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Morgan Taylor Cherry Mitchell April 8th, 2019

Racial Formations in the United States and Aesthetic Resistance in the 21st Century

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Abstract

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This thesis provides a framework for looking at Black aesthetic practices as a form of resistance. I present an investigation of Black art that details the unique perspectives of Black people. The proclamation of Black life that arises out of Black aesthetics demonstrates the ways in which the unique experiences and perspectives of Black people are showcased as a means of affiliation and a form of cultural praxis that is harnessed in its depiction. Cultural formations and assemblages perform a resistance, as they express how the recognition and the thoughtful depiction of culture complicates racial binaries.

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Introduction: Becoming Black and its Beautiful Journey

The story and the journey of *becoming* is familiar to many Black people in America. For me, it begins with family. The development of cultural practices begins here. For many, it begins with mannerisms, gestures of enthusiasm, vocal ad libs, storytelling, ways of worship, ways of speaking, and a way of self maintenance. The initial phase of *becoming*, rich in its purity, appears untainted. These cultural practices and experiences are unique, as they are a part of a coalition of communities, passed down from ancestor to ancestor. Although we are looking at Black aesthetic practices, we are looking at these practices amid a white system for Black Americans.

For the purpose of this paper, I define whiteness as system of oppression that systematically works to protect itself as an ideal, and to maintain its hegemony. I am investigating the ways in which developing an unmarked sense of self is a form of resistance for Black Americans. The refusal to be marked is radical in this context and this refusal begins and ends in cultural practices. Paul Taylor, in *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, calls this refusal and rebuilding, a "human act of aesthetic self fashioning. This aesthetic self fashioning creates a stylized barrier between themselves and the new social forces with which they would be forced to contends."[1] This aesthetic self fashioning provides instrumentality to self-consciousness because the autonomous construction of a self allows one's consciousness to be built independently and freely. Therefore, self fashioning and identity development is the essence of Black aesthetics. Further, Taylor defines Black aesthetics as "the practice of using art,

[1] Paul C Taylor, *Black is beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Vol. 6. John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 2.

criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in maintaining Black life worlds."[2] Taylor's Black aesthetics is an internal self gaze--a creative response to the responsibilities of self-fashioning.

In my work, I aim to investigate racial formations and their role in Black aesthetics. I begin my paper by discussing whiteness and its relationship to Black identity. With an understanding of whiteness as a coercive system, we can examine how cultural practices subvert and take up forms of resistance to whiteness, as cultural practices are formations of unmarked autonomous selves. Black art and Black art movements demonstrate that art has been and is recognized as a form of coalition building to Black peoples by creating purposeful representations within the public sphere as a means of defiance. We will discuss the art works of Kerry James Marshall, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Fahamu Pecou and their cultural political implications. In chapter one, "Defining Black Aesthetics: Neal, Gayle, and Taylor" I will outline Black aesthetic theories and theorists. In the subsequent Chapters I will examine whiteness as a political system and its implications on Black peoples through normalization and specialization. Then in chapter three and four I will begin to discuss the duality present in Black life and the sources of agency in Black life traditions. Finally in chapter five to seven I will discuss how Black art is a form of cultural resistance by specifically drawing from the works of Kerry James Marshall, María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Fahamu Pecou. Throughout the course of this work I hope to showcase the ways that art and the expressions of culture work as a radical mode of resistance.

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[2] Taylor, *Black is beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics,* 12.

Chapter 1: Defining Black Aesthetics: Neal, Gayle, and Taylor

In 1968, the writer Larry Neal stated that Black arts were the aesthetic leader of the Black Power concept.[3] He argued that Black artists should speak on the Black experience in order to subvert deceptive images of Black people and to help uplift the Black community. He argued that the Black power concept and the Black arts movement pertains to the "Afro-Americans' desire for self-determination and nationhood"[4]. He states:

> When we speak of a "Black aesthetic" several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition...The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? [5]

For Neal, the Black aesthetic is understood as an essential part of the Black Arts Movement, which emphasizes Afro-American nationalism and the radical restructuring of Western culture. Neal examines the way in which a Black aesthetic is the construction of a cultural tradition. He asserts that the assembly of a Black cultural tradition is synonymous with destroying whiteness, in so far as he sees the formation of Black cultural traditions as a communal refusal to succumb to whiteness. He reiterates that the creation of a Black aesthetics is about Black people creating

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[3] Larry Neal, "The Black arts movement." *The Drama Review: TDR* (1968): 1.

[4] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 2.

[5] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 2.

a world that is theirs. A world where Blackness is not subjugated. A world where whiteness is not meaningful. And most importantly a world that speaks truthfully to Black existence. Neal writes that, "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept."[6] For Neal, the Black aesthetic is Black resistance.

Addison Gayle, the author of the 1971 anthology *The Black Aesthetic,* speaks to advocates of the Black Aesthetic by stating, *"* the proponents of a Black Aesthetic … call for a set of rules by which Black literature and art [are] to be judged and evaluated"[7] Gayle situates his definition closely to the production of Black art in order to nurture a Black identity that does not aim to appease whiteness. Gayle and Neal define the Black aesthetic similarly because they both align their understandings of a Black aesthetic with the cultural implications of Black life.

Neal and Gayle's definition of Black aesthetics diverges from W.E.B Du Bois' earlier theory on Black art and its purpose. Du Bois' 1926 essay "Criteria for Negro Art" brings up the importance of incorporating Negro art into mainstream society. Du Bois argues the importance of Black artists depicting their lived experiences in their art. He asserts that Black people are only a part of the entertainment scene so long as it aligns with what white people want to see. He uses this to stress the importance of documenting Blackness, beauty, and history in order to subvert and challenge the stereotypes of Black people. He states:

> In other words, the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial, racial prejudgment which deliberately distorts Truth and Justice....We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes of white patrons....In all sorts of ways we are hemmed in and our new young artists have got to fight their way to freedom. [8]

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[6] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 1.
[7] Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (Doubleday Books, 1971), 44.
[8] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro art," *Crisis* 32, no. 6 (1926): 290-297.

W.E. B. Du Bois believed that Negro art could break the oppressive chains of the white normative gaze by changing white conceptions of Blackness. He contended that art can be used to resist previous knowledge production. He stressed encompassing art into the New Negro movement because he stated that art is propaganda that should be produced with the aim to captivate universally while also maintaining a genuine connection to Black life. In the "Criteria for Negro Art" Du Bois furthers the sentiments of Alaine Locke and the New Negro movement, which emphasized integrationist impulses, as the movement highlighted Black readiness for participation in society. Du Bois pushes for this universal yet intimate art form because he believes that art is connected to truth and justice. He stated, "The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of justice."[9] Du Bois suggested that having the opportunity to imagine justice can help ignite actual progress. Du Bois recognized the responsibility of imagining Black life practices with the aims of humanizing and integrating Black life into the American art sphere. Du Bois can be seen as an intergrationalist as his theories of art serving as propaganda dilutes the Black experience in order to appease the white normative gaze. With that being said, Du Bois and the Harlem renaissance pushed integrationist agendas, however, that is said not to discredit the impact of Du Bois and the Harlem renaissance.

Aesthetics were understood as principles concerned with beauty. Philosophers like Larry Neal, Alain Locke and Du Bois, were examining aesthetics as a philosophical phenomenon that explained Black cultural and political conditions. Decades later, Paul Taylor examines aesthetics under the philosophic scrutiny of aesthetics' role in race, white supremacy. In *Black is Beautiful,*

[9] Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro art," 28/29.

Taylor looks at Black aesthetics from a philosophical standpoint, which he explains as "the philosophic preoccupations that animate and surround the cultural works of Black peoples."[10] Taylor suggests that race is an aesthetic phenomenon. He asserts that understanding how Black life worlds and cultures have been racialized affects the visual experience of Black life. Using some of Paul Taylor's notions, I will explore how Black art effects and sustains Black life worlds and practices. In this essay, I will use Taylor's and Gayle's notion of Black aesthetics to examine how artists such as María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Kerry James Marshall, and Fahamu Pecou use their art to explore Black life and the idea of self-fashioning as a form of resistance and healing.

