

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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Volume 14 Special Issue 2.5

September 6, 2013

## **Pens and Ploughshares: The Historical Use of Art by African-Descended Women to Create Social Justice in the US Neo-Slavery Era**

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Citation: View, J. (2013). Pens and ploughshares: The historical use of art by African-descended women to create social justice in the US Neo-slavery era. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(SI 2.5). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v14si2/>.

### **Abstract**

In the period after the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Plessy v. Ferguson*), “white” supremacy was codified and reinforced through law, custom, and mob violence. Despite this, African-descended women artists in the Western Hemisphere committed the revolutionary act of declaring, “I am; I am here; I am here remaking/reimagining the world you are destroying.” This chapter offers some of the lesser-known counter-narratives of these artists of the period between the late 1890s and the 1960s.

*The pen is mightier than the sword (Richelieu, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1839)*

*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.  
(Isaiah 2:4 & Micah 4:3, New International Version)*

### **The Broad Socio-Political Context for Art-Making**

In the period from 1896 to 1965, African-descended women were in a war for their very survival and many used art – literature, dance, song, drama, music, painting, sculpture, etc. – to fight back.

Between 1846 and 1946, the United States government participated in over 130 wars and violent struggles<sup>1</sup> most directed toward North American populations and populations that became part of the ascending American Empire (e.g. Collier, 1993). At the midpoint of this century came the legal codification of “white” supremacy in the U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation even in public accommodations (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 1896).

This codification served to empower local mob acts of violence to reinforce “white” supremacy in every corner of the nation that exceeded the reach and resources of the federal and state governments. At the apex of this period, every institution in U.S. society promoted the idea that people of color and women were inferior to “white” men in ways both mundane and elaborate. Through shunning, sundown laws that insisted that people of color leave town before sundown (Loewen, 2005), limited (or non-existent) voting rights, derogatory public imagery, murder, torture, and rape, and other means, the power structure fiercely asserted its

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<sup>1</sup> This number is a conservative estimate. Various sources of information include major declared wars (domestic and international), domestic conflicts including wars against American Indians, extrajudicial unprosecuted mob violence such as documented lynchings of African Americans and Mexican Americans, and government-approved violence against Asian and Asian American workers and landowners. Collier (1993) provides a scholarly source of data. Some popular sources of information include History central.com Instances of use of United States armed forces abroad, 1798-2004 From the Library of Congress, retrieved from <http://www.historycentral.com/USEFOFORCE.html> on December 18, 2009; Wikipedia: Timeline of U.S. military operations [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_military\\_operations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_United_States_military_operations) retrieved on December 18, 2009; Yahoo Answers.com : How many wars has the U.S. been involved in? <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080930181743AApFxbL>, retrieved December 18, 2009; About.com: History Matters American History Timeline American Involvement in Wars from Colonial Times to the Present <http://americanhistory.about.com/library/timelines/bltimelineuswars.htm>, retrieved December 18, 2009; PoetPatriot.com: Timelines of Liberty: <http://www.poetpatriot.com/timeline/tmwar-american.htm>, retrieved December 18, 2009

own legitimacy. Bolstering these assertions was the beginning of decline among European empires (particularly the British, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires) and the rise in American economic power globally (Campion, 2010). American Protestant men believed themselves to rule the world and needed to insure that the rest of us knew it.

The most significant way to reinforce superiority was through economic means: to force people of color and women to grovel for daily food, clothing, shelter, and long-term sustainability. Certainly segregationist legislation, the second rise of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings and race riots, sharecropping, the racial discrimination of labor unions, sexism and the lack of legal reliable birth control contributed significantly to conditions of poverty and oppression. For African-descended women, however, more ominous forces were at play.

