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VISUAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF A COLOR-BLIND SOCIETY: POST-BLACK ART AND COLOR-BLIND RACISM

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An abstract of
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ABSTRACT

VISUAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF A COLOR-BLIND SOCIETY:
POST-BLACK ART AND COLOR-BLIND RACISM
By Olivia K. Young

This thesis investigates whether the concept of post-black art can be read as a movement towards a progressive racial consciousness and a broader black identity, or if it aligns with the oppressive movement of color-blind orthodoxy to make race silent and invisible. Furthermore, it explores how the notion of post-black art can be examined as a reflection of larger American racial politics and how those politics are embedded in systems of oppression.

I will begin by defining blackness in terms of visibility, and argue that black aesthetics have evolved as a mechanism for challenging black invisibility; black aesthetics combine philosophies of black ontology with visual representation of the African America diaspora in order to combat singular or simplistic renderings of black life.

The second section moves into a discussion of black aesthetic movements, focusing specifically on the two twentieth-century black art renaissances, The New Negro Movements of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s. This section carefully highlights the recurring question surrounding black identity, which emerge at the onset of black aesthetic movements. This section will act as a preamble for the analysis of the ideological movements behind post-black art.

The third section will focus predominantly on post-black art and give a comprehensive breakdown of the term, the responses, praises and backlashes of the new label.

And finally, the last section of my thesis will draw connections between the art realm and a larger socio-political order, highlighting the colorblind orthodoxy that developed and dictated the post-civil rights era. More importantly, however, this section will attest that post-black art, through supporting the principles of color-blind ideology and race neutral thinking, aids in the cultivation of white dominance and black subordination.

I will argue that the conceptualization of the term 'post-black art' is a direct derivative of the national vogue of colorblind thinking, a philosophy that is rooted in the defense of whiteness and the overarching maintenance of white supremacy. The new era of post-black creation adheres to colorblind convention and endorses a doctrine that in concept preserves and perpetuates black oppression.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my God:
Speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs; sing and make music from your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God
Ephesians 5:19-20

I sing praises to my family and their unwavering love and support.

For my sister's heart and the love and supportive energy that she never ceased to send in my direction. You helped to cultivate my passions through late night conversations and exchanges wrapped in sympathy and encouragement. Thank you for reminding me of my strength and for listening, always listening. These words are indebted to you.

For my mother, who raised me to know and place love at the heart of every interaction, creation, and conception of myself. The love that you taught me is entangled within these pages. Thank you for teaching me how to love and for knowing me always. Your support has helped me through the hard moments.

For my Father who taught me to believe in myself and who motivated me to push forward through every challenge. Thank you for never doubting my intellect and for always knowing me even before I fully knew myself.

To my good friend Ian who never stop supporting my thesis, and helped me every step of the way. Thank you for your excitement and enthusiasm and motivating me to work in spite of it all.

To my all of my friends who helped keep me up late in the night, made me work on nights I wanted to sleep, who encouraged me to keep going, and who always believed in my success. I am indebted to you forever.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, Thelma Golden, a " highbrow mack-diva" and "pivotal" art curator of The Studio Museum of Harlem, released into the already dexterous lexicon of the art realm a new classifying term meant to both clarify and rouse the co-dependence of art and identity.[1] The term *post-black* owes its inception to a casual conversation, clever conjecture, and a "shared love of absurd uses of language." Along side her colleague Glenn Ligon, Themla Golden began using the term *post-black* as shorthand for a rising generation of artists whose work and mission differed from black artists of previous generations. Ligon conceptualizes the term, more conscious of the trend arising in the new generation of creators, and Golden, moved by the ingenuity of the phrase, used her position as a curator to announced its inception to the art world.[2] According to the definition assigned at the release of the *Freestyle* exhibit, post-black art is "characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped in fact deeply interested in redefining complex notions of blackness."[3] Post-black art epitomizes a generation of artists whose relationship with the barefaced, unapologetic racial consciousness of past decades is overshadowed by a request to put race on the sidelines and simply create.

I came across this subject while studying contemporary art in an art history class at Emory University. It was during the heart of the election of Barack Obama and I was concerned with the notion of post racial politics and the manner in which race was being expunged from the political frontlines despite the presence of a black candidate. I was

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[1] Greg Tate, "The Golden Ages," *Village Voice* (2001): 2
[2] Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Phillips Morris Companies Inc, 2001), 14.
[3] (Golden 2001, 14)

also surprised to find such a rigid disconnection between black visual representation and an overall sympathy for issues confronting the black community. For the first time, both literally and symbolically, blacks were being included in the vanguard of American representation while concurrently preserving a number of exclusionary ideologies. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva provides a summation of black sociopolitical life in the introduction to his book *Racism without Racist: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, which immaculately describes the state of black life in America. He writes,

> But regardless of white' "sincere fiction," racial considerations shade almost everything in America. Blacks and dark skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life; they are about three times more likely to be poor than white, earn about 40 percent less than white, and have about a tenth of the net worth that whites have. They also receive an inferior education compared to whites, even when they attend integrated institutions. In terms of housing, black-owned units comparable to white-owned ones are valued at 35 percent less. Black and Latinos have less access to the entire housing market because whites, through a variety of exclusionary practices by white realtors and homeowners, have been successful in effectively limiting their entrance into many neighborhoods. Blacks receive impolite treatment in stores, restaurants, and in a host of other commercial transactions. Researchers have also documented that blacks pay more for goods such as cars and house than do whites. Finally, blacks and dark skinned Latinos are the targets of racial profiling by the police that, combined with the highly racialized criminal court system, guarantees their overrepresentation among those arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated, and if charged for a capital crime, executed. Racial profiling in the highways had become such a prevalent phenomenon that a term has emerged to describe it: driving while black. In short blacks and most minorities are, "at the bottom of the well."[4]

[4] Eduardo Bonilla Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003) 1-2. I used such a lengthy quote because it profoundly and efficiently summarized the state of blacks in America and its assemblage by scholar Bonilla Silva provides an added weight of legitimacy.

How is it possible to disengage race from the sociopolitical issues afflicting the black community? How is it feasible to detach race from anything in a nation that places racial hierarchies at the forefront of conceptualization? Concerned with the blatant contradiction in America's perspective of race, my professor suggested that I look into the term "post-black" and explore the meaning and responses to racial color-blindness in the art world.

At the beginning of my examination I was insistent upon the fact that post-black art was castrating black pride, and, as an art movement, preventing the evolution of blackness as an identity and concept within our nation. I viewed the post-black era as separate from its black art antecedents. However, upon further analysis I found that this movement strictly aligns with the ideals of past aesthetic movements, and is searching for answers to the same compilation of questions surrounding black identity.

Research Question

Through this thesis I will investigate if the concept of post-black art can be read as a movement towards a progressive racial consciousness and a broader black identity or if it aligns with an oppressive movement to make race silent and invisible. And explore how the notion of post-black art can be examined as a reflection of larger American racial politics and how those politics are embedded in systems of oppression.

Methodologically, four fields of study will inspire this thesis: The veracity of black invisibility and the philosophies that arose to describe blackness in America, the history of black identity expression, focusing specifically on aesthetic movements and their relationship with the evolution of blackness as an identity; the post-black tenet that

has arisen since the 1990s, touching both within the art realm and the larger social order; and finally the theories on color-blind racism and a review of the interconnection of white supremacy and black expression.

Paper Outline

I will commence by defining blackness in terms of visibility and establish representation as the principal driving force of black aesthetic expression. Black invisibility is both a symptom of a larger social order and an identity pushed onto the black community. This section will act as a preamble for the analysis of white supremacy and its hierarchical dichotomizing of racial identities.

From here I move to a discussion of black aesthetic movements, focusing specifically on the two twentieth-century black art renaissances, The New Negro Movements of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Within this section I give careful attention to highlight the principal questions posed about black identity in order to reveal the similarities between the multiple black aesthetic movements. Although each era of expression has defined and carried out a distinct purpose, the same underlining inquiries and points of conflict are at the nexus of each black aesthetic movement. This section is vital for the deconstruction of the post-black art ontology, first by identifying the weight and stringency of this anthology of questions and second by exposing the reciprocal nature of the post-black art.

The third section of the paper will focus predominantly on post-black art and give a comprehensive breakdown of the term, the responses, praises and backlashes of the new label. Although, there are two waves of thinking surrounding the term, one exists strictly

in the art world and the other encompasses a larger field, overlapping into other social arenas; I will work to articulate the belief systems of each sector appropriately. For description and analysis of the art realm, I will include articles, interviews and responses to Thelma Golden's *Freestyle* exhibit and the debut of her co-conceptualized marker. For post black as a sociological term I will explore the relevance of post-black thinking past the art world, focusing more intently on the theoretical backlashes that took place mostly within academia.

The final sections of my paper will justify that post-black art, through supporting the principles of color-blind ideology and race neutral thinking, aids in the cultivation of white dominance and black subordination. However, more importantly it will draw connections between the art realm and a larger socio-political order, highlighting the colorblind orthodoxy that developed and dictated the post-civil rights era. I will argue that the conceptualization of the term 'post-black art' is a direct derivative of the national vogue of colorblind thinking, a philosophy that is rooted in the defense of whiteness and the overarching maintenance of white supremacy. The new era of post-black creation adheres to colorblind convention and endorses a doctrine that in concept preserves and perpetuates black oppression. Although futuristic in theory, 'post-black art' acquiescently concedes to a socio-political ideology rooted in racism. Therefore, instead of being freeing in nature, emancipating black artists from a history of limited expression and distinctiveness, it adheres to a larger ideology that endorses the invisibility of blacks and sweeps race away from mainstream consciousness.