As indicated earlier, Taylor defines Black aesthetics as "the use of art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining Black life worlds."[11] Hence, Taylor suggests that Black aesthetics are the creations and practices of people whom white society's oppressive frameworks deem Black. Although Addison Gayle's definition is often used when defining Black aesthetics, I would like to expand the focus of my paper by aligning my definition of Black aesthetics with Paul Taylor's as he discusses Black aesthetics as philosophical phenomenon. Looking at Black aesthetics in a philosophical framework expands the scope of the inquiry, allowing Black aesthetics to encompass the political, epistemological hegemony, and account for the plurality of Blackness. I aim to look at Blackness and whiteness as a philosophical phenomenon, and explore how philosophers have stifled autonomy and plurality from their understandings of Blackness in their studies of Blackness and racial contracts. I will also analyze philosophers who incorporate agency and plurality into their theories of Blackness. In the chapters to come, I will discuss how artists have

[10] Taylor, *Black is beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, 6.
[11] Taylor, *Black is beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, 6.

worked to refuse the hegemonic epistemological influence on Black identity by exploring Black methods and cultural formations through art.

Chapter 2: Normalization and White Supremacy as a Political and Epistemological System in the U.S

Normalization

Although my work focuses on cultural formations and Black self-fashioning as a mode of resistance, I feel the need to analyze how philosophers such as Frantz Fanon and Charles Mills examine Blackness. Fanon and Mills generate Blackness as a reactionary identity to whiteness. By doing so, they limit the dynamism present in Blackness. I delve into their interpretations because I feel that their theoretical examinations uphold white supremacy and its necessary ontological perceptions. Hence, I am exploring Fanon and Mills' analysis of Blackness because I aim to point out the differences in how I examine Black identity and how Fanon and Mills do so. Also, some of the concepts that Mills and Fanon articulate permit contextual understandings for concepts discussed in chapters to come. It is not my intention to conflate Blackness with whiteness in the same fashion that I feel Mills and Fanon have. However, I am aiming to provide an analysis of race formations and white supremacy because a clear understanding of how the system of white supremacy operates will be helpful in fully seeing how Black life experiences are dislodged and ambivalent to whiteness because they do not operate in a manner is legible.

In Charles Mills' essay *The Racial Contract,* he discusses how white supremacy erodes social identities by focusing on white supremacy's reliance on its self-serving production of

knowledge. According to Mills, the racial contract, i.e. white supremacy, requires its own moral epistemology, which is enforced by norming the procedural methods for determining what counts as factual knowledge.[12] Mills suggests that this is done through normalization. He argues that the norms associated with whiteness produces norms of whiteness, which are idealized and become naturalized. He suggests that society's norms act as a moral compass for "right" and "wrong." As follows, the moral compass is based upon a white perception, which creates a color-coded morality system. Therefore, Mills contends that the objective of white supremacy is to distort reality by using white epistemic authority and the historical presence of colonialism to produce knowledge. Through the naturalization of ideals and morality, whiteness operates in a manner in which knowledge production mobilizes whiteness.[13] Mills suggests that whiteness has the capacity to create knowledge. Therefore, whiteness operates in society freely, without obvious limits to its movements because it is sustained by its own rules through normalizing and categorizing certain peoples, ideals, and customs.[14] Therefore, because white normativity assembles hegemonic knowledge it is complicit in and leads the way to body naming.

Space

The racial contract is dependent on the politics of certain bodies. Mills states, "The racial contract is explicitly predicated on body politics, which relates to the body politic through the restrictions on which bodies are 'politic.' There are bodies impolitic whose owners are judged

[12] Charles W. Mills, *The racial contract* (Cornell University Press, 2014),17.
[13] Mills, *The racial contract*, 54.
[14] Mills, *The racial contract*, 54.

incapable of forming or formally entering into a body politic."[15] Mills' analysis of the importance of the perception of the human body and its ontological implications paves ways to evaluate how peoples are intertwined into spatial associations. For Mills, this spatial association is a crucial tool for white supremacy as it attaches normalized perceptions onto certain beings, imposing personhood and sub-personhood. Mills suggests that only white bodies can claim personhood and pretend that the body does not have to account for itself because it is the somatic norm. Therefore, because the body is only irrelevant when it's the white male body, the non-white body is hyper-politicized and must always account for itself.

According to Mills, because of this deviation, Black bodies are incapable of entering a full body politic--full personhood.[16] As a result of the somatic norm of whiteness, white individuals have the ability to enforce their own epistemology because whiteness harbors perceptions of authority. Accordingly, in order for whites to carry out the racial contract they need to see themselves as persons with authority and they need to perceive non-whites as inferior sub-persons. Hence, there is a dimension of ideological coercion that takes place, which works to divide the world by persons and sub-persons. Fanon defines this world division as Manichaeism. Mills suggests that the dichotomy between subhuman and human is the product of norming.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, which contextually refers to the French colonization of Algeria in the 1830s, Fanon argues that the colonists are not content with just limiting the political and spatial freedoms of the colonized.[17] He suggests that manichaeism is utilized by the

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[15] Mills, *The racial contract*, 53.
[16] Mills, *The racial contract*, 17.
[17] Lossin, Rebecca H. "Historical Context of The Wretched of the Earth." Columbia College. Accessed March 26, 2019. https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/historical-context-wretched-earth-0.

colonizers to make the "colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil."[18] Similar to Mills' theory of the creation of nonwhite sub-humans, Fanon suggests that manichaeism works to demonization the colonized subject.[19]

Fanon suggests that the intimate relationship between race and geographical space is the impetus that mobilizes a racial dichotomy within society, which allows race to be a social and political determinant. Mills also explains that in order for the racial contract to operate spatially, individuals who occupy that space cannot be alike, therefore, normative distinctions must be made. Mills contends, "The norming of space is partially done in terms of the racing of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals [whether persons or sub-persons] of a certain race. At the same time, the norming of the individual is partially achieved by spacing it, that is, representing it as imprinted with the characteristics of a certain kind of space."[20] Mills suggests that norming space and racing space are done in tandem, by associating certain spaces with certain people but also characterizing certain people with certain spaces. The interdependent support of characterizing space and individuals helps to indict individuals marked as subhuman into a circular trap. In Fanon's case with Algeria, through the French colonial rule, Algerians were thought of as French nationals, however they were deprived of rights that were granted to citizens, thus, normalizing the French and Whiteness and committing anything associated with Algerians to be subhuman and worthy of subjugation and dehumanization.[21]

Through this method of normalizing individuals, whiteness is established as the somatic norm. The normalization of white spaces allows for raced space to be omitted from euro-

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[18] Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2007), 6.
[19] Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*, 7.
[20] Mills, *The racial contract*, 42.
[21] Lossin, Rebecca H. "Historical Context of The Wretched of the Earth." Columbia College. Accessed March 26, 2019. https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/historical-context-wretched-earth-0.

civilization. Mills states, "Globally, the racial contract effects a final paradoxical norming and racing of space, a writing out of the polity of certain spaces as conceptually and historically irrelevant to European and Euro-world development, so that these raced spaces are categorized as disjoined from the path of civilization."[22] Mills implies that the normalization of white space allows non-white spaces to been seen as inferior and not part of the superior Euro-civilized space. Further, Mills explains that the normalization of white spaces creates a discourse that compares a space's industry and culture to that of euro-civilization. For example, colonialism is an endeavor that denies non-whites the credit for civilization and industry. Therefore, these spaces are seen as uncivilized, making non-European space virtually invisible and third world.[23] Mills furthers his notions on the ways in which idealized norms create spaces that are "tainted" through its association with certain bodies.

Fanon and Mills Define Whiteness and Blackness

Interestingly, although both Mills and Fanon contend that colonialism and white supremacy implements deceptive ideologies towards whites and non-whites, Mills states that white identity cannot be defined separately from non-white identity. He states, "In the ideal Kantian world of the race-less social contract, persons can exist in the abstract, in the non-ideal world of the naturalized racial contract, persons are necessarily related to sub persons. For these identities are 'contrapuntal ensembles.' Requiring their opposites with the 'secondariness' of sub persons being paradoxically essential to the primariness of the European."[24] Situating an identity

[22] Mills, *The racial contract*, 74.
[23] Mills, *The racial contract*, 45.
[24] Mills, *The racial contract*, 58.

into a “contrapuntal ensemble” strips agency, as an contrapuntal ensemble siphons the way in which an identity is perceived and it deprives identity of unrestricted instrumentality. For Mills, whiteness paradoxically depends on the secondarieness of Blackness--that is the contrapuntal ensemble. However, I argue that Black identity is not situated into contrapuntal ensembles because it is dynamic and at its core the identity produces modes of refusal through Black life practices that work to disrupt racial binaries. Later in my work I will critique both Mills’ and Fanon's notion of “contrapuntal ensembles” as I feel that their theories do not give Blackness its deserved plurality and dualism, which operates beyond and in resistance to the scope whiteness.

