the killing of Black women by police (Fondren, 2020). As Black women, we understand that we must care for ourselves so that we stay well and alive. It is an act of protest. But, when one of us is violently victimized, we wonder if our futures have returned to the past.



The recent police murders of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020 and George Floyd on May 25, 2020 sparked international protests both mourning their deaths and demanding justice. The enduring protests largely focused on the unjust killing of George Floyd at the hands of a policeman who stared into an observer's cellphone camera with his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck until he died. Although Ms. Taylor was unjustly killed two months earlier, the protests did not center on her but eventually added chants of "Say Her Name" as a demand for validation of her life as well.

Understandably, as we are viewed by the world, our nation appears to be actively apocalyptic. Further exploration of the case of Breonna Taylor exemplifies our national distress and our specific concerns as Black women. Be aware that there are more layers and facts accompanying this case than are reported here. In summary, shortly after midnight on March 13, 2020, 26-year old Breonna Taylor was shot by at least 8 bullets and killed by 3 white, plain clothes police officers. They broke in the door of her apartment, in Louisville, Kentucky, authorized by a "no knock" warrant (based on a police error), while she and her boyfriend, who attempted to defend them, slept. The resulting police report stated that there were "no injuries" although Breonna was dead. Due to months of legal pursuits and largely peaceful national protests, "Breonna's Law", outlawing "no-knock" warrants was unanimously passed on June 11, 2020 by the Louisville, Kentucky, Metro Council. On September 15, 2020 the city of Louisville reached a record \$12 million settlement with Ms. Taylor's family for her "wrongful death". The settlement included a police reform package intended to prevent further tragedies of this kind from happening.

However, the secret grand jury deliberations over the case resulted in jurors deciding not to charge two of the white Louisville police officers who shot and killed Breonna Taylor. Rather, they decided to ultimately charge the third officer (a white, former police detective) with recklessly endangering three of Ms. Taylor's neighbors with gun shots during a botched and unjustified raid on her apartment. No one was charged in her death (The New York Times, 9/23/2020).

But, as of September 30, an unnamed juror has been successful in legally demanding that a 20-hour audio tape of the court proceedings be released to the public. There is more to know based on his/her concerns about the validity of the judicial process. We are reminded here that

inclusion of black women's experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combating racialized state violence for black communities and other communities of color



(Crenshaw and Ritchie, 2015).

Art, storytelling and protest

A response from the arts to the long history of the dispensability of Black women like Breonna Taylor, can be seen in the current Afro-futurist HBO series, “Lovecraft Country” where the mystical is combined with racism of the Jim Crow era, according to Frazier Tharp (9/14/2020, msn.com). Wunmi Mosaku plays Ruby, one of the African American characters who can shape-shift into Hillary, a white woman. Mosaku is a British-Nigerian woman who was interviewed to discuss an episode that included graphic sexual violence against a white man. In her comments about rage and the transformation into a white woman, she offers:

But then she’s still a woman. And so, there’s still the patriarchy to contend with. It’s still not complete freedom, but there’s a safety that she gets to walk around the world with, that isn’t afforded to black and brown people. And Ruby struggles when she’s Hillary because it’s so conditioned in her that she has to preserve her life at all costs. Whereas as a white woman, people are literally scared for her. That’s just not Ruby or any black or brown person’s reality, you know?”

...Ruby says it perfectly: “The problem isn’t being black. That’s not the problem, the problem is white supremacy, racism. Being judged on your closeness to whiteness.” I didn’t think Ruby felt like, “I don’t want to be black.” That’s not her goal. Her goal is, “I want to live my life uninterrupted.” Uninterrupted by inequality, injustice, white supremacy, racism, patriarchy. I want to live my full potential. And I think every black and brown person would identify with that feeling.

... The question isn’t about being white, the question is like, being able to flourish and grow into the person that you truly know that you are, but society keeps getting in your way. (<https://www.msn.com/en-us/Lifestyle/relationships/nmi-mosaku-taps-into-%e2%80%9ccellular-rage%e2%80%9d-on-lovecraft-country/ar-BB191ASZ>)

Mosaku opines that “sci-fi and horror are a perfect vehicle for exploring racism and injustice, the horrors of that. They are real; they are actual; they are tangible. They are also metaphorical and invisible” (Tharp, 2020).