BLACK INVISIBILITY

A historical understanding of race relations in North America is essential for deconstructing the underlying elements of blackness and identifying the fundamental questions surrounding black identity. In the beginning pages of his book *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, Charles W. Mills, a black philosopher and scholar, briefly points out to the reader the contradictions of slavery and liberty and the dualisms that arise as these practices overlap. Mills acknowledges that while American society embraced a philosophy that centralized liberty and inalienable human rights, it simultaneously expanded a system of slavery and merciless human bondage. However, instead of confronting this inconsistency between ideology and action, "most jurists and philosophers…simply [ignored] it."[5] Mills clearly identifies that the result of this behavior is a silence, "not one of tacit inclusion but rather of exclusion" where black existence is debarred from higher philosophical contemplation.[6] Not only are blacks expelled from the privileges of society, they are also consciously excluded from the realm of philosophical scrutiny and contemplation. Therefore, when examining 20th and 21st century racism it is not enough to account for the status of black Americans; instead, the real discussion must harbor in an incorporeal realm, abstract in both form and meaning, where blackness is defined in terms of visibility.

Discussions about visibility are imperative because representation "is the means by which we think and feel about that thing, by which we apprehend it."[7] Black aesthetics

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[5] Charles W. Mills, *Black Visibility: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 3.
[6] (Mills, 1998, 3)
[7] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), xiii.

have evolved as a mechanism for challenging black invisibility; they combine philosophies of black ontology with visual representation of the African America diaspora and adopts as its means of combat the production of complex renderings of black life.[8] Although black aesthetic movements are defined and realized by black artists and scholars in their respective eras, they cannot be examined in isolation but require the history of black invisibility in order to be fully understood.

Ralph Ellison, novelist and literary critic, speaks to the notion of invisibility in his book *Invisible Man* and specifically references the power of this conceptual world. He writes:

> I am invisible, understand simply because people refuse to see me…because of a particular disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of *their* inner eyes.[9]

Ellison not only highlights that his invisibility is a 'construction' but also one created specifically by '[white people's] inner eye.' Thus he sees his existence as both conceptualized and dictated by a peripheral white world. Similarly, the relationship between black consciousness and white hegemony became the foundation of W.E. B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness. He describes blacks as "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American World— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."[10] Through this description Du Bois exposes the foremost obstacle of black expression and being: the absence of an unconstrained self-consciousness. The Veil, a

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[8] (Powell 1997, 15)
[9] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952: New York, Vintage, 1995).
[10] W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989)

metaphor that invokes the invisibility of black life, reveals an additional barrier prohibiting authentic black expression. Since blacks are forced to see themselves through the eyes of "the other world" their notion of self is affected by concepts and images formed on periphery of the black existence, which encroach on self-imposed definitions of blackness. However, Du Bois also includes within this passage the answer for securing absolute freedom of expression. According scholar Joel Williamson,

> In hoodoo belief the seventh son is the fortunate one and to be born of the veil is to have the gift of prophecy. This allusion to black folk belief follows the Hegelian idea of Freiheit, true freedom which comes from knowing the self through one's people and 'governing one's self in accordance with the folk spirit.'[11]

Therefore, according to Du Bois, history becomes the main avenue towards freedom and any separation from personal interpretation of life inhibits black growth. Decades later contemporary scholar Elizabeth Alexander combines Ellison's theory of invisibility with Du Bois' resolution to double consciousness and presents a personal testimony of black aesthetic creation. By lacerating the black body and rendering its reaction and response to such deformation invisible, the humanity of black people has been forced to soar in a "metaphysical space." Alexander describes this space as the black interior,

> [A] space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of. It is a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us

[11] Harris, D. Michael *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 9-10.

> envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty.[12]

Alexander posits that black artists escape to a 'black imaginary' where they can locate unrestricted rendering of the black being. W.E.B. Du Bois might explain this space as singular in consciousness, enabling black artists to observe life through a lens tainted only by their own interpretations. By operating outside of the black interior the black artist is restricted to observing life through the veil and encountering half-truths of his or her own existence.

While Du Bois and Alexander discuss the metaphysical restrictions on black forms of expression, Langston Hughes re-contextualizes the metaphor and articulates it in terms of corporal limitations. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" Hughes illustrates the consequences of avoiding the black interior and observing life through the lens of white mainstream culture. In the following excerpt, Hughes recalls a dialogue between him and a black poet.

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet— Not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning, subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with the desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet.[13]

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[12] Elizabeth Alexander, *the black interior* (Minnesota: Grayworld Press, 2004), x

[13] Langston Hughes. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Nation,* (1926). *in The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Group,1994), 91

[13] Du Bois, W.E.B. "Criteria of the New Negro." in *The Nation,* (1926). *in The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Group,1994), 91

Hughes tells of a racial mountain and breathes imagery into Du Bois' theories on double consciousness shaping into being the crest of the black identity impasse. The racial mountain is the "urge within the race towards whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible."[14] Hughes identifies the racial mountain as the dividing wall in the relationship between art and racial identity and establishes it as a metaphor for the dilemma of black expression. Questions surrounding the purpose of black expression, which will be explored in depth in the following section, exist at the beginning of each aesthetic movement. In fact, Thelma Golden, art curator and originator of the post black label, declares the resistance to being labeled a "black artist" a central feature of the post-black art.[15] Although art critic Paul Taylor insists, "Nothing [Golden] says, after all, commits her to the repudiation of black identity, either as a psychoemotional resource for individuals or as a political-economic or moral factor in social life," Hughes' commentary on the black artist insists otherwise. [16] By detaching black identity from *creative* identity, Hughes argues that the black artist is subconsciously requesting a full renunciation of blackness and annulment from racial distinguishers, thus appealing to be white.

Although Hughes advocates for the revitalization of blackness as the sole motivator for creation, his resilience does not eradicate the influence of the racial mountain on future generations, but instead guides the response of the art realm throughout the 20th and the beginning of 21st century. Post-black art, although innovative as a creative process, organizes around philosophical questions and concerns that are far

[14] (Hughes, 1994, 91)
[15] (Golden 2001, 2)
[16] Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41 (2007), 628.

from original in the black community. In fact, it is in direct response to the perseverance of the racial mountain that fundamental questions surrounding black art emerge.

BLACK AESTHETIC MOVEMENTS

"His shadow so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality"

Alain Locke

Before considering contemporary constructions of black identity in relation to the arts, it is imperative to first review the philosophical undertones of black aesthetic movements. Although this section will not reveal in great depth or breadth the history of black art, it will uncover the competing viewpoints that resurface at the conception of black artistic expression. This section aims to establish a historical backdrop for post-black art and to institute a heightened level of understanding for the emerging criticism of the movement. Through the examination of two central black aesthetic movements, the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960, this section will divulge the historical significance of the leading interpretations of post-black art.

THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

The ascendance of black art in the 1920s New Negro Movement, colloquially referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, parallels the emergence of contending philosophies regarding race and identity. Although black art had dappled in the aesthetic world prior to the 1920s, the explosion of blackness in the art realm necessitated a new wrestling of black identity. During this era two opposing philosophies emerged that would remain at the nexus of both black identity politics and black art expression. On one

side artists and scholars argued that art should be used for the sake of art and guard against the restriction of freedom; whereas the opposing viewpoint avowed artwork as a function of political propaganda. While each position was heavily defended in the New Negro Movement, both arguments also re-materialized in subsequent aesthetic movements.

At the onset of the New Negro Movement scholars such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois establish a relationship between art and racial identity that insists upon the inclusion of a politic agenda. Both "sought…to affirm a positive racial identity and to claim a place for black artist in American culture."[17] In fact they believe in the "capacity of artistic expression to alter deeply ingrained assumptions of black inferiority and eliminate prejudice."[18] Under this doctrine, the purpose of art is to free black people from oppressive entities within the American subconscious. Locke and Du Bois establish one extreme on the art and representation spectrum and expose the foundation of black artist expression as rooted in a deliberate attempt to respond to the historical fantasies of black deformity and malformation.[19]

For example, within Du Bois' "The New Negro," he discloses his preferred connection between black art and the sociopolitical order. "Thus" he says, "it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization of beauty, and as we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before."[20] However, one of the methods that Du Bois

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[17] Mary Ann Calo*, Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 1.
[18] (Calo 1997, 1)
[19] Alain Locke, "The New Negro" in *The Nation,* (1926). *in The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Group,1994), 91
[20]W.E.B. Du Bois. "Criteria of the New Negro." *in The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Group,1994), 91

refers to is "propaganda" and the utilization of art to systematically manipulate existing doctrines of black beauty or black existence. [21]

The use of art as propagation reduces black aesthetic expression to mere rejoinder, focusing first on being defensive and second on recreating truths. Du Bois' request establishes the underpinning of black art as being a series of responses and counter attacks on representations of blacks. For example, Du Bois poses the questions at the beginning of his article, "Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?[22]" Within this question it is clear that the "criteria" that Du Bois outlines in his article is inextricably linked with a responsibility to transform black representation in American society.

Similarly, Alain Locke urges black artists to "express themselves in characteristically racial terms by drawing on the uniqueness of their circumstances, on their position as heirs both to an authentic American folk culture and to the artistic tradition of ancestral Africa."[23] He aligns with the theory of Du Bois and further articulates the positive relationship between black art the reconstruction of black identity. For example, the creation of the "New Negro" identity is an indivisible aspect of the New Negro Movement. Locke used this term to render a verbal signifier of the profound transformation of the black image at the turn of the 20th century. Specifically, Locke proclaims that the New Negro "simply cannot be swathed in" the older formula for black identity; instead, "the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observer is

[21] (Du Bois 1994, 101)
[22] (Du Bois 1994, 101-102)
[23] (Calo1997, 2)

transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro Life."[24] He reveals the presence of a new class of black life, one that has changed in form and in scope while simultaneously placing complete responsibility on the arising New Negro for rehabilitation of an old black image in modern society. Henry Louis Gates in his article "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" reveals more specifically the relationship between the old and the new Negro image. He explains,

> The two sets of figures can also be said to have a certain cause-and-effect relation, with the fiction of a Negro American who is "now" somehow "new" or different from the "Old Negro" generated to counter the image in the popular American imagination of the black as devoid of all the characteristics that separate the lower forms of human life from the supposedly higher forms.[25]

The construction of this new identity is complicated because it places itself in direct opposition to the 'old' depictions of blackness, and derives as its purpose the complete amelioration of the former identity. Gate's interpretation indicates that the first black renaissance was actually fanatically concerned with reconstructing the black image as opposed to constructing it.