The destructive implications of colonialism that Mills and Fanon examine shed a light on how whiteness operates with Blackness--without love and without recognition of identities, cultures, and experiences. By analyzing the mechanics of whiteness we see that Black autonomous existence and Black cultural practices are not legible to whiteness because in order for existence and culture to be legible Black existence and culture would also have to be recognized autonomously and without subjugation. But as Mills and Fanon have examined, Blackness is rendered invisible and entirely dependent to whiteness as an identity.

Chapter 3: Blackness and its Social and Cultural Construction

Both Mills and Fanon agree that white supremacy groups certain individuals in society by using a co-dependent formation of identity based on whiteness, which is done through the political demarcation of nonwhite bodies. Therefore, idealized moral associations are attached to certain bodies and spaces and this moral understanding provides a collective consensus of the idealized norms that are enforced through epistemic authority. However, I aim to challenge

Mills' and Fanon's notion surrounding their ideas of the co-dependent formations of Blackness by incorporating cultural formations into Black identity, which brings about plurality and a mode of praxis within Blackness that is not legible inside of the racial binary, hence, illegible to whiteness.

Although I do agree with Mill's theory of racialization and his idea of the racial contract being one of the first social contracts, I do not believe in his explanation of racialization, as he groups Black existence with white existence. His notions of the dependency of whiteness to Blackness and vice versa does not leave room for the pluralism and complexities of autonomous Black spaces. Mills fails to show how cultural experiences have played an instrumental role in identity formations and autonomous assemblages of cultural experiences and traditions. Unlike Mills and Fanon, other thinkers such as Nigerian curator Okuwi Enwezor realizes the instrumentality in Black being. Enwezor speaks on the pluralism of Black being and frames it in a way that grants the Black psyche and its state of being as an innate contribution to the denouncement of white supremacy. Enwezor reworks W.E.B. Du Bois' double consciousness to express it as a cultural refusal and a second sight that allows Black people to see the incongruities of whiteness. In *Everything is Separated By Water* Enwezor states:

> ...it should always be borne in mind that double consciousness is not solely a mode of existence but also an active process of translation, transmission, enactment, and performance. Whether through language or image, a metonymic sign or an aesthetic form, this process is both a way of crossing and double-crossing space. It is about undoing and remaking, disassembling and reassembling, and acquiring and redistributing cultural material, imagery, authority, and power...Double consciousness is a practice of joining: talking syntactical incongruity and rendering it legible, understandable."[25]

[25] Lisa D. Freiman and Okwui Enwezor, *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: everything is separated by water (*Yale University Press, 2007), 69.

Theorists like W.E.B Du Bois have examined Black identity against the systems of whiteness and have explored the unique ways in which Black people's positions under white supremacy offer a dualist perspective that whiteness as a political system is not able to grasp. The dualist perspective (double consciousness) coined by W.E.B Du Bois suggests that Black people have the ability to see themselves from their own perspective, but also from the perspective of others. For Du Bois, double consciousness is a condition that has plagued Black Americans. For him, double consciousness is an issue and a setback. However, like Enwezor, I see double consciousness as a place of movement, a place that brews resistance, and a place from which beauty emerges. A place that has the power to disassemble whiteness. It gives the gift of the expansion of the mind because it lengthens one's world-views. Instead of thinking of this expansion as a form of mental captivation, I argue that it is a form of mental elevation and fluidity, which promotes movement, creativity and ultimately a profound cultural refusal. For me, double consciousness is a gift of sight. It allows us to see the incongruities of the hegemonic teachings, it allows us to see the incongruities of white identity and the world they have created for themselves. This sight allows my existence to be a continuous refusal. This sight allows me to see the world for what it is. It allows for a better understanding of humanity, which warrants the assemblage of communities that have double sight to create anew, to unlearn and to relearn the world we live in through community and life practices. It is a constant reworking and undoing that is not only liberating but tantalizing to whiteness. I see this unlearning in our speech, our dance, and the ways that we see the world and express it to one another. Our existence in both worlds allows us a world-view what is unfathomable to whiteness, essentially an untouchable source of creativity, mental awareness and culture that is beautifully exclusive. Enwezor beautifully articulates how double consciousness is an aspect of Black identity that

allows for resistance and restructuring that works at the underbelly of white supremacy. Double consciousness then becomes a part of the cultural identity of Blackness. There is an aspect of culture that lies at the underbelly of the racial binary, which provides a richness and an independence that I think theorists like Addison Gayle, Alaine Locke, Paul Taylor and Monique Roelof and artists like Kerry James Marshall, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Fahamu Pecou are calling to.

Recognizing the ways that identity and culture implicate aesthetic structures and how these aesthetic structures embroil the modalities of culture and identity dissipates the centralization of white normativity.[26] With this in mind, my definition of Black remains broad, as that allows my definition to observe the plurality of identity within Blackness. My definition of Blackness is in accordance with Paul Taylor's definition, "Black is not a color but a condition. It is a condition of being positioned in certain ways of being racialized--by social and cultural forces."[27] Paul Taylor's definition of Black provokes readers to include the social and cultural forces that Black peoples have created and lived under into this definition. Hence, Taylor is including the historical dimensions of racial formations as well as the creative responses to the racial formations put in place. This forces readers to incorporate the "life-worlds" of Black people when thinking about Blackness as a racial category. I think this incorporation is crucial because it forces audiences to attend to the plurality of Blackness and the violence and erasure that ensues when that plurality goes unrecognized. Taylor's assertion of Black plurality allows Blackness to have autonomy and it deconstructs the universalist perspective of Blackness. Taylor states, " Invisibility is what happens when the seer fails to credit the two-ness of "of

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[26] Cornel West, *white on white/black on black,* ed. George Yancy (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005),109.
[27] West, *white on white/black on black*, 3.

Negro"--when we see Black life only through the eyes of others, without attending to the counterhegemonic impulses and practices that might make black life more than a problem."[28] Taylor argues that if Black life is only looked at through whiteness and its relationship to it, the plurality of Blackness is extinguished. Just as Du Bois recognized Black people's second sight and their inherent duality because of it, Taylor also examines the plurality and analyzes the importance of not looking at Blackness through dominant hegemonic gazes that strip Blackness of its duality because whiteness is not able to recognize the complexities of Black identity. Taylor's recognition of Black plurality deviates his understanding of Blackness from theorists like Fanon and Mills as they align Black aesthetics closely to historical demarcations of Blackness.[29]

Chapter 4: Racialized Aesthetics and "Aesthetic Racialization"

In *Racialization as an Aesthetic Production: What Does the Aesthetic Do for Whiteness and Blackness and Vise Versa?* Monique Roelof argues that racial formations are aesthetic phenomena and practices that are racialized structures. In her work, she situates culture in terms of its aesthetic and racialized dimensions of whiteness and Blackness.[30] This idea is present in Roelof's idea of "aesthetic racialization," which is that Black people live under conditions that are directly intertwined with Blackness's racialization. Roelof asserts,

> Racial formations are aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic practices are racialized structures. A theory of the nature of race and racism … must address the place of the aesthetic in processes of racialization. Correlatively, a theory of the aesthetic as a

[28] Taylor, *Black is beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, 39.
[29] West, *white on white/black on black,* 109.
[30] West, *white on white/black on black*, 84.

> philosophical category … must account for the ways in which structures of aesthetic exchange channel racial passions and perceptions.[31]

Roelof's argument illuminates the importance of visual culture and perception as it is impacted by white oppressive norms. Roelof begins her outlines of production with Kant and Hume, where she critiques their philosophies of taste and culture. Roelof dismisses their aesthetic philosophical grounding due to the fact that Kant and Hume ignore the impact of the normativity of whiteness. She asserts that their definitions of general "taste" and art merely encompasses the white, male, and middle class definitions and livelihoods, thus, erasing and invalidating cultures and tastes that do not adhere to white cultural and social identities. Roelof states,

> Kant enlists the aesthetic in support of white civilization. Grounding taste in the *sensus communis,* he renders the aesthetic normativity of whiteness invisible and decenters the hierarchized cultural standards underwriting his aesthetic system... "other" people's cultural needs and supports are then easily dismissed as extraneous, incidental, a burden these people bring with them, or a best, a momentary aesthetic thrill.[32]

Roelof points out that Kant superimposes the aesthetic with white civility by rendering whiteness as invisible and the cultural norm, which allows "other" culture's aesthetic practices to be dismissed and not taken seriously, which reinforces a hierarchical cultural system. Roelof suggests that through the process of categorizing and normalizing a cultural practice, Kant and Hume contribute to centralizing white normativity.