In his groundbreaking research, Blackmon (2008) documents the “inexplicably labored advance of African Americans in U.S. society in the century between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s” as a direct result of their re-enslavement by U.S. businesses, large and small. Through the use of slave mines and forced labor camps operated by state and county governments, large corporations, small-time entrepreneurs, and provincial farmers -- and fed by hundreds of thousands of indigent African American men captured and imprisoned on the flimsiest of charges -- mines, lumber camps, quarries, farms and factories thrived (p. 6-7). “Repeatedly, the timing and scale of surges in arrests appeared more attuned to rises and dips in the need for cheap labor than any demonstrable acts of crime” and “the record is replete with episodes in which public leaders faced a true choice between a path toward complete racial repression or some degree of modest civil equality, and emphatically chose the former (p. 7).” It was on these re-enslaved men that the majority of African-descended women and children were expected to depend for their own livelihoods from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1951, when the U.S. Congress finally passed explicit statutes making any form of slavery in the United States an indisputable crime (p. 381), and in the absence of their own voting and economic rights.

As these women struggled to feed themselves and their families, they lived in a scientific and popular culture that derived scholarly glory and entertainment from the denigration of these same women. Termed child-like, immoral, savage, animalistic, and the prime suppliers of the “marketplace of the flesh – slave, sexual, and service economies (Collins, 2002, p. 41), African-descended women were presumed alien to the Victorian ideal “true womanhood” embracing “white” women (Giddings, 1984, pp. 79-83), an image that persisted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of fictional and marketing characters such as the fat, dark-skinned, emasculating mammy, the accommodating aunt jemima, the fair-skinned tragic mulatto, and the cinnamon-colored temptress in their various permutations in the advertisements, books,

magazines, movies, music, radio and television shows of the period only served to make the daily experience of African-descended women even more oppressive (Bogle, 2009).

While African Americans actively resisted racial oppression in creative and adaptable ways – including creating and joining civil rights organizations, sitting in, sending their children to school rather than the fields, going on strike, boycotting, drinking from white water fountains, staring their oppressors in the eye, speaking half-truths in public, documenting full truths in Black-owned media –

African American resistance to white supremacy was costly.... [Weighing] the unlikely prospects of success with the certainties of violent reprisals... African Americans knew that the price of resistance could be their lives. (Chafe, Gavins, Korstad, Ortiz, Parrish, Ritterhouse, Roberts, & Waligora-Davis, 2001, pp. 268 - 270).

In the face of economic, physical, and cultural violence, African-descended women in the Western hemisphere had few defenses in the war against them. Laboring as they were behind the plows and other sharecropping implements, the sewing machines of the sweatshops, the hot stoves, washpots and toilets of “white” women, and the desks of their underemployment, African-descended women had not much more than their readily available imaginations and the weapons of pens, paintbrushes, songs and dances.

This article highlights some of the lesser-known counter-narratives of these artists in the period between the late 1890s and the 1960s. In some cases, the artists are well known but their lesser-known works provide insight to the consciousness of African-descended women. In other cases, the chapter attempts to resurrect artists who do not yet (and may never) penetrate the popular consciousness by, for example, appearing on commercial Black History Month calendars representing “Our Best and Brightest Artists.” In all cases, these women stand in forbidden spaces, against the laws of their time, defiant.

### ***Those Multi-Tasking Race Women***

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw African-descended people at their lowest ebb in their pursuit of social, economic and political justice. Scholar-activist W.E.B. DuBois and historian John Hope Franklin widely perceived this period as the nadir of Black history (Shockley, 1988, p. 277). Similarly, the period between 1920 and 1960 is considered the nadir of feminist activity, following the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granting women the right to vote and the major decline of (“white”) women’s organizations (Guy-Sheftall, p. 77). African-descended women of the period provide a powerful counter-narrative.

In 1896, the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court re-encoded the second-class citizenship of people of color, African-descended women reinvigorated the broad movement for social justice with the creation of middle-class racial uplift, pan-African nationalist, and working-class socialist clubs and organizations. Not content to stand idly by as government stripped away the hard-won victories of the Civil War and Reconstruction years, and disappointed by the failure of Black male leaders to forcefully defend them (Giddings, p. 83; Brown, 2006), these women theorists and activists marshaled every bit of education, financial wherewithal, wit, social power, and courage they had to save the entire race.