Juxtaposed to the Breonna Taylor tragedy and the film representation of a Black woman



's cellular anger, which later develops into a futuristic and complex kind of justice, is the story of Senator Kamala Harris. By viewing these Black women's stories in proximity to each other, we can prepare to participate in dismantling familiar and new forms of oppression. We can move beyond hope to action.

Kamala: Prosecuting the case for Black girl magic

Senator Kamala Harris is a 56-year-old vice presidential candidate. She is the daughter of a Jamaican-American father and a mother from India. Born in California, she identifies as African American and Indian American. The current U.S. President, Donald Trump, recently described the first woman of color to be the running mate on the presidential ticket as a "monster". This debasing term has deep historical, racist roots in reference to Black women. After Sen. Harris, who is also an attorney, deftly sparred with the current Vice-President during a televised debate, Trump displayed the white fragility and white male privilege we are so accustomed to in America. How dare she be brilliant, poised and well-prepared. How dare she be self-aware, assertive and in control of the space and circumstances surrounding her Black body. How dare she not allow herself and the international cadre of Black and non-black women to be viewed and treated as superfluous. Like Breonna Taylor, Sen. Harris is routinely accompanied by the twin specters of racism and misogyny. Dr. Moya Bailey refers to the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women face daily as *misogynoir*. It is particularly evident in visual and digital culture.

Black women are using digital spaces to challenge the way misogynoir informs their lives and health. While mainstream and digital media can focus on Harris' heritage and gender, Black women and their allies are wielding this same digital media to have more nuanced conversations about Harris as a candidate (Bailey, 2020).

In spite of the systems in place to keep Black women from moving from the margins, Sen. Harris has agency and refuses to be devalued or damaged. The master narrative that does not include her states that "positions of power are occupied by white men". The counter narrative for her/us that is being written in public view is that the "American political and cultural future can include Black and brown people who are visible and in positions of power". Although (or perhaps, because) this nation had an African American male president for eight years, daily demonstrations of racial animus are stunning. Because of what appears to be acceptable aggression towards people of color, Black women are vulnerable. For instance, Ms. Taylor's family, even after her death, had to contend with public efforts to defame her and destroy her dignity. Intersectional groups of



protesters close to and thousands of miles away from Breonna gave her voice by bringing attention to Black women's lives as valuable and at risk of being lawlessly extinguished. They are illuminating the details of her story and its significance in telling the current American story through her counter narrative. The master narrative, that "all Americans will be protected by the police and the law", is false. The counter narrative, that "a Black woman has no idea who will negatively impact or take her life without recourse" better describes our current Americanness.

The "Black Aesthetic" and Black women *artists*

The following is an example of how art, the "Black Aesthetic" and life can create an *artist* story. This is Dr. Adrienne Walker Hoard's personal reflection on her art and the art of other Black women and how they translate into social action.

What's in a Name: Born to Create

Born Negro, African American in these continental United States of America. My birth certificate classifies my RACE as "C", and my first new driver's license had under RACE, the number 2. What are these label names 'they' have for me? I came into being as an artist to translate visual stories. I speak my truth based on the resourceful flow of ancestral knowledge and Divine timing. Abstraction allows me the freedom of total emotional aesthetic expression. In my paintings only the colors – authentic and bold – give any indication of the depth of my feelings, the intensity of my truth, or the joy in my passion while creating. The absence of representational imagery in no way detracts from the inherent meaning and content in the symbolism visible in this abstract art. (Reynolds, 1995) Rosalind Jeffries describes my abstraction as "self-portraits in time and space...Abstracted not defined because it is a journey through the mind". (1976)

It takes time and persistent effort from one little woman to arise out from under the weight of the American stereotype that denies Black excellence, and surreptitiously corners the market on accomplishment in any forms, for white only, non-black Americans. As an *artist*, an active artist, global scholar, former Ford Foundation Senior Fellow and former Fulbright Senior Lecturer, I still live in a world of conditions dictating, that the color of the woman's hand creating the art determines the trajectory of that art for exposure to a global population who is seeking significant aesthetic experiences through works of art, housed institutionally in public museums and galleries. (Ellis, 2019) When will my own art live

on large, white painted museum walls?