Roelof suggests that Fanon and Mills dismiss the poignancy and legitimacy of individual cultural experiences. Both theorists talk of identity formation and the aesthetic processes in accordance with racialization that mold normative world views. In Fanon and Mills' work, whiteness shapes Blackness, leaving Blackness without an autonomous way of adhering to the

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[31] West, *white on white/black on black*, 83.
[32] West, *white on white/black on black*, 96.

world around it. These notions debilitate Blackness and Black culture, leaving it to stand in tandem with whiteness. However, Roelof states:

> Aesthetic oppression, so conceived, is not exhausted by its destructive dimension but can be seen to re-establish the terrain from which novel productive forms must inevitably emerge. Fanon's reading of aesthetic oppression as an extinction of aesthetic modes and capacities aligns the aesthetic too closely with a pure, ambivalently valorized national identity.[33]

Roelof importantly notes that Fanon deemphasizes the cultural resistance that is embedded into aesthetic cultural practices, which are inherently reactive to the oppressive systems that coexist with Blackness and the multi-dimensional ways that aesthetic practices act to challenge and subvert oppressions.

To counter Fanon's shallow interpretation of the way that aestheticization and Blackness intermingle, Roelof introduces works by Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Audre Lourde, and Paule Marshall--thinkers who have been able to describe the the vitality of everyday Black aesthetic practices, which have been ignored by the "Enlightenment model of aesthetic exchange." [34] Roelof reifies the value in basic everyday practices that are important in maintaining a sense of joy, contentment, and survival. Roelof explains how Audre Lorde uses poetry to actualize these attributes. She affirms that because aesthetic practices are convoluted with survival, everyday aspects of life, and resistance, they are intrinsically racialized. This assertion allows for the acknowledgement of a more complex understanding of aesthetic productions that exist and should be legitimized.[35]

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[33] West, *white on white/black on black*,103.
[34] West, *white on white/black on black*, 104.
[35] West, *white on white/black on black*, 109.

Ultimately, Roelof suggests that aesthetics are central to both Blackness and whiteness because of their connection to identity, culture and it's subjectivity, therefore, aesthetic practices are essential to culture and identity, serving as the pillars for aesthetics and vice versa, where so culture and identity are weighted and dependent on aesthetics.[36] Roelof states, "A failure to recognize their [Aesthetics] complex, mutual entanglements runs the risk of aligning the aesthetic too tidily with historically stabilized cultural demarcations, or of reinstituting whiteness as a basis of normativity in the fields of art and culture."[37] Roelof warns us of the challenges of interpreting aesthetics and racialization and vice versa, as she asserts that there needs to be a better critical understanding of the engagement with aesthetics. She emphasizes the necessity of having a critical engagement with individual aesthetic practices, as she contends that aesthetic rationality commingled with the normative social frameworks erase agency and value that is fundamental to aesthetic practices and its resistances. Roelof explains the importance of addressing and acknowledging the plurality and agency of Blackness, a fundamental misstep in Mills and Fanon's theoretical works on Blackness. Roelof also challenges Du Bois' notion of Black aesthetics because Du Bois racializes aesthetics in a manner that disallows the autonomy in showcasing Black experiences without its necessity to appeal to a white gaze. From now on, my work will examine Black thinkers and movements who have centralized Blackness without incorporating whiteness as a relational figure. These thinkers and movements situate themselves within Roelof's thinking, as they do not nurture aesthetics and praxeis that reinstitute whiteness as the norm or sustain a binary way of thinking about culture.

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[36] West, *white on white/black on black*, 109.
[37] West, *white on white/black on black*, 109.

Chapter 5: The *Twentieth Century and Black Arts Movements*

The New Negro/The Harkem Renaissance represent a major ideological reconstruction of Black arts and its purpose. Major thinkers in the movement were concerned with uplifting Black populations by using art and criticism to reconstruct the discourse surrounding Black identity and culture. Major thinkers in the movement like Alain Locke, W.E.B Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurtston, and others were devoted to curating Black creative practices to reflect Black lives in a positive light because they believed that the arts and humanities had the ability to aid the Black populations by illustrating Black excellence. However, the movement was not only about uplifting and re-establishing Black identity in Black community, but it also was to establish this identity in white communities, which they hoped would help the Black population at large. Hence, The New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance were integrationist movements. However, with the rise of anti-integrationist movements like the Black Power movement and the Black Panther party, art and aesthetic ideologies shifted accordingly.

The Black Arts Movement was a collective of politically motivated artists, writers, and poets who sprung up during the Black Power Movement. The Black Arts Movement was founded in 1965 by Amiri Baraka when he founded the Black Arts Repertory theater.[38] The Black Arts Movement harbored a close relationship to the Black Power Movement as Larry Neal wrote:

> The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate

[38] Foster, Hannah. "THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT (1965-1975)." Black Past , 21 Mar. 2014, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-arts-movement-1965-1975/.

> symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-Americans desire for self determination and nationhood.[39]

The close relationship that the Black Arts movement had with the Black Power movement speaks to the shared mission statement of the two initiatives, which focused on Black power with a sense of solidarity for the Black identity. The works of art and literature that were produced during the Black Arts Movement reflect these sentiments. The Black Arts Movement was also named the Black Aesthetic movement. In that context, Black aesthetics were meant to describe artworks that centered Black culture, struggles and experiences.[40]

Toni Morrison participated in the Black Arts Movement by examining Black experiences in American literature. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Morrison looks at the way that Black people's presence in literature mimics the historical influences of slavery. Morrison argues that the erasure and the invisibility of Blackness in American literature strips Blackness's autonomy and inherent resistance against whiteness. Therefore, the silencing works to coalesce Blackness into white dominant culture. Morrison agues that the lack of Black writers in American literature affects knowledge production as it limits Black roles and their character developments. Morrison, attests that American literature's deprivation of Black authors provides a less than whole portrayal of Black life experiences. Morrison was enthralled by this, and sought to explore the ramifications of white individuals including Black individuals in their work. Further, she argues that the inclusion of black people in American literature with the absence of Black authors is dangerous and violent to the imagination of the nation and provides great insight to the author's thought process and their

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[39] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review:* TDR 12, no. 4 (1968).
[40] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement."

imagination of Black peoples. She states, "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary mediation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writing conscious."[41] Morrison reflects on how dependent American literature is on Blackness as it gives the white characters a sense of superiority and freedom, but Morrison exposes that it is actually the opposite, as white authors subconsciously realize that Black "shadow" characters are necessary in uplifting and elevating the white characters. For white authors, Black "shadow characters" are necessary to support white superiority. Moreover, the depiction of Black peoples in literature and likewise in paintings are used to elevate whiteness.[42]Therefore, Morrison analyzes the landscape of American literature and Black peoples roles within. By doing this Morrison theorizes the politics of Blackness and in her other books Morrison does not value or consider whiteness in her narratives.

The hegemony upholds a framework that necessitates whiteness to be uplifted by Black shadows. Thinkers like Morrison, Kerry James Marshall, and others are attempting to insert a different narrative of Black life into the arts by creating central and autonomous Black characters where whiteness is either absent or condemned. Situating Black figures in narratives that are devoid of whiteness is transformative because it situates itself in opposition to the centrality of white normativity.

Chapter 6: Kerry James Marshall and his Aesthetic Practices

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[41] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 34.
[42] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 46.

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955. However, Marshall grew up in Los Angeles, California.[43] In the summer of 1968 Marshall had his first experience as an art student.[44] In the seventh grade Marshall was nominated by one of his art teacher, Mr. Romity, to attend an art program at Otis Art Institute taught by Gorde De Groat.[45] During the program Marshall was able to study art works and artists, one being Charles White, who became a special figure in Marshall's early career. Marshall says that this program and his encounters with White inspired him to attend Otis for college. Marshall graduated from high school in 1971 and entered Otis as a full time student in 1977.[46] While at Otis, Marshall had the opportunity to take a collage class with artist Betye Saar where he delved into collage before turning to paint.[47]

In the beginning of Marshall's career, he states that it was Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* that propelled him forward. He states, "the condition of invisibility literally changed everything for me. What I was reading there, the notion of being and not being, the simultaneity of presence and absences, was exactly what I had been trying to get at in my artwork."[48] Marshall's painting of Black figures provides a historical and institutional critique of the lack of Black representation in museums. His oeuvre works to institute Black lived experiences into the historical and institutional confines of museums. Marshall's oeuvre has the capacity to influence because he paints. Therefore, by painting he utilizes a "respected" art medium, and because of that Marshall was able to infiltrate institutional hegemony. This sort of infiltration allowed his oeuvre to serve as a metacommentary on the way that artworks are critiqued and historicized. In *Mastry* by Kerry James Marshall, curator Helen Molesworth states:

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[43]Helen Anne Molesworth, *Mastry,* ed. *Kerry James Marshall (*Rizzoli Publications, 2016), 9.
[44] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 17.
[45] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 17.
[46] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 24.
[47] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 25.
[48] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 25.