Prominent African-descended feminist thinkers of the era – all of whom were orators and activists, in addition to their chosen profession – included Anna Julia Cooper (educator), Julia A.J. Foote (first ordained woman deacon of the African Methodist Episcopal church), Nannie Helen Burroughs (educator), Gertrude Bustill Mossell (journalist), Mary Church Terrell (educator), Ida B. Wells-Barnett (journalist), Sadie T.M. Alexander (lawyer), Amy Ashwood-Garvey (writer, organizer), Amy Jacques-Garvey (editorial writer), Claudia Jones and Grace Campbell (Communist Party organizers), Elizabeth Hendrickson (writer), and Lucille Randolph (union organizer). They organized millions of African-descended women in the U.S. and Caribbean (Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; James, 2003; McCarthy & McMillian, 2003; Taylor, 2003).

Women such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper gained prominence for both their fiction and non-fiction writings, the latter being one of the most popular and prolific Black writers, orators and journalists of her day, male or female. In 1859, she became the first Black woman to publish a short story, “The Two Offers,” “a feminist narrative serialized in the *Anglo American*, which tells the story of two women, one who [chooses marriage], and the other who remains unmarried while pursuing the higher calling of [writing about] racial uplift (Guy-Sheftall, p. 39).” She went on to produce four novels, several volumes of poetry, countless stories, essays and letters. Passionate about the special needs of Black women throughout her career, she was present at the 1896 founding of the National Association of Colored Women and eventually became its vice president. Both Dunbar-Nelson and Harper were emblematic of the many African-descended women who merged their public activism with their art-making.

However, this choice was more than a philosophical posture. Except for a handful of the formally educated, middle-class (and often married) women of African descent, it was nearly impossible to make a living solely as an artist; the demands of capitalism (flavored with racism and sexism) forced a higher percentage of Black women of all classes into the market labor force than any other group of women. Nevertheless, Black women were compelled to create art. Why? And, what was their aesthetic? To what extent was it shaped by their social,

economic, and political reality? Did it differ from that of mainstream artists? The next two sections of the chapter explore these questions and some of the African-descended women who made art during the period.

### ***The Evolving African Aesthetic***

Pasteur & Toldson (1982) attribute the expressive quality of Black culture to five complementary and interactive elements: depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, stylized rendition, poetic and prosaic vernacular, and expressive movement. These qualities manifest in all of the art forms -- music, dance, literature, visual art, and theater arts – and serve to define the authenticity of African arts in varying degrees over the entire course of the period of study.

Yet, African American arts have not existed in isolation and most artists could literally not afford to live only in their imaginative spaces and ignore the world surrounding them. Yearwood (1987) presents two dominant forces influencing artists of the period: social realism and modernism.

To counteract African characters that had become the butt of a national joke in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “coon” songs, the “darky” jokes, and the raging success of films celebrating the Ku Klux Klan such as *The Birth of a Nation* (Shockley, p. 283), social realist art developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that

...defined Black life proudly...[depicting] certain ideal views of [B]lack life through characters and situations that would serve as models for [B]lack aspirations, despite the social circumstances of racial discrimination. Art was to function as a vehicle for building racial consciousness, consolidating a sense of community, and solidifying a sense of identity among Afro-Americans based on a middle-class model (Yearwood, p. 143).

Drawing on a variety of dominant values in African American life, including “a strong belief in the redemptive powers of Christianity; the moral right of the democratic ideal; DuBois’s hope of a Talented Tenth; Booker T. Washington’s doctrine of social accommodation; and even Marcus Garvey’s cultural and political rejection of Eurocentric<sup>2</sup> values (p. 139), “the

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<sup>2</sup> In his 1903 essay published in *The Negro Problem*, W.E.B. DuBois defined the “Talented Tenth” as a philosophy of educating a subset of African Americans in the manner of European university liberal arts education to uplift the masses of African Americans; in his 1895 speech at the Atlanta Cotton States and

artists of the period were expected to uphold the stoicism and dignity of aspiring African Americans.