Reaction-based art is seen clearly in the onset of the New Negro Movement. During this time, Winold Reiss' "The Brown Madonna" recreates the classic mother and child image, using a traditional trope, but depicts the figure as black instead of white. This painting, like many of the classic renderings, portrays the woman diverting her eyes and directing her gaze towards the bottom right hand corner of the painting conveying a

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[24] (Locke 1994, 47)
[25] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* No. 24 (1988), http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928478?seq=3.

sense of humility. Although this piece of art can be deemed revolutionary in scope because it portrays a black woman in a scene traditionally reserved for white females, the objective was not to illustrate the true essence of a black female character, but rather to place her into a space typically restricting black portrayals of femininity. Art scholar Emily J. Orlando, when discussing the piece, insists, "…In spite of its revisionist agenda, the movement in fact harkened back to tired, jaded forms."[26] Therefore, instead of also revolutionizing the way that black women are illustrated, the painter elects to counteract stereotypes of black femininity by placing black figures in place of their white counterpart. Orlando argues that this form of revisionist action places additional subjugations on the black female. In speaking of this painting Orlando suggests, "the Madonna is revisionist in that she is Africanized—as a gesture of race pride—yet it serves to send a message to black women that the role of self sacrificing attendant is one of the few available to her.[27]" Therefore, instead of liberating the black female body, the painting simply shifts the lens and harkens other oppressive stigmas.

This particular painting is vital to the understanding of the New Negro Movement not only because of its subject matter, but also because of the artist. Reiss came to the United States after attending the Munich's Academy of Fine Art and School of Applied Art and was immediately placed at the forefront of the New Negro Movement.[28] Perhaps the commencement of a black aesthetic movement by a white artist explains the cycle of revising and responding. Richard Powell questions, "Was it ironic that Alain Locke and other promoters of the "New Negro" chose Winold Reiss—a Caucasian artist of German

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[26] Orlando, J. Emily. "'Feminine Calibans' and 'Dark Madonnas' of the Grave": The Imaging of Black Women in the New Negro Renaissance" 64-66.
[27] (Orlando, 65)
[28] (Powell 1997, 43)

nationality—to portray this modern, black persona?[29]" Powell determines that the distinction in nationality and distance between the histories of American racism enables Reiss to understand his black subjects in a way that other American white artists could not. However, a more hardnosed interpretation is that Reiss offered a construction of black identity that fully rivaled the visual representations by whites in America.[30] Reiss' participation in the New Negro Movement reveals that black representative art does not necessarily have to be created by a black artist in order to battle oppressive representation of blacks. In this instance, race was deemed secondary to an agenda that resisted and battled dominant and oppressive racial ideology.

Even Reiss seemed to understand requests made by Du Bois and Locke to use art to expand black representation. When taking up his mentee, Aaron Douglas, whose creations also contributed in the formation of the New Negro Movements, Reiss explicitly advised Douglas to discover and explore "that inner thing of blackness."[31] Douglas' portraits and landscapes of oil and water illustrated "abstract silhouettes" that drew on a history that bequeathed his subjects with an aura of independence and power.[32] Specifically, however, his philosophy on black art also aligns with that of Du Bois and black political agenda. In "The Negro in American Culture" Douglas writes,

> What a Negro artist should paint and how he should paint it can't accurately be determined without reference to specific social conditions…. Our chief concern has been to establish and maintain recognition of our

[29] (Powell 1997, 43)
[30] (Powell 1997, 43)
[31] (Powell 1997, 44)
[32] Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 132.

essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality.[33]

Although Douglass and other artists who participated in the New Negro Renaissance adopt the philosophy of Du Bois, their viewpoint did not exist in isolation. On the other side of the spectrum arose a completely different interpretation of art and identity. Instead of requesting art to be the guiding instrument of change, this divergent philosophy reduced art to mere expression and detached political agendas from artistic creation. For example, several prominent scholars of the New Negro Movement collaborated on a publication that was dedicated solely to the expression of art and the "Younger Negro Artist."[34] Zora Neal Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, John P. Davis, Nugent, Wallace Thurman and Langston Hughes assembled to formulate the blueprint of a new black art publication entitled *Fire!*. In the beginning of the publication Hughes outlines the intention of the work by stating; "We young Negro artist who create now intent to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear of shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, the displeasure doesn't matter either."[35] Hughes asserts a new way to conceptualize black art; under his approach, art is created strictly for the purpose of art rather than generating and defending a political agenda.

Although the New Negro is used as propaganda to advance a new identity for blacks, and Locke expressly supports revising the old Negro image, he also records his perspective on the overall purpose of black art. In his essay "Art or Propaganda?," he

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[33] (Bearden 1993, 132-133)
[34] (Bearden 1993, 121)
[35] (Bearden 1993, 121)

opposes the use of art as a tool for social and political change and aligns with the perspective of Hughes by stressing the importance of individualized black expression.

> My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect. Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naive or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression, — in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda.[36]

Locke challenges the validity of collectively undermining social roots of oppression and urges artists to commit to personal expressions of personhood. These opposing perspectives on art and propaganda are recycled within 20th and 21st century aesthetic movements and exist as the foundational question of post-black art. As we will examine in greater detail in succeeding sections, post-black artists assume Hughes' position that states; "if [they] are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter" as a motto and cling to Locke's inquiries on collective expression as well as reject the utilization of art to advance political or social change.

THE BLACK ART MOVEMENT

The 'art for the sake of art' philosophy prominently emerges again in the late 1960. Volume 1 of *Black Artist on Art* (1969) by Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy begins with a declaration on the responsibly of black art. Lewis writes,

[36] Alain Locke "Art or Propaganda?," Harlem 1, no. 1 (1928),

> Traditionally it is customary to approach a subject of this nature with some historical justification. I have, however, decided to depart from this tradition because I feel that honest creative expression needs no historical justification…. BLACK ARTIST ON ART is a book to promote change—change in order that art might function as expression rather than as an institution.[37]

However, this perspective arises in direct relation to the reemergence of art being used as a political tool. The Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 70s rearticulated the same underlying questions concerning black identity and art and grapples with similar complex queries on the purpose of the black artist. Although BAM existed as a consortium of black artistic expression, its chief tenet advocates for the creation of an independent black ideology, iconology and creed. In 1968 Larry Neal, one of the leading architects on the movement, articulates the principle objectives of the Black Arts Movement in "The Black Arts Movement" published in the summer edition of *Drama Review*. Neal asserts:

> The Black artist['s]…primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. Therefore, the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers [and artists] is to confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West. Currently these writers are re-evaluating western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art. Implicit in this re-evaluation is the need to develop a "black aesthetic."[38]

Therefore, at the onset of this black aesthetic lives an urgency to connect art with a larger sociopolitical battle against racism. For example, a piece such as *Political Prisoner*

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[37] SAMELLA S. LEWIS AND RUTH G. WADDY, *Black Artist on Art*, (Los Angeles: Contemporary Craft Publishers, 1969), vii-viii.
[38] NEAL, 29.

created by Elizabeth Catlett in the midst of the aesthetic revolution draws insight into the convergence of ideology and art and reveals how the theories of the Blacks Art Movement translate into artist expression. *Political Prisoner* created in 1971 is a 71-inch wooden sculpture of a woman standing with her head lifted upward and her hands bound behind her back. This work honors Black Panther Party member Angela Davis for her heroic influence in the black liberation movement.[39] However, Catlett also spoke in universal terms, and shapes for her community a new image of the black female.

Catlett's alignment with the principles of BAM dictate her creation process and deeply influence the direction of her art. For example, Catlett was invited to speak and advise a group fifty artists and art scholars in the 1970 Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art also known as CONFABA. Specifically, this conference focused on the "need for art historians to play a proactive role in the 'serious business of preserving, protecting and projecting the visual art legacy of black people in the United States.'"[40] the CONFABA convention was specifically concerned with art functioning as a liberating mechanism. For example the preamble states:

> ….When we addressed ourselves to the problem of the function or art, it was explicit that the function of art is to liberate man in the spiritual sense of the world, to provide more INTERNAL space…The heart of the Black Artist's ideology is the dedication of his art to the cultural liberation of his people. It is in this sense that Black art is decidedly functional, political and spiritual, and it is not to be confused by the alienation concept of 'art for art's sake' rather than art for people's sake… [41]

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[39] LISA E. FARRINGTON, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African American Women Artist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 132.
[40] (FARRINGTON 2005, 132)
[41] BRETTELL, RICHARD R. *et al., Black Art: Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art (*Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), 25.

During the conference, Catlett is required to address the members via phone due to forced political estrangement, Catlett "proclaimed her status as a 'black revolutionary artist' and reiterated the importance of cooperative efforts among African American artists to support the 'liberation of our beautiful people.'"[42] The preamble of the conference and the speech made by Catlett reveal the intrinsic link between the artist and ideology. Catlett assume the position and principles of the Black Art Movement and generates artwork that reinforces her conviction.

At the onset of both the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement, two lines of thinking emerge surrounding the purpose of black art and the black artist. Although each movement or phase in the history of black art has sought to deduce a definitive resolution, the question lingers and re-emerges as new artists are confronted with the paradox of being black in America. Post-black art, although new in conception, rearticulates the same questions of its predecessors: Why should black artists be encumbered with the responsibility of expanding the notion of blackness?