> "Marshall's oeuvre is a sustained exegesis on the ways in which the museum, painting, and the discipline of art history have participated--both historically and presently-- in the defining, and maintaining of race as a naturalized category."[49]

His oeuvre maintains the traditional artistic mediums while still calling attention to the lack of Black representation and the mishistorization of Blackness and Black lived experiences. His oeuvre alludes to transforming white omnipotence through the presentation of Black life worlds. Molesworth suggests the power of paint in the museums, she writes, "Marshall's project is a form of institutional critique, a profound querying of the museum through its most privileged object: painting."[50] Marshall's adoption of painting is a systematic approach in order to resist and curtail the maintenance of white supremacy in museums. Through his artworks, Marshall is dedicated to a restructuring the historical chasm for Black people present in the art world. Molesworth argues that Marshall is able to do this because of the notion of museums belatedness. She states:

> It is belatedness that allows us to recognize that no matter how chronologically a museum is installed, it is still offering all time, all ages, all places at once. Museums are predicated on the notion that all time can be rendered simultaneous, which is a way of saying that we have all arrived late: it has all existed before us...But in Marshall's case a late arrival is a way to reorganize the simultaneity of that information[51]

Because of Marshall's commitment to painting, he is systematically committing himself to a technology that is over six centuries old, moreover, painting is a medium that can be articulated and tenable in spaces and languages that hold the power. For, the belatedness present in museums allows Marshall to reconfigure and question the cultural historization present within those institutions. It can be assumed that Marshall acknowledges the lasting effects and the

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[49] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 33.
[50] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 37.
[51] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 42.

control of knowledge permeation that museums have. However, unlike Audre Lorde's notion that *The Master's Tools Cannot Destroy The Masters House,* Marshall is using the master's tools for restructuring.[52] This alludes to the fact that Marshall cannot achieve an intervention or a dismantling because he is still using hegemonic tools that cannot create a true disruption. However, he is on the road to transforming white spaces. Marshall is attempting to use the master's tools and techniques maybe not to destroy the museums, but to transform the space in a way that this welcoming and representative of Black life experiences, which can spur and lead to a stronger resistance of hegemonic powers in the institutional arts. However, for the purpose of my paper, Marshall has done a great job at creating a space for Black narratives to be put in the spotlight.

Marshall's approach to entering the art scene and wanting to be taken seriously is evident in his studious techniques and his artistic mastery. It is important to look at the ways in which Marshall depicts the Black figures in his paintings with an air of elegance, grace, and substance. He states in an *Art 21* Interview, "You cannot underestimate the value of a Black figure in a picture that seems self-satisfied. Especially given the history of Black people in the United States and other parts of the world as it is somehow always compromised and traumatic."[53] As Paul Taylor has talked about Black aesthetics being a Black self fashioning, Marshall is exploring the ways in which paintings can help orient a Black self fashioning that is a refusal to be continuously associated with decay and stress.

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[52] Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Pres, 2012), 112.
[53] Marshall, Kerry James. YouTube. May 02, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2bmHE7MRQU&t=372s.
Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The exhibition is cocurated by Dieter Roelstraete, Helen Molesworth, and Ian Alteveer.

Kerry James Marshall. A Portrait of the Artists as a shadow of His Former Self. 1980

Marshall's *A Portrait of the Artist as a shadow of his Former Self* was Marshall's first figurative painting after taking a break from painting abstractly. The portrait was inspired by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* which discusses the notions of visibility and presence. The intermingling of presence and absence is evident in the portrait as it dances with visibility and invisibility as the Black figure is set against a Black-grey background.[54] Marshall states, "That was the first time I used a Black silhouette against a nearly Black background; simultaneous presence and absence, where you can alternately see and not see the figure in painting."[55] In Marshalls paintings there are three types of Black that he employs in his works: Ivory, Mars, and Carbon. Ivory, also known as bone Black, is made from the burning of bones and teeth. Mars, known as iron-oxide Black, named after the ancient Roman of war and Carbon is made through the incomplete combustion of petroleum products such as tar.[56] Considering his technique, Marshall asserts that he never uses or mixes Black paint in any other parts or colors in his paintings. He states that this technique allows the Blackness of the figures to burst as well as it allows the Blackness of the figures to be perceived as a color.[57] Marshall's literal use of Blackness for his figures serves as a rhetorical device that Marshall employs to reclaim Blackness, its representation, and its histories inside of museums. Because color is the most outward and visible manifestation of race it is the criteria that individuals are judged and surveilled upon. In a 2000 interview Marshall states, "Extreme Blackness plus grace equal power. I see the figures as emblematic; I'm reducing complex variations of tone to a rhetorical

[54] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 49.
[55] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 49.
[56] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 59.
[57] Marshall, Kerry James. YouTube. May 02, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2bmHE7MRQU&t=372s.

dimension: Blackness. It's a kind of stereotyping, but my figures are never laughable."[58] Marshall's use of Blackness as a rhetorical device enhances his artistic and cultural operatives. This portrait and the series that follow this work allude to Marshalls mastery and his fervent study of art history along with his dedication to insert Black people and Black livelihood into the historicized realms of museums.[59]

The mastery and complexities of Marshall's later works allow's one to see how he was able to evolve these Black figures into something elaborate and skillful.[60] In an Art 21 interview Marshall states," From the very first image which is The Portrait of the Artist as a shadow of his Former Self , where that figure is essentially flat you can demonstrate that the figure can evolve over time into something more sophisticated. That I do not have to abandon the Blackness of the figure--I can make it complex within the context of its Blackness."[61] *The Portrait of the Artist as a shadow of his Former Self* is especially unique because the piece was created using egg tempera.[62] Marshall's dedicated study of art history and his appreciation of European Renaissance painting is clear, as he uses a thirteenth century technique associated with Italian painters like Giotto and Sandro Botticelli. This showcases his ability to appropriate the techniques revered within the white world and insert Black figures into these techniques. Marshall's keen artistic approach paired with his illustrations of Black figures works perfectly to protect his artworks. Marshall states, "I think there had always been this way in which the moment a Black artist presented images of Black people, then the issues in the work always

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[58] Marshall, 59.
[59] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 49.
[60] Marshall, Kerry James. YouTube. May 02, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2bmHE7MRQU&t=372s.

[61] Marshall, Kerry James. YouTube. May 02, 2016.

[62]Molesworth, *Mastry*, 48.

seem to collapse into simply social and political issues... And so the work was seen as a social phenomenon rather than an aesthetic phenomenon." In order to combat the compartmentalization and the subsequent trivialization of the aesthetic phenomena in his work he states, "So what I try to do is make the paintings be as much about the way paintings can be done....historically and technically, how the paintings look and incorporate style, [while] at the same time, seem to be as much about the subject that is represented in them...so that you have to take them both as a whole package."[63] This approach protects not only Marshall's work but the representation in his work. It allows Black individuals to penetrate into the art realm without being compartmentalized or trivialized.

In *Past Times*, a later work, the painting is extremely flat and the figures are very stoic and seem disturbed by the gazers' on looking, however, the faces are eerily similar, almost mask like.[64] The masked aspect of the figures imposes a sort of distance and impersonal relationship between the audience and the figures, which seem protective and unapologetically reserved. Lanka Tattersall, in *Mastry* writes, "Lips are sealed tight--a muteness that enhances the stoic elegance of Marshall's figures but also has the function of sealing off the interior of the body from view. The figures are impenetrable; everything [except the eyes] is epidermis, external."[65] It is almost as if Marshall is establishing the literal but also the non-literal Blackness of the figures, which act as a shield, a cover from the gaze of the audiences who presumably are the white bourgeois museum goers and art collectors. The depersonalization of the figures is a constant reminder of the impenetrable elegance of Black people.

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[63] Charles H. Rowell, and Kerry James Marshall, "An Interview with Kerry James Marshall." *Callaloo* vol. 21, no. 1 (1998): 265.
[64] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 60.
[65] Molesworth, *Mastry*, 60.