This posture was often at the expense of any themes involving working class, poor or rural African Americans. Yearwood (1987) suggests that this “may have been a response to the over-popularization of the blackface minstrels and the low-comedy caricatures of poor rural [B]lacks as ludicrous and colorful zip coons” (p. 143). Just as easily, it could have been due to the class biases of middle-class, educated African Americans, a number of which descended from proud, never-enslaved, land-owning people. Despite the social status of being called a “race” man or woman, who promoted racial uplift, their charge was to look forward to equality with mainstream society, not look back at the ignorance and poverty of the majority of African Americans living in or migrating northward from the agricultural South.

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American modernists

sought to separate their work from the philosophy and values of a conservative middle class Black leadership. They deliberately reject[ed] the humanism and stoicism of social realism... by [expressing] the full spectrum of economic, cultural, political, and social aspects of historical and contemporary Afro-American experience.... [They looked] inward, celebrating historical roots, and refusing to engage in self-denial for the sake of assimilation... (p. 144).

In addition, artists began to assert

art as a medium for conveying the soul of Afro-American life rather than as a means for direct and overt political action (pp. 146-47).

Using the folk sources and expressions of working-class, urban Black life as the base, modernist artists sought to explore the universal human condition through the Black perspective.

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International Exposition, Booker T. Washington defined “social accommodation” as the masses of African Americans being patient for political rights and equality while focusing their educational and economic attention on vocational and manual endeavors; in the 1910’s and 20’s Marcus Garvey promoted Black nationalism, consisting of unity, pride in African cultural heritage and autonomy, including African Americans returning to the continent of Africa, as a rejection of American and European racism.

At the same time, Collins (2002) identifies a visual paradox in African American aesthetic thought that spanned the 60-plus years of the period: a concern with visual culture matched by a lack of interest in the work of Black visual artists. She attributes its beginnings to W.E.B. DuBois in his 1903 classic *Souls of Black Folks* when he “privileg[ed] [B]lack music and negat[e] [B]lack material and visual art,” and subsequently failed to include visual artists in his various scholarly symposia. This custom continued through scholars in African American Studies who “routinely devalued [B]lack visual production either openly or through process of benign neglect (p.1).” Black music, especially, but also dance and letters have always been “touted for [their] power, originality, and genius (p. 2),” but visual arts have oddly been disregarded, given the passionate concern with which Black scholars and activists have struggled against the mainstream visual culture and its racist depictions of African Americans, and a “belief that increased control of the visual sphere would aid struggles for equality and [B]lack liberation.” According to Collins, this was as much true during the New Negro movement of the 1920s (often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance) as during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The omission of visual artists from the ... conversation on how “Negroes are painted” rendered invisible those who actually worked most directly with paint (p. 4).

Within this aesthetic swirl, African-descended women wrote, danced, sang, composed, acted, and even painted and sculpted. Much like the sentiments of Black Arts Movement leader Larry Neal, these women

did not see the arts as capable of liberating [B]lack people on their own, [but] did believe that their ability to provide vision and cohesion made them a necessary component of a successful revolution (Collins, p. 5).

### ***African-Descended Women Artists***

The women of the period largely embraced the African and American aesthetic and politics of their time, if no more than to declare a place for themselves in a public sphere designed to make them invisible. Best-known are the singers such as blues queen Bessie Smith, jazz divas Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, and classical singers Madame Evanti and Marian Anderson. Dancers, from the ornamental chorus girls of jazz clubs to the scholar-choreographer Katherine Dunham, were publicly prominent. Actors -- particularly those who worked against the prevailing Hollywood stereotypes of African women, as did musician and

composer Hazel Scott and Lena Horne<sup>3</sup> (or who subversively undermined them, as did Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters) -- entertained and uplifted the hopes of the masses of Black people in the United States and the Caribbean (Bogle, 2009). Visual artists such as Augusta Savage, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Selma Burke, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, and Edmonia Lewis maintained fruitful (and in some cases, long) careers in the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

However, Black women writers -- poets, novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters -- were by far the largest group of artists during the period.