[42] (FARRINGTON 2005, 132)

POST-BLACK ART

"only through new words/ might new worlds/ be called/ into order"

Saul Williams

In April of 2001 "Post-Black Art" was inaugurated as a label in the Studio Museum of Harlem exhibition *Freestyle* featuring 28 immensely different artists working in the United States. These artists, linked only through their impulse to push individuality over collectivity, approached all mediums from painting to digital art to sculpture and were based mostly on the east and west coasts with a few representing the in-between. According to Golden, *Freestyle* and the umbrella term post-black was characterized by creators who "were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."[43] The denunciation of black as an identifier was purposeful in creating a space between the artist and their work. Instead of their ethnicity or race defining the meaning of their pieces, post-black artists seek to reverse the equation and let their work help to redefine blackness within America. Noting race as an optional diagnostic tool of expression post-black artists renounce a collective responsibility to combat racial doctrines and social conventions while still remaining somewhat preoccupied with the unrelenting denotation of blackness.

Post-black art resurrects the philosophies of Hughes and the authors of *Black Artist on Art* (1969), and demand a de-affiliation from political agendas that combat racial oppressions though the art realm. This new era of artistic expression advocates for individual constructions of life and denounces a collective approach to creation.

[43] (Golden 2001,14)

However, the critiques that emerge in response to the *Freestyle* exhibit lean towards Du Bois' interpretation of black art and criticize post-black artists for disconnecting art from a social and political black agenda.

In an interview with *Bomb* magazine, Golden elaborates on her definition of the term post-black art, "it wasn't a kind of art; it wasn't a particular way of making work, it was a stance, an attitude, a vibe, a feeling."[44] Post-black art did not commence a new era of creating or producing artwork; rather, this new label exists as a mechanism for distinguishing a new era of thought. Mary Schmidt Campbell explains in her essay "African American Art in the Post-Black Era" that Golden "coined this term out of necessity."[45] This new era of thought is rooted in the seismic shifts that have occurred since the 1960s era center on removing obstructions of oppression and heightening an overall sensitivity to equality. For example, the artists of Freestyle were unique because they were molded by a post-civil rights period. Golden explains,

> As a group, they exemplify the presence of art school training in that they create work they refers to multiple histories of contemporary art and culture – both non-Western and that of the Western Modernist tradition. They embrace the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation with a great ease and facility.[46]

Campbell goes on to clarify that after being formally trained, the artist of *Freestyle*,

> "…were making their way competitively in the art world, winning places at the most prestigious artists' colonies, landing important fellowships for individual artists and successfully entering the marketplace without the intervention of museum directors, curators, scholars and academics. They were competing in the market on their own terms, that is on terms defined by their work. They reveled in that fact that they did not need to be

[44] Mary Schmidt Campbell, "African American Art in a Post-Black Era" *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Thought* 17, no 3 (2007) 321.
[45] (Campbell 2007, 317)
[46] (Golden 2001,14)

> 'introduced' or 'certified' by an intellectual elite who explained their presence in the art world on the basis of identity.[47]

These artists produce work that speaks to the freedoms that they experienced as individuals during their lifetime. Indebted to the movements of their predecessor who pushed for the evolution of a black identity, the post-black artists of *Freestyle* manipulate this freedom by opting out of a black identity for their work all-together. On one level, this semi-unrestricted form of expression is what Golden sought to emphasize through the title "Freestyle." In the vernacular of hip-hop culture freestyle connotes a "space where the musician (improvisation) or for the dancer (the break) finds the groove and goes all out in a relentless an unbridled expression of the self."[48] The semblance between the title of the exhibit and the genre of artists lie in the abandonment of controlled avenues of artistic articulation and more importantly the desertion of a collective message or implication surrounding their work.

For example, one artist from whom many post-black artists drew inspiration is Kara Walker and her paper silhouette figures that both highlight and toy with the mythologies of slavery and the unmerciful visual stereotypes that accompany it. Walker was criticized for resurrecting negative imagery of black men and women and for reviving and circulating the poignant memories of overt hatred.[49] However, she is also praised for her innovation and for boldly defying the principles of the post-civil rights color-blind mentality, where race is rendered nearly invisible and all discussion of oppression are disguised or buried. The post black generation of artists follows in pursuit

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[47] (Campbell 2007, 317)
[48] (Golden 2001, 14)
[49] Cathy Byrd "Is There a 'Post-Black' Art? Investigating the Legacy of the Freestyle Show" *Art Papers* 26 (2002): 38.

of Kara Walker's eminence, expanding the perimeter of blackness but doing so unhindered by political agendas.

This search for freedom of expression within the black art realm also exists at the root of the post-black phenomenon. Campbell observes, "Many of these successful young artists found the label 'black art' imprisoning, culturally and esthetically. They expressed the need to participate more expansively in a world that, in their eyes, had grown more connected, geographically mobile, culturally fluid, and porous."[50] Similarly, Golden notes that the post black art of the 21 century was deeply influenced by the "theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s, and the late globalist expansion of the late 90s."[51] Therefore, post-black art not only exists as the next wave of artistic expression but it also renders a new perspective on black identity, not available to artists in previous decades.

Golden elaborates in an interview with *Village Voice* essayist Greg Tate,

> The moment of multiculturalism was one where that was the way people formed exhibitions—a moment of discovery when people said, Let's explore; let's discover and expand. It had this real frontier quality. But then that became, thank goodness, the norm, and many Black artists moved to the forefront of our consciousness in terms of contemporary art practice in ways that didn't have to be explained through a Black History Month label. So there was no longer any need to have all those paragraphs before you got to the work on why you were showing the work and what this means and da da da pluralism we are the world hold hands kumbaya. The artists in 'Freestyle' are the beneficiaries of the '90s artists' breakthroughs. But they were also formed more out of the theoretical and aesthetic arguments of the late '90s that were both a result of millennial madness and the need to look back on the whole century.[52]

[50] (Campbell 2007, 2)
[51] (Golden 2001, 14)
[52] (Tate 2001, 1)

Golden highlights that post-black artists are responding to their environment as much as they are creating in order to expand it. The relationship between post-black art and the dominant racial ideology will be explored in detail in the following section, providing an in depth view of the color-blind orthodoxy and its relationship to a new generation of art.

After the 2001 *Freestyle* exhibition, *The New York Times, The New Yorker* and the *Village Voice* as well as a few scholarly voices, deliberated over the significance, repercussion and implications of the post black idiom. The response that erupted to Golden's classifying label did not only bring criticism, it also introduced supplementary analysis of the artists, redefinitions of the movement and new labels derived from extended examination. National columnist and managing director of the Urban Issues Forum Anthony Asadullah Samad, presents his opinion in the *Chicago Defender*, where he begins by criticizing the ideology behind a post-black art, the recent evasion to race and the adaptation of this evasion by black artist.

Samad takes a literal approach at dissecting post-black art. Posterizing[53] the term 'black art' implies that there was a '"Black Thought" period in the art world that was embraced and appreciated by mainstream curators." [54] Samad professes that this movement never transpired and, therefore, the conceptualization of a post–black art is out of order. Samad moves through a logical interpretation of Golden's theory; he interjects, "art is suppose to be an extension of the expression;" however, under the umbrella of post-black art, black artists emerge as discrete beings completely detached from their work. Artists are "extensions of the expression. Except when they're black. Then the

[53] The term 'posterize' was created by Samad in his article "Art and Culture: Continuing Efforts to Make Race Irrelevant"
[54] Anthony Asadullah Samad, "Art and Culture: Continuing Efforts to Make Race Irrelevant" *Ourviews* 102, no. 42 (2007) 10.

artist becomes secondary to the expression."[55] This breakdown ameliorates black artists from the art realm and replaces their presence with their product. Samad proposes a new label, one that avoids a complete extirpation of black identity from the art world. Instead of identifying the era with the artist's stance, he connects the movement of thought with what it is trying to avoid: Post-Racism Thought. However, posterdizing racism implies that it too, as a construct and a philosophy, has been terminated from our society.

Paul C. Taylor's analysis of the post-black label helps to resolve Samad's issue with posterizing racism. His essay *Post-Black, Old-Black* attempts to elucidate the impulse to posterize a theory or concept through the examination of the 'post-black' label. As opposed to Samad, the employment of the "post' becomes more central to the understanding of the term in its entirety than the deconstruction of the actually term itself. For Taylor, the employment of the antecedent "post" carries the unique responsibility of validating and appreciating the past while simultaneously embracing the movement into a diverging era.[56] Therefore, posterzing has two specific aims, it "declares or accommodates a lack of uniformity in some unfolding domain of practice, and it traces the newly variegated reality to its common origins."[57] Post-black,could not exist without the formation of a narrowly defined blackness; however, its purpose is to exist as an innovative label spacious enough for accommodating a wider stage of thoughts. Post-black art embraces and rejects societal definitions of blackness, but most importantly it creates a new space for conceptualizing race-thinking.

Taylor deducts that the interjection of a 'post' in post-black art, although useful, is inadequate in the full contextualization of the movement. Instead he sees the label

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[55] (Samad 2007, 10)
[56] (Taylor 2007, 628)
[57] (Taylor 2007, 629)

derived by Golden as a "placeholder, an abbreviated perhaps innovation of unexcavated theoretical resources."[58] Throughout his essay he returns to the same questions, "how can post-black be the new black?...and in what sense is it really "post" blackness at all?[59]" Golden launched the dialogue on this question, and Taylor, like Samad, interjects his own interpretation of the era of artists. Taylor asks, "if it is just a new stage of blackness, then why not name it accordingly? Not "post-black," as if blackness has been superseded, but, say, neo-black. Or, since that stinks, something else?"[60]

Michael D. Harris in Colored Pictures argues for a similar term. Artwork rooted in oneself and one's ancestral existence, or communal existence, enables artists to more deeply influence racial issues. He posits,

> Artists are free to be as creative as their society and patronage will allow, but the work rooted in their experiential and epistemological existence connects them to energies that deepen the expression while offering universal identification through the specific.[61]

He contends that the trend of 'post-black artist" is to uproot themselves from their racial histories and detached their work from racially infused stigmas, should not be labeled as a complete divergence from black art ideology; instead, it is simply an amendment to the relationship between artist and identity. Contrary to their Black Arts Movement predecessors, "Their connections are not defined by essentialist racial "blood" associations. Instead their work emanates centrifugally out from common cultural foundations through diverse individual perspectives."[62] Although there has been a shift in

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[58] (Taylor 2007, 626)
[59] (Taylor 2007, 627)
[60] (Taylor 2007, 627)
[61] (Harris 2003, 246)
[62] (Harris 2003, 246)

the underpinning principles of black art, the corresponding designation does not need to suggest a complete departure from blackness as an underlying authority in the creation of artwork.