At first, it may appear as if Marshall's paintings have nothing to do with Black culture beside the display of its shockingly Black figures, however, his demonstration of Black culture is hidden in a way that acts as a sort of dog whistle to Black museum goers. Whether it be in the names of the artworks, like *Dark and Lovely*, the popular Black hair care products, the picturing of voodoo veve symbols in the voyager, or the conditioning cap present on *AKA Big Boy* in his *Lost Boys* series. Marshall secretly speaks to his Black audiences, conveying aspects of community and commonality.

In this way, Marshall allows his art to be both consumable to whites while also speaking to Black onlookers in a more meaningful and textured manner. Marshall is able to converse dialectically between both the museum as a white hegemonic dominant system while also creating a space and for Black audiences. Marshall isn't enacting a epistemic disruption because his oeuvre is praised and legible under dominant logistics. However, his work is transformational and allows Black individuals to feel a connectedness to their identity, the fine arts, and the schema within museums. Marshall's strategy within the art realm demonstrates itself to be one that aligns itself with European art techniques and creating a space in the art realm for Black people to be represented with grace, poise, and stature. In the next chapter, we look at Fahamu Pecou's work, how he fathoms Black identity, and his strategic technique for entering the art world, which is quite different from Marshall's.

Kerry James Marshall. Past Times.
1997

Chapter 7: Fahamu Pecou: Contemporary Art With a Yoruba Perspective on Ritualization, Identity, Culture, and Race

"Fahamu Pecou is the shit" is the phrase that *supported* the artist's rise to fame.[66] The phrase taunts at the notion that artists must adhere to the white art world in order to establish notoriety. Pecou started his career boldly, positioning himself as the center subject in his artworks, In Fahamu Pecou's work *Visible man,* Mark Sloan writes, "Pecou developed a fearless persona that has served to both elevate and animate his complex insights into what it means to be a Black male in this time in history."[67] Pecou's work provided a creative and unique commentary on the social and cultural realities of Black American men.

Old gods, new names, 2016

Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas

Pecou's DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance was inspired by police officers

[66] Mark Sloan et al., *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*, (South Carolina: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art; Atlanta, Georgia: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2017), 9.

[67] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*, 9.

murdering Black men and the violence and pain that is pervasive in the Black community.[68] For Pecou, DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance is about rethinking the ways in which we think about life, in the hopes to resist the psychological despair and violence. Pecou states:

> Do or DIE is a different type of spectacle, one that distances itself from the terror and violence typically associated with Black bodies. It affirms life and life beyond, it reclaims what was lost, turning our gaze inward and ultimately forward. Through ritual, performance, and image, the series challenges the perception of death dominion. Ultimately, Do or DIE is a reminder of an intimate balance that affirms life. It is art as affective resistance....It is healing.[69]

Pecou offers audiences a new way to think about Blackness and its positionality. Pecou's *DO or DIE* series is an investigation of the systematic killings of Black men and the systemic outcome of the state to having agency over Black life. Pecou states:

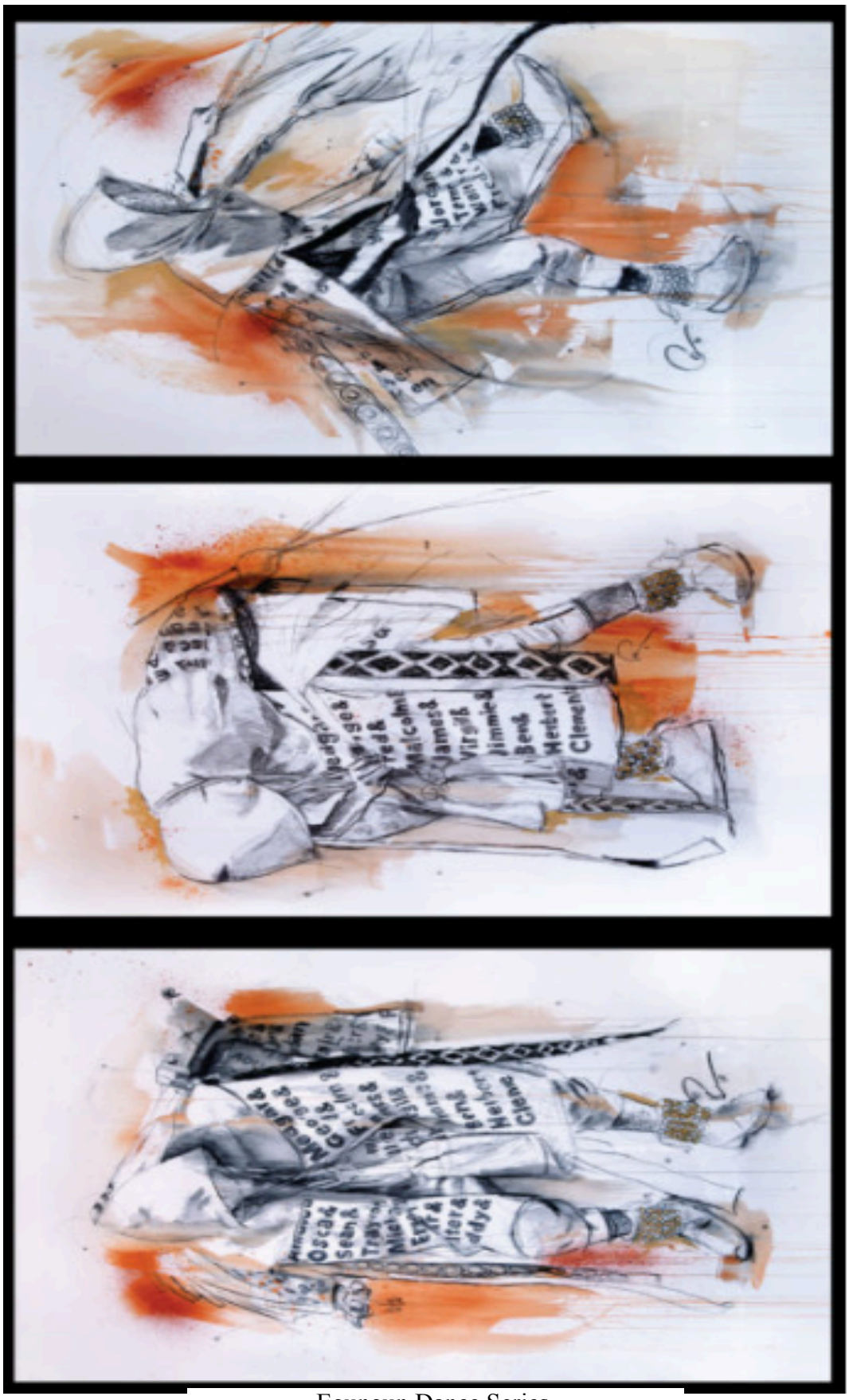
> Violence against Black bodies is endemic. Historically used to strip Black people from having any agency, the terror of physical harm or death has historically worked to contain and dehumanize communities of Black bodies. From the Transatlantic slave trade, to Jim Crow, to this era of mass incarceration, Black men's bodies have maintained a peculiar proximity to death. This spectacle of death remains a visceral inevitability instilling fear and panic, but perhaps worst of all--despair.[70]

In order to investigate a way to theorize the spectacle of Black death Pecou turned to Ifá, a religion within Yorubaland where spirits are infinite. He turned to Egungun traditions of memorializing ancestors through masquerade.[71] "In Yorubaland, Egungun Masquerades

[68] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,10.
[69] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,10-11.
[70] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,131.
[71] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,132.

represent the incarnate spirits of ancestors who return to the village to interact with the living"[72] Pecou created an "New World" Egungun costume installation, which consisted of a hoodie, sweatpants, sneakers, a fly whisk, and a beaded cowry-shell mask. The costume consisted of cloth on which the names of men who have died at the hands of police: Martin & Medgar & George & Malcolm & James & Virgil & Jimmie & Ben & Herbert & Clementa & Emmitt & Abram & Sam & Michael & Eric & John & Tamir & Walter & Freddy & Anthony & Saxe & Dan & Henry & James & Amandou & Oscar & Sean & Trayvon. The names on Pecou's New World Egungun costume took the place of elaborately decorated cloth that would be present on a traditional costume. In *Visible Man*, Aurto Lindsey states that Pecou "defied the finality of death by invoking Malcolm, Martin, et al., and permanently located them in his works of art."[73]

[72] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,132.
[73] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,133.



Egungun Dance Series.