W.E.B. Dubois, in *The Criteria of Negro Art* (1926), stated, I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compells [sic] recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compell [sic] recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new. (p. 295) Mallocci (2018) characterizes DuBois's call to arms "on artistic expression" as a shift in his long-term view to elevate the position of his race.

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. (p. 295)

The resulting controversy created a schism in the Harlem Renaissance Black art supporters, still being creatively debated.

The United States of America is a land of opportunity, and given an opportunity in any arena, African Americans can thrive, have survived. Decades of hard work, report uplifting stories of outcomes surpassing roadblocks with tenacity and dignified persistence. How is it, in our U.S.A. and other white-ruled countries, 94 years later, we must bring a new movement pressing for DuBois's old issues that Black people are human and have the right to be safe and "enjoy" life, a current living premise of the human rights advocacy of #Black Lives Matter? (Ojo, 2020)

Artists and curators continue to clamor for equitable respect, emphasizing that art created by living Black artists is '*high art*', deserving of all the accoutrements and respect given to art produced by living white artists. Katherine Brooks (2014), shares with us the grim data showing that almost 80% of United States of America's successful working artists are white. These astounding statistics mirror the percentage ratios of white students to Black students currently enrolled in art schools, 80 to 20. Brooks' research documents that women artists make up 3% to 5% of the artists secured in public museums and collections in the E.U. and the U.S.A. Women artists of color number in percentages well below .05% of the 3%. When will these collections expand to include my own art, living large on their white painted museum walls?

Given that context, I arrived on the planet in just the right decade and am



blessed to be an African American woman activist, free householder of color, in this 21st century, pandemic era. As activist, I understand my art creation and my lived experience as a daily political statement. There are many definitions for this concept of marrying the words artist and activist. These include conflicting debates on the multiple agendas, techniques and strategies for viewing art as political expression and societal weaponry. Even though the terminology has received the fifty-year upgrade, the concept remains historic from the U.S.A. of the 1960s. Distinctly communicable, revolutionary art emanated from oppressed and oppressing people in other countries prior to its arrival for the 1960s U.S.A. evolution. Meaningful protest using art against injustice can be pretty, poetic and powerfully charged. The aesthetic connection transmits energy, a feeling upon encountering art and beauty, which can transport you to a place, you didn't know you needed to go. It can engender a feeling within you, that came from nowhere, yet feels faintly familiar. Moreover, it can compel you to act on your feelings, responding to societal events, individually or within a group to express a range of sensations from despair to joy.

The painted portraits of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as the act of painting *Black Lives Matter* on city thoroughfares across the country, all became unifying images of healing and solace. These colorful creations supported the lift to joy from despair. Aesthetic objects engender aesthetic experiences, which can contribute to an aesthetic release of emotional energy, especially relevant in our politically charged seasons. Encountering the art is elemental for the aesthetic expression to evoke aesthetic experience. (Beardsley, 1958) Welsh-Asante (1993) references aesthetic experience as the gateway to feeling similarity and power in community from the Black aesthetic, an African-derived aesthetic with a spiritual center.

We, who did witness the Black Arts Movement in the U.S.A., during the 1960s and 1970s, saw and felt Larry Neal's passionate declaration to be, "concerned with the relationship between art and politics..." (1968, p. 1) Within her review of Chicano/a and African American activism in the arts, Frieda High (1997) similarly chronicles these two decades of critical community expression. She highlights the aspects of cultural collaboration and savvy targeted intentions to provide outcomes of historic proportion promoting international visual continuity.

Our ancestor, Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison, outlines,
All of that art-for-art's-sake stuff is BS... What are these people
talking about? Are you really telling me that Shakespeare and
Aeschylus weren't writing about kings? All good art is political!