Harris also references *New York Times* columnist Holland Cotter's perspective on the post-black designation. Cotter suggests that the label offers artists an escape from the limiting 'identity corner' of racial identification, while simultaneously acting as a trapping mechanism for black artists. Thelma Golden's conception of post-black "could easily end up being yet another exercise in control from above, a marketing label of greater benefit to the privilege' and that 'a wholesale rejection of identity-based art would seem, to say the least, short sighted."[63] Although post-black art arose from the crux of the black community with intentions to tear down the limiting parameters of black art, Cotter points out its limitations. If post-black art aligns with the principles of the emerging racial paradigm, then instead of being revolutionary in tone, deflating societal restrictions, post-black art could be another tactic, as he puts it, of "control from the top."

The arising criticism of post-black art prompts a deeper analysis of the movement in relation to dominant ideological influences. Within this new era of race thinking "race is treated as a form of performances; an identity that [can], within limits, be worn or put aside; and as a diagnostic tool to investigate social values and pathologies."[64] Post-black artists operate under the notion that blackness can be temporarily removed or momentarily adopted for creative purposes. However, it is important to question who benefits from such expression. Is the black community really profiting from the minimization of race within the art realm? And is this post-black mentality a viable tool

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[63] (Harris 2003, 248)

[64] Holland Cotter, "The Topic is Race; The Art is Fearless," *The New York Times* , March 30, 2008, final edition, Lexis-Nexus, via Emory University, http://www.emory.edu

for overcoming the limitations of blackness? The following section will examine the contemporary impulse to connect autonomy with freedom and explore how post-black art becomes absorbed under the umbrella of color-blind thinking.

COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND POST-BLACK ART

"The artist must elect to fight for slavery or for freedom. I have made my decision. I had no choice."
Paul Robeson[65]

The preceding sections have established a base for understanding how aesthetic movements have aided in the preservation and perpetuation of racism through the dissemination of ideology[66]. White supremacy of the nineteenth century was perpetuated by visual depictions that purposely distorted or disfigured black life. Although the black aesthetic movements of the twentieth century extensively transformed the visual representation of black people in mainstream society by producing complicated and more psychologically complex delineations of black life, they were still rooted in racist ideology through their participation in the conversation about race. Similarly, the post-black art movement of the 21st century is entrenched in exploring a redefinition of blackness that has been negotiated predominantly by a new era of racial ideology.

The contemporary racial ideal has informed the individual perspectives of the contributing artists, thus shaping the development of the movement. The connection between art and ideology, however, is reciprocal in nature, each influencing the other. However, in the post-black art movement the relationship between aesthetics and ideology have remained hidden, veiling a central function in a prevailing ideology of the art world. Post-black art is indelibly linked with the overall purpose of contemporary racial philosophy. Thelma Golden defines her new label as "clarifying," in that it

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[65] "The Topic is Race: The Art is Fearless" *Black Educator* 2008. http://blackeducator.blogspot.com/2008/04/topic-is-race-art-is-fearless-see.html
[66] Arthur K. Spears, *Race and Ideology: Language, Symbolism, and Popular Culture* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press,1999), 12.

explains the tendencies and ideological dogma of a new generation of artist. Therefore, in order to understand post-black it is necessarily to first discuss the underlying principle of the dominant ideology with America. Color-blind orthodoxy, or color-blind racism, which arose in post-Civil Rights America, has defined the last several decades of sociopolitical thoughts and rests at the base of post-black philosophy.

However, before moving into the crux of the argument, it is important to note that this paper does not seek to assert absolutes. The relationship between art and race is dependent upon the dominant ideological paradigm, and, therefore, must be interpreted discretely. Post-black art that does not contain racial content is susceptible to advancing racial agendas only because of its positive or direct relationship to color-blind racism. Therefore, art does not require racial references in order to be understood as black art, but it must oppose the dominant racial ideology in order to be considered an active opponent of racism.

Racism As a Tactic of Oppression

Historically speaking, color-blind racism arose in the post-Civil Rights era to replace the suddenly null and void Jim Crow racism of the early 1900s. Once the obstructions for black political and electoral participation were lifted and the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act became the law of the land in the mid-1960s, America stood at a defining moment: It could either move in the direction of true racial equilibrium and uphold with integrity an inclusive system based on liberal ideals, or the fundamental belief in liberty and equality, or construct a new tool for maintaining an old

racial order.[67] Color-blind racism arose as the new instrument for implementing a defining structure of American society. Bonilla-Silva, who expands the frames of color-blind racism posits, "Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era, [and] color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era.[68]" He insists further, "Color-blind racism became the dominant racial ideology as the mechanisms and practices for keeping blacks and other racial minorities 'at the bottom of the well' changed.[69]" Despite the modification made to the habits of employment, the overarching institutionalization of racism is still deeply ingrained in American infrastructure.

In *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, Bonilla-Silva divides color-blind racism into four frames intended to deconstruct the fundamental components of this racial ideology. Each enables a deeper conceptualization of the racial philosophy as a whole. These four frames are listed as, abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism and the minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism distorts the principles of liberal philosophy and uses them to "rationalize racially unfair situations.[70]" Bonilla-Silva highlights that through using liberal rhetoric, whites are able to reframe racialized instances and extract references to inequality.

Naturalization explains the contemporary tendency to relate circumstances to "natural occurrences" instead of recognizing their institutional framework. For example,

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[67] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006), 3.
[68] (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, 3)
[69] (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 2-3)
[70] (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 26)

an art exhibit that premiers only white artists, under this pillar, could be argued to simply reveal the propensity of people and artists to "gravitate towards likeness," instead, of noting the long history of racial segregation within art exhibits. Bonilla-Silva explains that cultural racism "relies on culturally based arguments such as 'Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education' or 'blacks have too many babies' to explain the standing of minorities in society."[71] This pillar replaces the biological argument for racial inferiority with one rooted in cultural allusions. Instead of referencing brain size for black intellectual inferiority, color-blind racism inserts a cultural argument.

And the final pillar, minimization of racism, asserts that racism as a social, political and economic oppression is no longer presently shaping minority life. It reduces racism to a historical detail and permits the persistence of racism within society without taking it into significant consideration. This pillar distorts the link between race and racism by ignoring the presence of a racially ingrained distribution of power. Color-blind ideology through the minimalist lens "does not…ignore race; it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy.[72]"

COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Color-blind ideology replaces the historical trend of ridged social policies in forms of racism with a diverse system that provides surprisingly flexible ways to rebuff references to inequality. [73] It rejects absolutes and instead adopts a "pliable" frame of

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[71] (Bonilla Silva 2006, 26)
[72] Charles A. Gallagher "Color-Blind Privilege:The Social and Poltical Functions of Erasing the Color Line In Post Race America" *Race, Gender & Class* 10 (2003):5
[73] Jason Rodriquez, "Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (2006): 645.

reference that can adjust liberally to incorporate or exclude individuals.[74] This philosophy appears to be racially unbiased, especially in comparison to the overtly exclusionary tendencies of the Jim Crow era. However, color-blind racism uses the elasticity of the ideology to support racial hierarchies and perpetuate the principles of white superiority. This flexibility is achieved through an adherence to liberalist notions, most specifically, political liberalism or individualism, and economic liberalism or equal opportunity. By moving away from conversation about group-based oppression, racism is discounted as an institutional or structural oppression and suddenly it becomes easier to blame individuals for their own circumstances.

However, the perversion of liberalism is an important component of color-blind ideology. Liberalism can easily be defined as a white only philosophy, historically extending theoretical freedom to only white heterosexual males. Although "contemporary commentators debate the merit of liberal humanism as it pertains to current debates about race-based policies, multiculturalism and "equality of results," many seem oblivious to the fact that "European humanism (and liberalism) usually meant that only Europeans were human.'"[75] Although, it was also adopted by Civil Rights organizations in the 1960s as a strategy to extend liberties to people of color, this does not mean that the fundamental component of the philosophy changed. Abstract liberalism, as expressed by Bonilla-Silva, is simply rearticulating liberal notions "in post-Civil Rights America to rationalize racially unfair situations."[76] Through accepting a platform that diminished race as a social divider and pushed forth an agenda of equality, the nation strategically

[74] (Bonilla Silva 2006, 48)
[75] (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 27) Italic included. Quote from Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 27.
[76] (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 28)

evaded community dialogues on race and racial hierarchies. It is important to note that the 1960s did not mark the end of racial inequality; instead, the nation merely agreed to disable conversations surrounding racial disparity. Recognizing color-blind racism as an oppressive system that subordinates people of color through silencing strategies is the first step in understanding how post-black art, a movement originating in the black community, could possibly be oppressive in nature.