2016

The aspects of cyclical life and spirit reincarnation deals with Ifá and its belief in eternal spirits. Pecou describes his work as a fusion that includes "... elements of hip hop culture, Black aesthetic movements such as Negritude, and Yoruba spiritual practices as concepts of body, mind, and spirit." He writes, " in my work, hip-hop(body), Negritude(mind) and Ifa (Spirit) combine to tell the story of a spirit's journey and offer a proposal for holistic rejuvenation. DO or DIE is not a story of death, but one of life"[74] Pecou regarded his paintings as visual oríkì, praise poetry. Pecou regards his paintings as a place where spirits are cherished and live. Through his artwork, Pecou encourages audiences to view life and death differently because of his account of spirits that have the ability to live on. Pecou writes:

> The significance in the painting however refers to the idea that life is cyclical. The spirit figure is being prepared to return...This is significant in the context of this work because we are talking about resistance to the idea that we can be "ended" or destroyed through acts of violence against our bodies.[75]

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance discusses how Yoruba religious practices can act as a form of resistance to the structural oppressions and violence that Black peoples face by using Yoruba religion to think differently of life and death. I feel that through this particular oeuvre, Pecou is evoking memories from centuries past for Black Americans. This sort of "remembering"[76] engages a way of thinking about identity that incorporates traditions and practices of Black American ancestors as a form of hope and a new way to look at life. I feel that Pecou is articulating a sort of resistance that spurs from memory, because memory is a

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[74] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,135.
[75] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,135.
[76] Toni Morrison's Beloved explores the concept of rememory, where a person encounters there past again and again to the point that it influences their present selves.

refusal to be constituted within a society that is ahistorical and asymmetrical. It is the uprising of centuries of ancestors.

In *The Future of African Art* Rowland Abiodun asserts that in order to properly study African art one needs to recognize the "soul" and the philosophies of African peoples.[77] Abiodun also calls great attention to the centrality and importance of Iwa to Yoruba art and thought, as Iwa encompasses the Yoruba aesthetic universe and is crucial the the definitions of beauty[78] Abiodun defines Iwa, "Put simply, this Iwa deals with the full recognition and proper appreciation of the thing in itself, the unique qualities of a specific object..."[79] Thus, I found it very interesting how Pecou was able to maintain Iwa while acutely showcasing Black American livelihoods and offer a new perspective on life and death within the Black community. Pecou was trying to get at this idea of Black people reconnecting with ancestors and the religions of our past to construct a memory that throws a wrench in the systems of oppressions present in America. I think that he believes that this enactment and practice of "re-memebering"[80] can affect our inhabitants and how we constitute ourselves. Thus, through his art work and his cultural studies he is affirming the power of ancestral knowledge. Enwezor states:

> By articulating the idea of double consciousness as the activity priority of the African American self, Du Bois inaugurated contemporary African diasporic studies...Today, the in-between or third space is the most active site of contemporary... Édouard Glissant, rather than speaking of the planetary totalization that oftentimes accompanies globalization discourse and skews it toward the hegemonic domination of Western authority and power, speaks instead of the world as beginning the process of

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[77] Rowland Abiodun, "The future of African art studies: an African perspective," *African Art Studies : the State of the Discipline : Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art* (DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, , 1987), 65.
[78] Abiodun, "The future of African art studies: an African perspective," 66.
[79] Abiodun, "The future of African art studies: an African perspective," 70.
[80] Toni Morrison's Beloved explores the concept of rememory, where a person encounters there past again and again to the point that it influences their present selves.

> creolization...In short, double consciousness, with its creolized juxtapositions, is the name of all cultural experiences today. It is the foe of ethnocentrism[81]

Thus, Enwezor uses double consciousness and Glissant's creolization to speak on this aspect of "rememebering."[82] Pecou's work is calling attention to the power and the resistance inherent in creolization and double consciousness that is present in the Black psyche. Dr. Michael D. Harris, an artist, a professor, a curator, an author, and an internationally known member of Africobra states, "Many African American artists who incorporate African elements and forms into their work do so by making a symbolic middle passage in reverse...often the journey begins with an examination and appreciation of vernacular expressions in the artist's family or community that display traces of African cultural systems."[83] Pecou is doing just that as he is expanding the African American identity and connecting it with African elements and religious forms. By doing this the artist is combining two distinct but inherently connected cultural systems to make a statement on the state of being an African American man in the United States and a way to use and imagine rituals and diasporic cultural practices as a form of resistance through a self-fashioning based on African elements and ideologies. Mark Sloan writes, "...his works transform the body into a subject of self-actualizing agency,"[84] which Pecou does through the use of political, religious, and popular culture symbols. In the next chapter, we will look at the ways in which a Black woman uses art to make sense of her culture, identity, and lineage. Unlike Marshall and Pecou her art work centers femininity and Blackness. María Magdalena Campos-

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[81] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 69.
[82] Toni Morrison's Beloved explores the concept of rememory, where a person encounters there past again and again to the point that it influences their present selves.
[83] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 42.
[84] Sloan, *Visible man: Fahamu Pecou*,100.

Pons offers us a personal account of her experiences of being Cuban with African lineage, a woman, and an educator in the United states.

Chapter 8: María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Diasporic Identity

María Magdalena Campos-Pons produces artworks that are autobiographical and distinctly personal. She is woman of Nigerian descent and was born and raised in Cuba. She lived in Canada for a short while before she moved to Boston in 1991 where she teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.[85] Her work alludes to the themes of water, turbulence, hybridity, and postcolonial consciousness.[86]

After Campos-Pons's time at the Massachusetts College of Art in 1991, her art developed and she expanded her work to include video, film, and installation. Her first installation, *Erotic Garden or Some Annotations on Hypocrisy(Jardín Erótico)* in 1988 was displayed at the Massachusetts College of Art. *The Erotic Garden(Jardín Erótico)* unfolded Campos-Pons's aesthetic production of female sexuality.[87] The installation portrays female genitalia and contraceptive devices, and a four panel painting. Campos-Pons intermingles floral, organic and genitalia to elude a sense of multiplicity and obscureness in her installation, which incorporates wooden staffs that evoke a phallic nature. Further, they loosely resemble African wood carving traditions.[88] An art critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera discussed Campos-Pons's work in

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[85] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 7.
[86] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 85.
[87] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 19.
[88] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 20.

relation to Cuba and its developing feminist activity. He argued that Campos-Pons's work was "a hymn to universal fertility" and an "unreserved and joyful sexual liberation." Mosquera was also one of the only critics to address feminism in Cuban contemporary art. In an 1991 article called "Feminism in Cuba?" he acknowledged Campos-Pons as one of four artists who were undertaking feminist consciousness in their works.[89]

During the 1970s many women artists in the United States involved in the feminist art movement attempted to subvert ideas of women being portrayed as objects of sex by using vaginal iconography to establish power and agency. A decade after this phenomenon, Campos-Pons attempted to situate her own Cuban feminist narrative into her art works, through the inspiration of other influential Cuban artists such as Flavio Garciandía and Consuelo Castaneda. Both artists utilized fragmentation and a non adherence to traditional pictorial formats, these themes and formats can be seen in Campos-Pons's *Erotic Garden* and *Swan Lake*.[90] In some of Campos-Pons's later works, she begins to explore her creolized identity and its relationship to Cuba and the history of Africa.

[89] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 20-21.
[90] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 21.

The Calling. 2003

Over the period of roughly 360 years between the fifteenth century up until 1866 approximately one million African slaves were brought to Cuba. The Yoruba descendants on the island became known as Lucumi. Lucumi, a term used to describe Cuban descendants of Yorubans.[91]The Lucumi practiced Santería, a religion that follows Yoruba traditions and traits. However in Cuba, because of the Spanish intent to convert Catholicism there were efforts to maintain Santería in the city centers of Cuba. [92] Campos-Pons articulates the presence of African traditions amongst her while growing up in Cuba. She asserts:

Replenishing. 2001

[91] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 26.

Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 26.

> In my country, in my setting, in my town, the "problem" of being African wasn't about physical placement or about land. When we talked about Africa, we (in Cuba) didn't talk about the continent. Africa was in my backyard. My father talked about my great-grandpa, who came from Nigeria, in such a way that we don't even talk about Nigeria. Nigeria was in my backyard. We didn't have any idea of going back to Africa. We didn't need it. Africa was there (in my family). I don't know how to explain that, but the center of my ancestors wasn't focused on displacement the way that it is in the United States... Whatever we needed to dig for from our past was there...I didn't have to dig deep to find my past[93]

During the 1980s, the increase in visibility of Africa in Cuban art stemmed from the Africa decade that Castro's regime instituted, which proposed to support African culture and aspects of Afrocubanism as a response to institutionalized racism.[94] The Cuban government abolished legal race discrimination and there were legal reforms in health, education, and employment that helped Blacks disproportionately, however, it is arguable that the reforms helped Afro-Cubans because they were Black.[95] It is understood to many that these reforms helped Afro-Cubans because they were poor.[96]

Campos-Pons's artistic depictions of African heritage and the creolized culture that surrounded her picked up after Cuba's "Africa Decade" because of the increase of education and focus on Africa.[97] However, Campos-Pons asserts that her creolized surrounding and her cultural practices that engaged an African presence inspired her works. In *Everything is Separated by Water,* Lisa D. Freiman states,

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[93] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 27.
[94] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 31.
[95] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 31.
[96] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 32.
[97] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 31.