There is none that isn't. And the ones that try hard not to be political are political by saying, 'We love the status quo.' We've just dirtied the word 'politics,' made it sound like it's unpatriotic or something. (Morrison laughs derisively.) That all started in the period of state art, when you had the communists and fascists running around doing this poster stuff, and the reaction was 'No, no, no; there's only aesthetics.' My point is that it has to be both: beautiful and political at the same time. I'm not interested in art that is not in the world. And it's not just the narrative, it's not just the story; it's the language and the structure and what's going on behind it. Anybody can make up a story. (Nance, 2008)

I stand on the shoulders of visual artist-activist women, who use their creations to tell their authentic story and send a particularly credible societal and/or political message. These artists exhibit their lives as a political and societal statement, just by showing up with Black excellence in an art world which exhibits mainly white expectations. A sampling of women includes the late Barbara Jones-Hogu and Jae Jarrell, each an original member of AfriCOBRA, the foundational arts activist organization of the United States of America's Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These women produced provocative silkscreened posters and fabric art designs to convey messages of Black power, solidarity and family-to-family community presence. One of their lady heroes was the late Fannie Lou Hammer. I recently witnessed an interview with Rev. Dr. Karen Crozier, who referenced from her book, the speech given by Hamer at the National Women's Political Caucus in July 1971. The title of speech supported the AfriCOBRA tenet of community, "*Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free*". (2020)

Because my favorite expressive genre includes Abstraction, and I admire the work of those artist-activists who aesthetically create meaning with non-objective expressive tools. One activist-author is Barbara Chase-Riboud, whose sculptural art strongly, yet softly bestows the feeling of triumph in the memory of darker times in Black African and African American history. Her story told in bronze and satin cords, touches deep cords of ethos in connecting all humanity. Nanette Carter is a compassionate abstract activist, whose visual story of her engagement with life, personifies subtle forms and textures. Her art vibrates with African diasporic rhythms and displays unique color exchanges within an ancestral palette. Her abstract layered wall pieces are not just pretty, but also provide Light, exposing provocative social responsibility in the face of injustice. Carter's balancing images dutifully heal and combat the plethora of current media images reflecting social injustice and fear.

Faith Ringgold also pushes back against fear. She combines revolutionary

artivism with her textile and painted art, her children's literature and through her foundation, *Anyone Can Fly*. Ringgold places Black lifestyles and Black dreams for lifestyles into a realm of beautiful possibility for all ages in her audience. Her lens embraces a feminist perspective in philosophy and execution. (Farrington, 1999) Ringgold's daughter, the powerful author, Michele Wallace, embraces a different perspective. She supports the lens of womanism, specifically as defined by Clenora Hudson Weems (1993). *Africana Womanism*, delivers a specific space for Black women to place their female power and allegiance. Wallace carries her mother's outspoken social justice mantle forward revering Black women and families. (Ringgold, 2015)

Betye Saar another early activist, also created and nurtured into flight, two phenomenal women visual artists-activists, her daughters, Alison Saar and Lezley Saar. Betye Saar's piece *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* from 1972, is acclaimed by Dr. Angela Davis to have inspired a "Black women's movement". Saar wanted America "to clean up her act" toward indifference, and said so, with a washboard and a gun-toting, head-wrapped Black woman. (Sayej, 2018)

Artist-poet, Malaika Favorite, likewise offers her visual commentary on America's relationships with its citizens of color utilizing the washboard, as a vehicle for storytelling. Her poignant series of washboard paintings beginning with *The Flag Needs A-washing*, expresses her feelings upon seeing the flag representing her birth country, which does not see her as eligible for the free and the brave, safe lifestyle, its image embodies. Artist and art historian, Samella Lewis, examines Favorite's:

strong interest in using women and their activities as subjects for her art. When asked why she does not paint more men and deal with male themes, her reply is: After all, enough men have already talked about themselves to fill all the libraries in every city. Women need to discuss who they are and where they wish to go in life. (1990, pp. 171-172)

And who is telling the stories of Black women artists any better these women themselves? Although, I do recommend pen and paper, social media has exploded with the personal narrative statement strategies including videos of a day in the life and podcasts on self-care in nuanced manners. Now is your season for expressing the way you know yourself to be. Reclaiming your choice to speak for yourself is a powerful intervention into the deep dive of self-discovery, self-love and self-reliance for women artists in our 21st century pandemic era. Whether you call it being alive or being woke, this level of deep compassion and self-knowledge informs your aesthetic persona, your self-identity.