Gallagher goes a step further in his analysis and incorporates the defense of whiteness as a major perpetuator of the color-blind ideology. He notes, "The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any taint or suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt while legitimating the existing social, political and economic arrangements which privilege whites."[77] The representation of whiteness is a relatively new notion within academia. It brings to the surface the idea that whiteness is a constructed paradigm that simply exhibits different rules than its binary racial construct, blackness. While blackness is managed by its degree of invisibility within the mainstream public eye, whiteness is also governed by a code of invisibility. Richard Dyer begins his book *White* by revealing that whiteness as a racial construct rarely gets attentions or consideration when discussing race. Instead it is an invisible identity. Towards the beginning of his book, Dyer explains:

> As long as race is something only applied to non-whites peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen or named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. / There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the communality of humanity. Raced people can't do that— they can only speak for their race.[78]

[77] (Gallagher 2003, 6)
[78] (Dyer 1997, 1-2)

AnnLousing Keating agrees, insisting, "this invisible omnipresence gives "whiteness" a rarely acknowledged position of dominance and power."[79] Furthermore, this invisibility enabled whiteness to exist in a neutral state. "By thus erasing its presence, 'whiteness' operates as the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all so-called "minorities" are measured."[80] This code of invisibility is what enables Langston Hughes to equate the desire to avoid being labeled a *black* artist with the desire to be white. Holland Cotter reiterates Hughes' position on race when he insists that "Ethically neutral" or racially neutral is just "a code-term for white" and that "Whiteness is yet another part of the postracial story."[81] Here Cotter points out that it is impossible to separate the white/black binary racial paradigm because a person cannot request to be neutral of race without recognizing that this neutrality in our society *is* whiteness.

Since white has been established as the norm within the racial spectrum, extracting race from identity does not deracialize an entity (person, artwork or subject matter, etc); instead it makes the subtle but impossible request to be seen and observed as white. Theoretically, demanding to be de-racialized and working or existing outside of racialized boundaries should destabilize the power play made by whites to subordinate black persons due to race. But by evading racial identities, within a racialized system, blacks perpetuate the inclination to equate whiteness with normalcy.

This equation is how post-black art intertwines with the politics of color-blind racism. Art movements grounded in racial resistance, which push a deeper understanding

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[79] AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating "Whiteness." (De)Constructing "Race," *College English* 57 (1995): 905.
[80] (Keating 1995, 905)
[81](Cotter 2008, 2)

of race and new conceptualizations of blackness onto society, operate as advances towards equalizing the system. The authors of *White Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* articulate a similar point when they argue, "the color-blind ideal actually impedes efforts necessary to eliminate racial inequality. Formal color-blindness fails to recognize or address the deeply rooted institutional practices and long-term disaccumulation that sustain racial inequality."[82] Pointing out that race actually undermines the foundation of America's race based-system and acts as a force against inequality. Therefore an aesthetic movement such as post-black encourages the objectives of color-blind racism by first perpetuating whiteness as a racial norm and adhering to the liberal notion of individualism and second by minimizing the racial identity of the artist and/or the subject of race within the artwork.

MINIMIZING RACE IN POST-BLACK ART

Abstract liberalism and racial minimalism will be used in the following section to consider the connection between color-blind ideology and post-black art. The minimization of race, as mentioned previously, diminishing race as a social institution and curtails the existence, impact and influence of a racial hierarchy within society. In the beginning of a section of "A Critique of 'Our Constitution Is Color-Blind'" Neil Gotanda articulates the equation between black invisibility and the minimization of race or racism; he posits, "Color blind orthodoxy presse[s] for ultimate cultural and racial genocide, which creates a new level of invisibility."[83] As the color-blind ideology instigates a moratorium on references to racial hierarchies it does, in a sense, pressure for an

[82] (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 28)
[83] Neil Gotanda "Our Constituion Is Color-Blind" *Standford Law Review* 44 (1991): 59-60.

extinction of race as a notable social signifier. By removing race from institutions such as dialogue and representation, race is buried beneath the contradictions of color-blindness.

For example, within the November 1991 issue of Stanford Law Review, one article referenced the internal psychological conflict between repression and non-repression of race under the rein of color-blind ideology. In *A Critique of "Our Constitution Is Color-Blind"* Gotanda insists, "[From] a psychological or psychoanalysis perspective, non-repression may be considered a mode of repression. The claim that race is not recognized is an attempt to deny the reality of internally recognized social conflicts of race." Therefore, the non-repressive methods of color-blind racism that insists race is no longer a dividing facet of society, in actuality, represses race even further. Charles Lawrence expands this claim by incorporating racism into the case, "when an individual experiences conflict between racist ideas and the societal ethic that condemns those ideas, the mind excludes his racism from consciousness."[84] Lawrence goes further in his analysis to declare, "[m]uch of one's inability to know racial discrimination when one sees it results from a failure to recognize that racism is both a crime and a disease.... Acknowledging and understanding the malignancy are prerequisites to the discovery of an appropriate cure."[85] Thus, recognizing components, such as race, which enable the persistence of racial hierarchies will bring discrimination, on both an institution and personal level, to the attention of society. According to this paradigm, all movements or methods that minimize race adhere to a non-repression strategy or approaching race, which in actuality further repress race and the acknowledgement of racial hierarchies.

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[84] (Gotanda 1991, 22)
[85] (Gotanda 1991, 22)

Therefore, post-black art, which according to its definition suppresses blackness as a social identifier, not only works in accordance to the rules of color-blind ideology but also enables the persistence of racism in our society.

However, it is important to note that Golden separates the definition of post-black into two clauses, purposely divided by a comma to indicate the importance of the diverging points. The first, as mentioned previously, is the artist's "[adamancy] about not being labeled as "black" artists..."[86] Within these words the actual label is born. The next, secondary due to its dependence on the first, references the artist's outlook or stance, "…their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."[87] Ian Parker references the nature of the contradiction when he describes the Freestyle artists as "self-consciously detached ironist.[88]" In fact there are several levels of minimization in the post-black idea, ranging from the complete removal of race and historical references to bolder allusions to race and the racial hierarchy.

For instance, several of the artists center their work on "complex notions of blackness" and push their viewers to reconcile some of the contradictions in the color-blind era; they often utilize methods that subordinate blackness and diminish race to a reference or endnote. In fact, several artists grabble with the question of identity without compromising their ardor for producing work that discusses black life and the multifarious notion of blackness. But each artist under this label finds different ways to makes race a secondary point of analysis. However, it is important to note that even though the post-black generation of artists, as Parker mentions in the same article, "muted or rerouted the explicitly racial agenda of the predecessors," some still utilize race as a

[86] (Golden 2001, 14)
[87] (Golden 2001, 14)
[88] (Ian parkers 5)

motif throughout their work.[89] For example, artists such as Tana Hargest and Mark S. Bradford use race as the underlying basis for their artwork and incorporate blackness as a way to speak to their viewers about pertinent issues afflicting the black community.

Mark S Bradford, who is described as "'beauty operator' and cultural historian" doubles as an artist and hairstylist and draws his inspiration ardently from both fields. He describes his work as being influenced by "art theory and the space where new trajectory of black popular culture are performed."[90] The racial transparency in his work dismisses the possibility of a true post-black label, but his angle of expression does diverge from the conventional black art paradigm. In his 2001 exhibit, Bradford openly articulates his interest in "black-on-black dialogue surrounding the boundaries of identity and black modernism" and uses the paradoxical dimensions of race as the basis of his work.[91] Prometheus 2001, revolves around the mythical Greek character who tricked the gods and was chained and mercilessly punished by Zeus for eternity, or until Heracles kills this tormenter.[92] Teka Selman author of an essay about Bradford in the *Freestyle* catalogue explains:

> Prometheus' profile is a cornucopia of cultural artifacts, exploring the fabric of "authentic black subjectivity," through images that consider Afrocentrism, gender conceptions, and notions of wealth and power. Yet while he seems to give us a privileged look into a segment of contemporary black culture, the viewer is reminded that Prometheus comes from a perspective grounded in myth. Prometheus will always be a trickster, whose truths are purely relative.[93]

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[89] (Parker)
[90] (Golden 2001, 26)
[91] (Golden 2001, 26)
[92] Jonathan Vadakethu, "Prometheus," *Encyclopedia Mythica,* http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/prometheus.html
[93] (Golden 2001, 26)

However, the irony of his piece does not only exist on the canvas, but also overflows into his creative process as well. By "combining portraitures with 'ghetto-fabulous' style" Bradford pushes viewers to re-contextualize their understanding of art and the prescribed, often limiting spaces of expression. Further, by "painting in hip-hop gear," Bradford purposely uses himself as a way to advance a message about the absurdities of blackness and he "negotiates the space between high and low art, confusing our conception about the relationship between class and culture."[94]

Similarly, Tana Hargest places race in her artwork by taking one of America's most intense epithets and applying the loose connotation of the black community to explicitly express the irony of contemporary black-white relations. Hargest clearly alludes to the presence of color-blind racism within her work and uses the divergent nature of the institution to further her message on the intersection of "race, consumer culture and the contemporary art market." [95] Her message is communicated through a corporation she founded in 1997 called Bitter Nigger, Inc. In a letter she wrote to her 'Potential Shareholders" Hargest explicitly explains the purpose of her incorporation. She writes,

> We created Bitter Nigger to fill the void in the contemporary art market. Bitter Nigger provides fresh ideas in the arena of political art and illustrates the shifting possibilities of contemporary cultural production. Through our packaging of concepts as consumable products we have increased the relevancy of art for viewers beyond the art world. The road we have mapped out for ourselves is exciting. With careful planning and a focus on creativity, we endeavor to deliver the highest-quality cultural interventions available.