A good bit of the writing expressed a commitment to protest themes and ‘uplift movements’ that

... resulted in the literary lovers adopting a social conservative view of literature... social equality, political rights, and cultural parity with the broader white society...[where] art was a form of protest to be used in the fight for full racial justice (Johnson, p. 490).

Some of the better known writers include but are not limited to: the afore-mentioned Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson (host of a weekly salon of cultural leaders), the influential editor of the NAACP’s national publication *The Crisis* Jessie Redmon Fauset, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Angelina Weld Grimke, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dorothy West, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Margaret Walker, Paule Marshall and Lorraine Hansberry (e.g., Shockley, 1988; Johnson, 1980; Hull, 1988).

Pauline E. Hopkins was the first Black woman to publish a novel at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Contending forces: A romance illustrative of Negro life, North and South* (1900). Judged “the most forceful protest novel written by a Black American woman prior to Ann Petry’s *The Street*,” the race-conscious Hopkins focused on post-Reconstruction lynchings, sexual abuses, and social and economic oppression, and preferred having a Black publishing company to issue her work. The lead character was

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bogle, “NAACP secretary Walter White took a personal interest in [Lena Horne’s] career...because [he] was convinced that [she] could alter the trend of Negroes in American movies (p. 127).”

a cultured middle-class Black woman who leads a comfortable life, is knowledgeable about the race, and wants to counter stereotypes of the Black woman's immorality (Shockley, pp. 277-278).

Twenty years later, Zara Wright wrote *Black and White Tangled Threads* and *Kenneth*, two melodramatic romance novels about the 19<sup>th</sup> century that sermonized for education to support race progress and accord.

Wright, like the rest of her female contemporaries, was more concerned with spinning propaganda than presenting a story with a valid plot and characters. This was the weakness in their fiction; nevertheless, their will to write must be acknowledged (Shockley, p. 280).

Countless poets, emerged during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but

it was not until Georgia Douglas Johnson published *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* that an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black woman poet gained more than a little attention (Shockley, p. 281),

due to her talent as well as her living in the east and her friendships with leading Black male literary figures. Douglas's work tended toward personal "women's themes," consistent with a drift away from

the restrictions often imposed on art and writing by the Black middle class... to demonstrate to both [B]lack and white Washington that art could help create community as well as liberate the individual (Johnson, p. 499).

Hull (1988) reports that,

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black cultural debates often eddied around the drama. The explosion of dark faces on Broadway (notably in the musicals of the 1920s) was paralleled by the development of serious drama in predominately Black colleges (Howard University in Washington DC was a major center) and the proliferation of plays about Blacks by famous "white" playwrights (Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" was perhaps the most celebrated) (p. xlviii).

Many believed that the stage was the best place to break away from the stereotypical depictions of African American life, and, Angelina Weld Grimke (in 1916), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (in 1918), and Mary Burrill (in 1919) all tried their hand at writing plays on important

themes (respectively, the lamentable condition of ten millions of colored citizens in this free republic, patriotism in the face of racial violence, and a woman's right to know about birth control).

Sponsored by the drama committee of the NAACP of Washington DC and wildly popular along the East Coast, Grimke's play, *Rachel*, was

reputed to have begun the 'actual history of drama by Negro authors' when it was presented in 1916 as 'one of the first dramas of Negro authorship performed by Negro actors (Shockley, 1988, p. 375).

It depicted a middle-class family that suffered dual lynchings and fled north, only to discover different forms of racial discrimination. Explicitly intended to provoke and enlighten, the play created so much controversy that it led angry members of the NAACP Drama Committee to found The Howard Players for "promoting the purely artistic approach and the folk-drama idea," with the purpose of serving as a counter to similar plays, characterized by Alain Leroy Locke as "puppets of protest and propaganda (Shockley, p. 375)."