> Campos-Pons relation to African heritage was not particularly artistic or coincidental, her depictions came from her relationship to her involvement in Cuba's extensive religious, artistic, and cultural practices that incorporated an African presence" This demonstrates how Compos-Pons's lived experienced shaped her cultural practices, which inspired her art. *The Herbalist's Tools* provide a glimpse into the mysterious spiritual world of Santería healing practices that evolved from personal emotions and memories of childhood outings with her father.[98]

The Herbalist's tools recounts how cultural practices have artistic implications that speak towards identity and spaces of beings that are without the ontology and praxis of hegemonic gazes. Campos-Pons *Herbalist Tools* brings her childhood to life. Through the process of making her memory into art Campos-Pons is able to orient the memory and exercise a narrative and an identity marker that can be shared, spoken on, and empowered. Through her artwork she is able to unite and historicize her memory and its relationship to Cuba, Africa, and diasporic identity. She is expressing her identity and her relationship to the African presence in Cuba.

The conceptions and the ontology of Blackness is not able to be properly expressed within a colonial thought processes and ontological makings. Hence, Campos-Pons's art speaks about Blackness without tantalizing, making a spectacle, or re-living the violence associated with Blackness and Black womanhood. Campos-Pons speaks on the notion of identity and some of its potential perils if they are not self-fashioned and consistently enriched with history and the inevitable creolization. Okwui Enwezor states in *Everything is Separated by Water:*

> In one of her works, Campos-Pons once suggested that 'identity could be tragedy.' By this she meant that forms of identity that become fossilized lose their power of fecundation and are no longer seeds for enriching a cultural norm. It is a salutary strength of the Black Atlantic as the site for inventive "countercultures of modernity" that its formidable historicizing potential continues to yield works and discourses that never foreclose the possibility of inclusion, openness to other identities, and consent

[98] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 44.

> construction of newly imagined communities that move beyond the historical incidents of race and identity, beyond the conservative exclusivity of the nation.[99]

According to Enwezor, Campos-Pons's weariness of identity emerges from her disapproval of accepting identities conceived for the purpose of colonialism and white supremacy. Instead, she supports the remaking and the continual examination of cultural norms that place restrictions upon race, identity, and nationhood, as she sees this expansion as a way to enrich and generate fresh new identities that speak for the people and their cultural practices. Campos-Pons's assertion of identity being a sort of tragedy relates to Édouard Glissant's notion of identity, creolization, and diasporic community. Enwezor articulates Glissant's theory of identity and its relation to Campos pons. Enwezor states:

> Édouard Glissant, rather than speaking of the planetary totalization that oftentimes accompanies globalization discourse and skews it toward the hegemonic domination of Western authority and power, speaks instead of the world as being in the process of creolization. This term for mutual recognition, whether based on antagonism or agonism, speaks eloquently to other displacements, to other searches for and constructions of a double self, to other structures of existence in the mad waters of globalization and mobility.[100]

I feel that Campos-Pons is articulating a yearning for a pluralistic and mobile sense of identity. Because of Campos-Pons's experiences with the identity and culture, she is aware of the perils of having a monolithic notion of identity, as it particularizes and limits the thought processes of identity. Through her art Campos-Pons demonstrates the hybridity of identity and Black aesthetic practices, by nurturing ideas and creative practices that continuously remake and examine identity, nationhood, femininity, and culture.

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[99] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 86.

[100] Freiman and Enwezor, *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons*: *Everything is Separated by Water,* 69.

The Herbalist's Tools.1994

Conclusion: Art History and Art/Painting as Love as Revolutionary Resistance

Artists such as Kerry James Marshall and María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Fahamu Pecou demonstrate how Black aesthetics are a form of cultural resistance. These artists take an engaged approach at artfully conveying the power and the necessariness of self-fashioning. By calling attention to the representation of Blackness or through the use of identities as a means to unite and create.

Their artworks demonstrate Black aesthetics as a form of resistance. Their works of art that are revolutionary and liberating due to its consumption and the way in which it confirms

Black existence within its own terms by recognizing Blackness fully. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Kerry James Marshall, and Fahamu Pecou showcase the importance of representing black culture as it produces an acknowledgement of self that goes against the violence of the white imagination. These artists take an engaged approach at conveying the power and the necessariness of self-fashioning by calling attention to the representation of Blackness or by using their identities as a way to spark affiliation. Theorists like Monique Roelof, Toni Morrison, and Paul Taylor demonstrate how Black aesthetics are a form of refusal. They provide a refreshing narrative of the aesthetic components of Black life and provides a philosophical comment on Black aesthetics. The Black thinkers and artists that I have discussed in my paper demonstrate the power, the significance and the value of self-fashioning. When decimated whether through art or philosophy it reifies strength and self love across Black communities.

By incorporating a cultural praxis in our definition of Black identity, we can work to kill Black invisibility. We can work towards allowing Black people to see themselves through their own eyes, traditions, and praxeis that recognize them. In Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye,* Morrison articulates the plight of being Black and unseen. She expands this idea through her depiction of Pecola a young Black girl who is unable to see herself. Pecola's inner eye is affected by white normativity because she is not fully seen by others. Therefore, she has limited sight of herself. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* he speaks on this condition. Ellison explains what Pecola is going through with his depiction of the invisible man, "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed everything and anything except me...The invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact."[101] Both Ellison and Du Bois articulate the struggle of

[101] Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics,* 37.

trying to recognize oneself despite not being recognized by others. In Paul Taylor's book *Black is Beautiful,* he expands on Ellison's writing. He states, "First, the narrator's invisibility results from the construction of the viewer's 'inner eye,' which frames the exercise of the physiological capacity for sight. More precisely, his invisibility results from the construction of the inner eye out of resources provided by white supremacy and anti-Black racism."[102] Taylor suggests that Black people construct an "inner eye" that interprets and guides their sight in the world. Taylor asserts that when this "inner eye" is assembled through knowledge provided by the deceitful frameworks of white supremacy, the capacity for full and true sight goes void. Pecola's interactions perfectly articulate the invisibility felt by by Black people due to a white supremacist subject formations.

Although this may seem common place to some, within the academic realm there is still an unproductive engagement with theories that render Black identity agentless and within "contrapuntal ensembles."[103] I feel that there needs to be a better engagement in separating whiteness from Blackness, as well as explicitly calling out whiteness's self-carrying violence. By not calling attention to the terrorism of whiteness and the autonomy of Blackness, we participate in putting white normativity at the center of everything. In academic, creative, and professional settings I feel that people are not willing to confront white normativity and to look at artworks, literature, or life in a manner that does not place whiteness in the foreground. The refusal to acknowledge white normativity is exclusionary. It predicates the invisibility of Black selfhood. In my paper, I wanted to call attention to the this and showcase Blackness within aesthetic culture and how Black artists have taken up the task of expunging whiteness from their works.

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[102] Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, 37.
[103] Mills, *the racial contract,* 58.

Therefore, I believe that my work--an investigation of artists and philosophers who examine Black identity in the absence of white normativity--has the ability to fight against an "inner eye" that is fed by white normative resources. My work on Black aesthetics and the way that it nurtures Black self-fashioning has the capacity to disrupt white ontological perceptions of Blackness. The theorists that I called upon in my paper recognize the violence that ensues when the white normative gaze is accepted and becomes a committed member of the Black community. Hence, their works offer us a way of thinking of Black identity formations without whiteness, which allows Blackness an autonomous self-fashioning that I think can be transformative. Situating Black life and Black creative practices within its own terms and within its own "eyes" of definition. The self-fashioning or self-seeing is illegible to whiteness and therefore, it carefully works against the racial binary. It is a way to look at Blackness fully, with humanity, respect, and dignity and respect. The sense of *becoming* that I have experienced in life as a young adult has been the process of unlearning, relearning, and comprehending a pluralistic, far-reaching self that has not been fostered within my formal educations and experiences while growing up. This phase of *becoming* is a refusal and a dismissal of teachings that limit or restrict the multiplicity of Black identity.

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