Martindale, Shneiderman and Turin (2018) observe the need for mastering our self-identity confirmation with documentation from our community. They state,

Record keeping, whether by rote or device, is simply the medium by which we share and recollect the historical events that enliven the stories we believe about ourselves. Traditional story forms thrive in the new digital world, and new digital practices create their own cultural communities in ways familiar to older patterns of oral transmission, suggesting that humans return to core cultural forms of memory making in any technological context. (pp. 198-199)

Consider mark-making as record-keeping and a strategy for increasing your attention to sensory play. With pencil to paper, even a Sharpie on your notepad, not iPad, you can build self-confidence through your self-expression. Practice making lines on a page until you connect inwardly with your lines, and you feel that they do express authentic you. Write someone a pictorial and worded letter with your handwritten signature. How do you feel?

You have as well an aesthetic signature that those close to you will recognize. They know it feels differently when you are not present in the space. The loss of physical up close and personal encounters on a regular basis with those we care about, during this pandemic season is slowing the frequencies of everyone's energy. We humans are a social species, and whether you are glad to see that face at the door, or sad to see that face at the door, we do energize one another by showing up in person. We thrive with communications which feed all our senses, auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory and taste. Who knew that elbow bumps in sleeves would become the state of the art accepted greeting in many circles? Who surmised and prepared us for understanding Zoom/Skype and being prepared with the appropriate shirt and 'mic' means showing up in this new world?

As a consistent advocate for the healing qualities of aesthetic experience, in seeking answers for healing energy, I return to my research rooted in science. My book chapter, *The Black Aesthetic an Empirical Feeling*, identifies the phenomena of African American adult subjects being able to select with significant statistical accuracy, non-objective painting images, which they considered to be attributed to African American artists. When they selected works as having been created by an African American painter, their repetitive selections captured consistent recognition of four visual strategies in pattern composition. They are in order of selection significance: 1) Concentric Circles; 2) Linear Bands (stripes); 3) Diamonds; and 4) the Diagonal. (1990) This study was replicated at three HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), and results proved consistent with

the first outcomes. Imagine my wonderment and surprise, in 1998, upon arriving at the home of Ms. Elisabeth Mahlangu, in the Nebo District of Limpopo Province in South Africa and seeing each and every one of those visual pattern strategies painted on her front wall. An Ndzundza Ndebele woman's front hand-painted wall is her family signature, the image of lineage and belonging. Based on my acquired quantitative documentation, I maintain the presence of visual cultural cues significantly recognizable to African American adults and emanating from the center of the Black Aesthetic, an African-derived aesthetic.

It is imperative to remember that art initiated as an aesthetic expression, a human feeling communicated through tangible and living materials. Through marks in the dirt, on a rock wall or charcoal on paper, humans manifest through their art, it is a response to living. One's way of knowing the world, at a particular time, on a precise plot of land or water, while occupying this spinning Earth is the aesthetic *heart* of a person's art expression. Centuries after the creation of a work of art, it still brings its aesthetic prowess to relate to you, to give you 'pause' and healing in your present witnessing moment.

My personal vision is a creative composite from my lived experience as an artist member of the *community* in several geographic areas of the United States of America, as well as in South Korea, Italy and South Africa. As an activist, I have contributed four decades to the field of fine arts education, because of my concern for the *children* in all of us. Guided by the writings and teachings of artist-educator, Eugene Grisby (1977), my desire is to interpose empowering images for each person to develop a healthy sense of self. I utilize the visual arts, especially my photography as a liaison experience of *similarity* among diverse people. Looking into the eyes of another human being, regardless of their age, gender or color, can show you possible traits or purposes, which you might discover are in concert with your own. You the viewer bring your world to synthesize with my world view, when you encounter my art. Come see, and we will both learn, grow and discover more of ourselves. Ashe, Ache, Ase.

Hoard's story affirms Michael's observation that:

...despite the fact that in the telling and retelling of the stories of our movements for justice and equality, [in which] men figure prominently as protagonists, there have been numerous Black women artists who have hoisted the mantle of leadership onto their shoulders and spoken, sung, written and painted us free. (Michael, nd.)

The complexity of her story as a scholar, activist and spiritual being give visibility to how counter narratives, built on historic truths, are valuable, illustrative,



instructive and enriching as we continue to build an enlarged framework for how and why America can be better.