[94] (Golden 2001, 26)
[95] (Golden 2001, 40)

Through three divisions, Bitter Nigger Broadcasting Network, bitter Nigger Production Division, and Bitter Nigger Pharmaceutical, Hargest provides products that enable an individual to cope with or cure aspects of racism and white privilege that are not typically deemed as medically treatable. For example, Tominex is a blue pill that cited under the "Go-Along-To-Get-Along" drug and was "designed to help young black people "achieve a level of complacency normally reached after years of deferred dreams and smashed hopes…but without the bitterness" or disappointment."[96] There is also Privitol that is prescribed to white consumers who struggle with white privilege. This "dermal patch" helps whites to slowly wean themselves from "false security of skin-based privilege."[97] In the *Freestyle* exhibit Hargest also has an advertisement of her corporation that alludes to the way that ideologies are marketed and race is commodified within consumer culture. Debra Singer describes Hargest intention in her Freestyle article:

> She…asks us to reflect on our ingrained and often passive attitude towards these specialized marketing languages and on the state of unexamined consumerism that pervades American culture. By adopting an overt corporate identity and creating art that mimics common consumer products, Hargest suggests that the marketplace is a primary vehicle for the structuring of power relations and, as such, a profitable site in which to intervene.

However, the use of race within the work of both Hargest and Bradford diverges greatly from the anthem of black art convention. Although they incorporate complex analyses of blackness, they do so in a way that takes the viewers through multiple lenses of examination. Instead of creating work that focuses specifically on race, Bradford subordinates blackness as an aspect of his work and pushes his viewer to extract the

[96] (Golden 2001, 40)
[97] (Golden 2001, 41)

necessary information needed to comprehend his position that blackness is both a constructed reality and superficial identity.

Similarly, Hargest uses irony as a shield or defensive armor against blatant references to blackness. Through disguising her intent, she is able to circumvent conversations that encroach the outer boundaries of appropriate racial dialogue, and keep the analysis within a suitable frame. Although their work deals with race more than their post-black art contemporaries, race still is minimized both as a theme and an overall function of their work. Race has become a backdrop, an interchangeable notion, used sparingly and electively by this new generation of artists.

When reviewing the minimization of race in the post-black movement of art, it is impossible to overlook the artists who avidly avoid race as a motivational force for their artwork either in concept or creation. Many of these artists abstract their creations; placing blackness on the periphery and making subtle, often faint references to black life. For example, in *Freestyle* Kira Lynn Harris presents three photographers from her piece *96 Degrees in the Shade* created in 2000 during her summer at Smack Mellon Studios in Brooklyn. In these photographs Harris records the shining of both natural and track lights against "a staircase leading nowhere" that she covers in silver mylar.[98] The result is a series of photographs that resemble burning or bursts of light coming from a dark void. Although Susette Min, who writes the article about Harris for the Freestyle catalogue, references African Americans art in the final sentence, Harris' work not only avoids African American subjects but also circumvent even a conceptual connections to black space. In a statement written to The Cue Art Foundation about her exhibit, Harris does not even mention race as a contributor to her conceptualization of pieces or a major

[98] (Golden 2001, 26)

influence of her creation process.[99] Harris is an iconic figure of the post-black genre, she has extracted race from both her work and her consideration.

Similarly, *Freestyle* artist Louis Cameron and Jerald Ieans use minimalism and abstractions respectively as their primary tools of expression, enabling an extraction of racial allusions or historically contextual narratives from their work. Both processes are steeped in extorting reality and recreating spaces devoid of racial context. For example, in *Freestyle* Cameron débuted a series of grids either flat, consisting of "square units assembled into numerous, linear combinations" or the "distorted grid, biomorphs that seem to defy the very grid matrix in which they exist."[100] This series of grids varying in color and the level of morphism, was created though a computer-drafting program, CorelDRAW, which enabled him to create and then distort the grids proportionately. For example, Grid #9 (2000) is described as a "rectangular painting with a bulging appendage," with varying shades of green as its color pallet. This piece is 5 x 5 in dimension and rests unorthodoxly on the floor of the exhibit. Cameron's choice to construct his half sculpture, half painting, grid-like pieces on the floor was an intentional effort towards redefining the boundaries of the image and forcing the viewer to re-rationalize his or her understanding of margins and restricted spaces. His work is deeply concerned with the relationship between art and the viewer, and attempts to push his audience into familiar spaces with new limitations. Raina A. Lampkins-Fielder examples, "When the viewer moves, the effect is that the works themselves shift through pictorial and physical space, creating a perceptual system of relationship between the body of the

[99] Kira Lynn Harris, Artist's Statement, *Cue Art Foundation* http://www.cueartfoundation.org/Kira-Lynn-Harris.html
[100] (Golden 2001, 28)

viewer, the work, and the exhibition environment. As Cameron himself states, "I am to create an unorthodox painting experience."[101]

Dawoud Bey argues that these artists have not only lapsed into a post-black moment but also transcended the left and right margins of defining orthodoxies and launched a new era of "post-theory" artwork. [102] Jerald Ieans is a quintessential example, placing passive racial meaning and interpretation behind his paintings. According to Ieans, his abstract biomorphic images, fluidly layered and positioned on top of each other with varying degrees of color and shades, are "not abstractions" but instead "specific and separate embodiment of feeling."[103] However, beyond this description very little meaning is found in the artwork. Ieans does not seek to explore or create spaces for African American artists to establish new definitions of freedom, nor does he purposely challenge his viewer to explore boundaries like Cameron. Instead, "Ieans approaches issues of identity and issues of painting separately" completely avoiding the examination of complex issues of identity within his work. [104]

Similarly, by posterizing black, as Paul C. Taylor alludes, Golden gives the impression that blackness is no longer a socially significant identifier. Simply the label connotes a sense of racial minimalism. Minimization is, therefore, a rampant facet of post-black art, placing this new art movement in accordance with one of Bonillia-Silva's frame for color-blind racism. Thus, by diminishing the significance of race within the creation process, post-black art assists in perpetuating the structure of color-blind ideology.

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[101] (Golden 2001, 29)
[102] Dawoud Bey, "The Ironies of Diversity, or the Dissappearing Black Artist," *Artnet* http://www.louiscameron.com/Data/Screen/Press/Artnet0404/Artnet0404.pdf pg 3
[103] (Golden 2001, 46)
[104] (Golden 2001, 47)

LIBERALISM TO ENFORCE RACISM

Similarly, through the lens of abstract liberalism, post-black artists aligns with the principles of individualism in an attempt to expand the definition of blackness. However, by adhering to the liberalist tenets post-black art defends contemporary rationalizations of racism.

Thelma Golden argues that this new genre of art "in all its various forms, speaks to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African American art and ultimately to ongoing redefinitions of blackness in contemporary cultures."[105] Individualism, or the clinging to individualist ideals—an irresistible bond to freedom on the most essential stage—governs not only the formation of art but also the 'quest' within art to redefine and re-acknowledge the meaning of blackness. Post-black artists move away from collective statements in search of a personal voice, drain their artwork of communal representations and de-racialize their subjects, or avoid race completely, avoiding all histories or influences that might connect them to blackness.

The responses of the post-black artists are supported by a liberal paradigm and use individualism as the primary mode of persuasion. The history of individualism as a social concept and practice dates back over two thousand years to ancient Greek civilizations; however, its contemporary conceptualization has modern roots in the Enlightenment thinking of 18th century Europe.[106] The term carries the burden of multiple

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[105] (Golden 2001, 15)

[106] Peter L. Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 3.

meanings, discursive in origins, ranging from neoliberalism to individualist anarchism.[107] In fact, Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* refers to the multiple denotation of individualism insisting, "Individualism…embraces the utmost heterogeneity of meaning."[108] However, despite the various definitions, individualism explores fundamental questions of personhood and the relationship between the individual and society.

In doctrines of liberalism, individualism arrives at its meaning from the postulation that individuals are "naturally autonomous and self-determining."[109] This lens asserts, "humans inherently possess the capacity to be reasonable and to conduct and regulate their behavior according to an internal 'will.'"[110] This doctrine supports idealist or psychological analysis of human interaction across racial lines and enabled the definition of racism to be limited to the study of actions and beliefs instead of institutional or structural pressures. Reducing racism to the individual realm allows racial realists to make new contentions about the state of race in America. In *White Washing Race: The Myth of Color-Blind Society*, Michael K. Brown et al, highlights several books that have emerged as the ideological foundation of a new racial paradigm.[111] Although the *White Washing Race* emphasizes the vast difference between each book, it also notes the common claims made by the authors, each rooted in the aims to "move beyond

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[107] Cosmo Howard, *Contested Individualizations: Debates about Contemporary Personhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 3.
[108] Steven Lukes, "The Meaning of 'Individualism'" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971) 45.
[109] Howard, 6.
[110] Howard, 6.
[111] See page 5 of Brown, Michael K., Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Schultz, and David Wellman. *Whitewashing Race The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*. New York: University of California, 2005. Print. The books referenced are: Jim Sleeper's *Liberal Racism* (1997), Tamar Jacoby's *Someone Else's House* (1998), Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1995), Shelby Steele's *A Dream Deferred* (1999) and Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom's *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible* (1997).

dichotomies, to find more complicated options, [and] to construct an analysis that transcends race." These books are the central perpetuators of viewpoints such as the prevalent notion that color-conscious laws would give people of color an additional privilege, which would undermine the liberalist doctrines of equal opportunity. Similarly, racial realists attribute the state of racial affairs to the individual level, blaming blacks for their own tribulations. The use of individualism as a tactic to deter attention away from the persistence of racism and as a method to rationalize racism is precisely what Bonilla-Silva dubs the abstraction of liberalism.

However, black artists also adhere to the tenets of individuals. For example, Kojo Griffin was one of the 28 artists who was both labeled and exhibited as post-black in 2001. Through the employment of animal-like figures, androgynous in form, Griffin's work focuses on human behaviors and actions that are universally understood and committed, while purposely spotlighting experiences that are not emblematic to every day interaction. For example, in his piece *Untitled* (2000) uses of bears as the figurative imagery in the painting, evoking memories of teddy bears and childhood.[112] However, the warm and cuddly sensation that typically accompanies this childhood play toy immediately disperses as your eyes enter into the painting, moving up the legs of the father figure to his arms and onto the child, shaken and feeble in disposition. At first the child appears almost dead with his limbs hanging lifeless by his side and his head tilted back. However, the father's grip has not loosened, revealing that his rage has not yet eased, giving the impression that the experience is still mid-point, and the child's death, if coming, has not yet settled long enough for the father to take notice.