While the better-known artists left a powerful imprint on the history of African-descended people and the struggle for social justice, the lesser-known artists and the lesser-known works of prominent artists are particularly interesting. In 1903, Pauline Hopkins – editor, novelist, playwright, and singer – "laid the foundation for a new Black journalism [and] aligned with a group of radical editors of protest journalism" to fight the social accommodationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington and fought to make the *Colored American Magazine* a truly literary journal that also countered the charges of "white" supremacy, even as it was largely financed by "whites" (Shockley, p. 292). In contrast to the dominant beauty and cultural standards that celebrated Europeans, poet Pauline Jane Thompson in 1900, scriptwriter Elaine Sterne in 1916, choreographer-anthropologist Pearl Primus in the 1940s and 1950s, and actor-dancer Beah Richards in the 1950s and 1960s actively researched and appreciated African aesthetics.

Thompson's 1900 poem, *The Muse's Favor*, asks the Muse to put aside the all-too familiar music of "Caucasia's daughters" and instead "exchange this old song staid/ for an equally deserving-/ the oft-slighted, Afric maids." In return, the Muse sings of the "fouly slighted Ethiope maid" and "her dark and misty curly hair/ in small, neat, braids entwineth fair/ like clusters of rich, shining jet.... (Shockley, pp. 308-309)."

To counteract the wildly popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*, several African Americans sought to challenge the viciously racist imagery by creating a Black film industry; in 1916, Elaine Sterne wrote the first known film script by an African American, for "Lincoln's

Dream,” a financial and artistic disaster, but the impetus for the creation of over 100 Black-owned film companies, including the most successful of all owned by Oscar Michaux (Bogle, p. 103- 116).

Trinidadian Primus researched the folk and traditional dances of the African continent, the Caribbean, and picked cotton in the American South to meticulously document the African movement and technique to share with others (Creque Harris, 1991). Beah Richards, best known as the mother of Sidney Poitier’s character in the 1967 film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, had a long, well-regarded history as a dignified, proudly dark-skinned stage and screen actor, as well as a poet who, in her 1951 poem *White Woman vs. Black Woman*, issued a feminist challenge to “white” women:

What will you do?  
Will you fight with me?  
White supremacy is your enemy and mine.  
So be careful when you talk with me;  
Remind me not of my slavery;  
I know it well.  
But rather tell me of your own.  
You’ve been seeing me as white supremacy  
Would have me be.  
But I will be myself  
(Richards, *The Black woman speaks*, 1968, p. 35)

Similarly, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in 1895 and Gwendolyn Brooks in 1968 offered audacious challenges to African American men. Harper’s poem “A Double Standard (p. 205)” argues for equal earthly forgiveness for women’s flaws:

I’m glad God’s ways are not our ways,  
He does not see as man;  
Within His love I know there’s room  
For those whom others ban...

No golden weights can turn the scale  
Of justice in His sight;  
And what is wrong in woman’s life  
In man’s cannot be right

Brooks's poem "The Mother (p. 461-62)" boldly asserts reproductive choice for Black women in the face of nationalists who perceived birth control and abortion as genocidal:

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
  
... if I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate...

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved,  
I loved you all.

Perhaps the act of putting pen to paper was the easiest and most accessible way of making art for women who also had to work for a living. But, scholars continue to discover the myriad writers – both published and unpublished, famous and unheralded – who offered a range of ideas, visions, and stories about the realities and hopes for African descended women in an era when they were scarcely regarded as fourth-class citizens by the "white" men who dominated the political and economic arenas, the "white" women who often supervised them, and the men of color who were paid more for similar labor.

It is interesting to note the relative lack of evidence of visual artists during this period compared with the writers. Brundage (2003) refers to a

long-standing and conscious tactic of African American leaders and activists during the [post Civil War] era to use aural and visual means to reach the [B]lack masses, (p. 1369),

and suggests that this efficiency was due to the comparatively high rates of illiteracy and poverty among the newly emancipated people. However, by the period of legal racial segregation, many African American thought leaders exercised the visual paradox cited earlier (Collins, 2002) and ignored the value of visual arts in countering the demeaning images of African Americans, especially African-descended women. As a result, it is more difficult to find full stories of women visual artists, partly because there were fewer of them.