Conclusion

Because there is more to know, we recommend that those interested in anti-racist and anti-sexist involvement seek out political-cultural-philosophical literature that provides other counter narrative insights into the lives of Black women. Among other resources, Elon University offers Anti-Racism Resources which contains a section titled “Black Women Write on Race and Intersectionality” (<https://elon.libguides.com/antiracism/intersectionality>).

In her article, “The black women who launched the original anti-racist reading list”, Dennis points out the valorous contributions of some Black women librarians and authors over the decades who confronted racism through literature. However, she cautions that

[T]he work of dismantling systemic racism does not end with making bibliographies or even reading all of the books on them. Americans must *act* on what they know. We must demand actual racial justice and equality in education, jobs, health care and housing, now, amid mass protests, and more importantly, we must continue to do so after the protests have subsided (2020).

Telling Black women’s counter narrative stories is a political act. What they do for the community and the nation is to provide an entryway to a space where leadership, understanding and unfettered creativity can happen. Our stories show us what progress looks like and why race and gender-based abuse minimizes us all. In such a challenging time for America, it is difficult to find strategies for empowering and enabling our children. Black women’s stories can do that when they perform as metaphors for not only resilience but for the right to be visible and empowered. We protest and resist to affirm that we are not complacent or willing participants in marginalization. We protest through our creativity and our boundary pushing to demonstrate that there is no place where we do not belong. As Black women, we recognize that systemic racism and misogynist behaviors will not fade away and that we will have to keep demonstrating that we are here, we are engaged, we are a diverse and distinctive collective and that we will continue pressing humanity to better itself.



References

- American Public Health Association. Racism and Health. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health>
- Anti-Racism Resources. Elon University. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://elon.libguides.com/antiracism/intersectionality>
- Bailey, M. (Oct 16, 2020). Misogynoir and Kamala Harris. #HashtagActivism. Retrieved from <https://www.moyabailey.com/tag/misogynoir/>
- Beardsley, M. (1958) Aesthetics, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Publishers, (1958)
- Brooks, K. (2017). Most Artists Who Make A Living From Their Work Are White, Research Says. Huffington Post, 2014, 10 24) (updated 12 6) Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/racial-diversity-in-art_n_6037792
- Callimachi, R. et. al. (2020/09/23). Fired Officer is Indicted in Breonna Taylor Case; Protesters Wanted Stronger Charges. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/us/breonna-taylor-officer-indicted.html>
- Collins, C. & Daniel, V.A.H. (2014). Community curation as an alternative strategy for interpreting exhibitions. In J.B. Acuff & L. Evans (Eds.), *Multiculturalism in Art Museums Today*. Rowan & Littlefield: Lanham, MD.
- Crenshaw, K.W and Ritchie, A.J. (2015). *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies.
- Crozier, K. (2020). Live Book Interview on Fannie Lou Hamer's Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns. Interview by Brandi Colander. The Raben Group: Live, Washington, DC (2020 10 7). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWSmZn-CbaU>.
- Dennis, A. (June 18, 2020). The black women who launched the original anti-racist reading list. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/18/black-women-who-launched-original-anti-racist-reading-list/>
- Distribution of COVID-19 (coronavirus disease) deaths in the United States as of October 14, 2020, by race. Published by John Elfflein, Sep 22, 2020. Retrieved from

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1122369/covid-deaths-distribution-by-race-us/>

Du Bois, W.E.B, (1926) Criteria of Negro Art, *The Crisis*, 32, 295

Ellis, N.T., “Art so white: Black artists want representation (beyond slavery) in the Met, National Gallery”, *USA Today*, (2019, 5 5). Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/05/05/black-artists-african-american-art-museums-galleries-collections-painting/3483422002/>

Farrington, L. (1999). *Art on Fire: The Politics of Race and Sex in the Paintings of Faith Ringgold*, Millennium Fine Arts Publishing

Foussianes, C. (Sep 14, 2020) Lovecraft Country’s Wunmi Mosaku Thinks Ruby Wasted an Opportunity. *Town and Country*. Retrieved from <https://www.town-andcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a33956738/wunmi-mosaku-lovecraft-country-ruby-episode-5-interview/>

Fondren, P. (6/11/20). The ‘Say Her Name’ Movement Started for a Reason: We Forget Black Women Killed by Police. *Teen Vogue*. Retrieved from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/say-her-name-origin>

Gill, G. and Rahman-Jones, (7/9/20). Me Too founder Tarana Burke: Movement is not over. *BBC*

Grigsby, E. J. (1977). *Art and Ethnics: Background for teaching youth in a pluralistic society*. Dubuque, IO: William C. Brown Company Publishers.