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[112] Meyers, 1.

Within this piece, and several others that follow the same style and theme, Griffin extracts race through the use of animal-like faces. However, it is not necessarily Griffin's work that allows him to persist under the post-black label. He is a black artist whose work avoids blatantly racialized themes in order to accentuate the complexity of human interactions.[113] Golden specifies that the artists under this label are "adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists" thought their work explores the expansion or redefinition of blackness.[114] In an interview with Rebecca Dimling Cochran, Griffin elaborates on his stance as a creator and clarifies that his decision to avoid bluntly racializing his work was purposeful. He explains:

> I was constantly questioning myself as an artist, who I was, what I wanted to do and what I wanted to accomplish. I started realizing that as an African American artist everything I do will be judged by some sort of racial parameter. I decided that there were enough people talking about [racial issues] at this point that…within the context of contemporary art I didn't need to talk about the same thing.[115]

Here you see Griffin grappling with his identity in relation to his work and commenting about the declining significance of collective responsibility to the black art world. Instead of joining forces *with* the 'people talking about [racial issues]' Griffin separates himself from the collective and uses his art to promote an individuality. Post-black art represents the contemporary self-extraction of black artists from a collectivist framework in lieu of personally derived and employed assertions of resistance. Although the spectrum of resistance ranges from blatant to faint and the presence of race varies between artists, the

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[113] Rebecca Dimpling Cochran, "Kojo Griffin" *Art Papers Magazine* 23, no. 4 (1999): 14.
[114] (Golden 2001, 14)
[115] (Cochran 1999, 14)

linkage undoubtedly rests in the decentralization of race and the abandonment of racialized work as the key resistor to the definition of blackness.

Similarly, post-black artist Trenton Doyle Hancock in an interview with PBS for the fifth season of *Art:21—Art in the Twenty-First Century* (2009), explains his relationship to the principles of individualism and his current stance on the exploration of blackness:

> You know, the fact that I'm a black artist and there was something at one point that I wanted to explore. And I did that thing to a point and I just got really bored with how things were turning out. It's like everything was kind of given already and it was just something that I already knew in my heart—all of these issues—and I was very comfortable with who I was anyway. It wasn't something I wanted to explore any deeper.[116]

Like Griffin, Doyle consciously removes himself from the collective exploration of blackness and consents to simply produce art *as* a black artist. Although the later does still perpetuate the evolution of blackness, making space for the plurality of black art, it does so passively and is easily swept under the liberalist rhetoric of color-blind ideology. By subscribing to the code of beliefs issues forth under liberalism, black artists are simultaneously adhering to the underlying doctrines of color-blind thinking and supporting a canon that is being employed to perpetuate a new racial paradigm steeped in racist intent.

Navigating through the frames of color-blind ideology, post-black art emerges as an aesthetic movement grounded in the principles of individualism and the minimization of race, two frames that found their initial nativity in a racially oriented, oppressive

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[116] "StoryTelling: Character and Colors" Art in the Twenty-First Century, PBS Home Programs http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/hancock/clip2.html

system of thought. Ignoring the relationship between these contemporary ideologies disables the potential impact of black movements of expression and perpetuates the philosophical undertones of color-blind racism. Although post-black art seeks to expand the boundaries of blackness and create multiple ways to exist and create as a black artist, by adopting the foundational stone of the color-blind ideology and surrendering an active voice against this era of racism, post-black art acts as a perpetuator of color-blind racism. In the beginning chapter of Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* she vividly exemplifies racism as a moving conveyor belt, and illustrates how all individuals play an active role in maintaining or fighting against the system.

> I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racists behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is move with it. Passive racists behavior is equivalent to stand still on the walkway. No over effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the convey belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyer belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.[117]

Racism is perpetuated when its existence is ignored or unacknowledged; therefore by subscribing to a definition that removes race from the basis of the art movement, post-black art is passively standing, possibly even walking slowly, on a conveyer belt towards white supremacy.

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[117] Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997)11-12.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Yet it is unlikely that we shall ever have a truly great Afro-American artist among us until American society completely accepts the Negro and his valid interpretation. This wished-for relationship is still far from arriving although it is so much desired by all who love America and hope that she will fulfill the democratic promise of equality…. The present militancy of the Negro relative to this necessity has been interpreted as the actual conscience of American pricking her towards goals of social justice and more action. This, in fact, is a cultural upsurge of crucial importance, and it offers the artist and the writer unprecedented opportunities for the development of mobility and independence of creative thought and imagery. [118]
~James A Potter~

I do not intend to write about post-black art as a way to undervalue the significance of the expression, or the philosophy that upholds it. Post-black art calls into question black artist's ability to exist and produce. On the most basic level it unlaces race from expectation, and demands that an artist be able to create art without being bound by racial limitations. Independent of a sociopolitical context, post-black art is revolutionary. By working outside of race and relinquishing expectations of black aesthetics, theoretically, the definition of blackness should expand until it reaches the new model established by post-black artists. However, as this paper seeks to reveal, this is far from the case.

Black aesthetic movements interlace art with philosophy and challenge the ideological undertones of black representation. By confronting the prevalent theoretical strictures of dominant ideology, art instigates a battle between contemporary truths and new interpretation of reality. Post-black art challenges the singularity of blackness and seeks to generate a space where artists can create outside of the limiting boundaries of

[118] (Berden 1993, 380)

black expression and explore blackness without a collective agenda. This is what enables Tana Hargest to use race as the primary theme of her artwork while post-black artist Louis Cameron expunges it completely from his creation process. Both are incorporated under the post-black label, even though their perspective on race varies dramatically. Post-black art is about diversity, the ability to be a black artist and achieve the liberty to create without bounds.

Like the aesthetic movements that pre-dated it, post-black art is indelibly linked to the dominant racial paradigm of American society. Similar to the Jim Crow racism of the 20th century, color-blind orthodoxy governs contemporary elucidations of race and influences the characterization of modern-day racism. However, this philosophy, despite its liberal undertones, actually hampers efforts towards greater racial equality. This essay works to expose post-black art as one of the ways that color-blind racism perpetuates a system of racial hierarchy.

By adhering to the rules and frames of color-blind racism, post-black art aids in the oppression of the black community by supporting or coinciding with an ideology that facilitates a widespread apathy of racial inequality. Color-blindness enables the persistence of a racially based hierarchical system by discounting its presence. Similarly, by rerouting references to race and avoiding racial contextualization, post-black art preserves the stature of color-blind ideology. Furthermore, it adopts many of the core beliefs of color-blindness and merges them with a movement of redefining blackness. By placing oppressive beliefs at the core of the post-black movement, the artist's attempt to expand blackness and liberate black artists from restrictive limitations, suddenly becomes secondary to the underlying pressure of the dominant racial philosophy. Post-black art,

even in its attempt to be revolutionary, is really advancing a system of racial inequality. And under this doctrine, the art realm forfeits their position as soldiers in the crusade against racism. Until the connection between post-black art and color-blind racism is fully established and widely understood, post-black art threatens to act as a major instrument of publicity for color-blind thinking.

In terms of both Taylor and Samad's contention for the antecedent 'post' in the new aesthetic label, first and foremost post-black should not be interpreted as a beginning, or a separate stream of thought diverging from an oppressive forbearer. Instead it needs to be labeled for what it is: a movement or progression in the overall deliberation of black art and identity. Although the term 'post-black' is what drew me to the movement and incited in me a purpose to explore the expression vigorously, I did not find it necessary to re-labeling the term because, like Taylor explicates, it would merely become another placeholder for the same denotation. Therefore, I hope instead to place a new urgency in the usage of words in our nation.

Within this thesis I take the reader through the circumnavigation of black visibility. I began by recognizing blackness in terms of invisibility and reference Ralph Ellison as a major perpetuator of this conviction. I examine how black aesthetic movements play a persistent role in the defense of blackness by ushering into the mainstream art arena new and complex delineations of black life. As black artists struggled to amend their echelon of representation, blackness became more visible within the art world. Although post-black art does not overturn the progress made by racially conscious actors, it does reverse the relationship between blackness and visible

representation. Instead of pressing to make blackness a central aspect of the art realm, post-black art fights for a new racial invisibility.

However, also seek to divulge a new conception of blackness. Instead, of rendering it an identity, a sociopolitical distinction worn and adopted, blackness can be interpreted as a position, a perception, or a movement rooted in identity politics. Throughout aesthetic movements, blackness cosigns as a label and a proposition, an identity marker and a codebook for examining racial hierarchies. Post-black art persuasively pushes away from blackness as a label insisting upon a divergence from racial markers. However, disconnecting from the identity component does not sever its relations to an ontological interpretation of blackness. What does this mean? It means that post-black art can avoid, minimize and curtail racial references while still taking a stance on the notion of blackness. This speaks to the overall purpose of black aesthetic as the mediator between the politics of identity and race.

Black aesthetics evolved out of the clash between the functional purposes of art, art as an uninhibited sanctuary of expression on one side and art as a redeemer, sacrificing for the annihilation of oppression on the other. The disparity between these foremost philosophies generates a reaction, pendular in motion, which swings back and forth between the opposing extremes. At the onset of a new movement, black artists struggle in search of a point of equilibrium. Shuffling between viewpoints, they seek to replace the balancing act with stillness, a motionless resolution signifying the inception of equality. Post-black art renders one extreme valid and creates in anticipation of the cycle's collapse. However, until the extremes become negligible, until contestation,

regardless of position or intention, becomes unnecessary and the space between the opposing viewpoints opens as a possible resting place for the entirety of society, black aesthetic movements will follow in the tradition of their predecessors, oscillating between semi-viable attempts at freedom.

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