Hammond, Z. (2014) The First Six Weeks-Create a Counter Narrative. *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*. Retrieved from. https://crtandthebrain.com/the-first-six-weeks_create-a-counter-narrative/

High, F. (1997). Chiasmus. Art in politics, politics in art: Chicano/a and African American image, text, and activism of the 1960s and 1970s. In Dufrene, P. (Ed.), *Voices of Color: Art and society in the Americas*. (pp. 118-165). Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

Hoard, A. (1990). The black aesthetic: An empirical feeling. In Young, B. (Ed.), *Art, Culture and Ethnicity*, Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Hudson-Weems, C. (1993). *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Troy, MI: Bedford Publishing.

Lim, K. (Oct 18, 2020). Alicia Garza on the origin of Black Lives Matter. *CBS*



News. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/alicia-garza-on-the-origin-of-black-lives-matter/>

Jeffries, R. (1976) "HOARD", Adrienne W. Hoard ARTFORCE Exhibition Catalogue, Columbus, OH.

Lewis, S. (1990) *African American Art and Artists*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Mallocci, M. (2018). All Art is Propaganda: W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Crisis* and the Construction of a Black Public Image, *USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics*. Vol. 1. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-2752/7177>

Martindale, Shneiderman and Turin, (2018). Time, oral tradition and technology. In Tortell, P., Turin, M., and Young, M. (Eds.). *Memory*. Vancouver, BC: Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbtzpfm>

Michaél, T. (nd.). 16 Black Women Artist-Activists From the Past & Present That We Must Celebrate. Retrieved from <http://theculture.forharriet.com/2015/07/16-black-women-artist-activists-from.html>

Nance, K., (2008) The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison. *Poets & Writers, 50 and Forward*, November-December. Retrieved from https://www.pw.org/content/the_spirit_and_the_strength_a_profile_of_toni_morrison

Neal, L. (1968) The Black Arts Movement. *The Drama Review: TDR*, 12(4)

Black Theatre (Summer), 28-39

Ojo, E. (2020) Why #BlackLivesMatter is about the right to life, *Open Global Rights*, 19 June. Retrieved from <https://www.openglobalrights.org/black-lives-matter-right-to-life/>

Peterson, M. (March 4, 2019). The Revolutionary Practice of Black Feminisms. Smithsonian. National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Pierce, M. (Jan 18, 2016) ... When Martin Luther King Jr. took his fight into the North, and saw a new level of hatred. *Los Angeles Times*.

Reynolds, D. (1995) *Symbolist aesthetics and early abstract art: Sites of Imaginary Space*, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press

Richardson, A.V. (2019). *Dismantling Respectability: The Rise of New Womanist*



Communication Models in the Era of Black Lives Matter. *Journal of Communication*, 69(2), 193–213, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz005>

Ringgold, F. (2015). A Letter to my Daughter, Michele: in response to her book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, *CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform*, 30 November

Sajej, N. (2018). Betye Saar: the artist who helped spark the black women's movement, *The Guardian/US Edition*, 30 October. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/30/betye-saar-art-exhibit-racism-new-york-historical-society>

Thomas, E. (10/8/20). Trump insults Harris as 'a monster' morning after vice presidential debate. ABC News.

Violence Against Black Women – Many Types, Far-reaching Effects (2017). *Institute for Women's Policy Research*. <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/race-ethnicity-gender-and-economy/violence-against-black-women-many-types-far-reaching-effects/>

Tharpe, F. (9/14/20). Wunmi Mosaku Taps into "Cellular Rage" on Lovecraft Country

msn.com. Retrieved from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/Lifestyle/relationships/wunmi-mosaku-taps-into-%e2%80%9ccellular-rage%e2%80%9d-on-lovecraft-country/ar-BB191ASZ>.

Walker, A. (1983). *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Welsh-Asante, K. (1993). *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the traditions.*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Young and McMahon, (6/16/20). #SayHerName Puts Spotlight On Black Women Killed By Police. *WBUR. Here and Now*.