There were, of course, the countless women who quilted, designed clothing, whittled, and created other crafts associated with home making. Of these, the women of Gee's Bend, Alabama (Quilters Collective History, 2010) have the most extensively documented and

celebrated archive of their work. Their quilts are known as “story quilts” for the family and community histories they document.

The better known “fine” artists included sculptors Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller and Augusta Savage, painters Lois Mailou Jones and Alma Thomas, and Elizabeth Catlett (sculpting and wood prints), who comprised a very small universe: Fuller influenced Savage and actively mentored Jones, who subsequently mentored Catlett and Thomas. While W.E.B DuBois celebrated Fuller’s work in 1913 for effective chronicling of the Black experience, she declared an unwillingness to limit her work to “traditionally feminine themes or to African-American types” (Kerr, 1986). Though popular among African Americans for depicting heroic images of Black history, critics have often found her work to be derivative of her mentor, French sculptor Auguste Rodin, and therefore a “failure” as art (Wortek, 1982; Brundage, 2003, p. 1399).

Savage, on the other hand, boldly and consciously depicted African American themes, imagery, and African physiognomy in her sculptures and created a well-regarded studio during the Depression to provide art education to adults in Harlem, NY. She was commissioned to produce sculptures of the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. Known as much for her teaching as for her own production, Savage eventually became discouraged by the financial struggles of making art for a living and produced very little for public consumption after the 1940s, though she continued to teach until her death (Bearden & Henderson, 1993).

Jones was considered the “grande dame of African American art” largely due to her 47-year career as an influential art educator at Howard University and the critical acclaim accorded to her paintings. Early in her career, French artist Cezanne influenced her work; mid-career, she was influenced by the New Negro Movement to use her African heritage as the theme of her work. Following her marriage to a Haitian graphic designer at the age of 48, her paintings became infused with Haitian themes and symbols. According to Laduke (1987), Jones’s work was largely free of political themes, except for a few collages and posters creating in the late 1960s (p.31); she was “tired of being considered only as a [B]lack painter (p. 32)” and preferred, instead, to be known as “an American painter who happens to be [B]lack (p. 32).”

Similarly, one of Jones’s students, Alma W. Thomas spent 71 of her 86 years in Washington, DC as an art educator and as a painter, and as a decided free spirit. Choosing to avoid marriage altogether, she said,

the young men I know cared nothing about art, nothing at all. And art was the only thing I enjoyed. So I have remained free. I paint when I feel like it. I didn’t have to

come home. Or I could come home late and there was nobody to interfere with what I wanted...that is what allowed me to develop (Fitzpatrick, 1982, pp. 103).

As an unmarried woman, she needed market employment, and spent over 35 years teaching working-class and poor children in DC's segregated schools, community organizations, and clubs, and middle-class African Americans at the art department at Howard University. She painted until the very end of her life, her works having been exhibited at major U.S. galleries.

Considered an iconoclast,

Thomas directed her life and career exactly as she wanted to do it, undeterred by what others might think [an] attitude [that] strengthened by her keen sense of her own identity and by her firm belief in hard work (p. 106).

As demanding as she was of herself, she was even more so of her students. Generally, African American teachers in public schools were perceived as

those [B]lack children who did not rebel. They accept uncritically all the assumptions of American education and American society...they believe that the individual has complete control over his own destiny and they deny the influences of class, racism, economics, etc. (p. 54).

Certainly, as a child of the Black upper-middle class, Thomas maintained an air of superiority in the face of white supremacy and African Americans who did not share her willingness to live up to her standards as a teacher and artist. Some African American parents resented what they perceived to be her elitism and a fear that she was practicing the kind of academic survival-of-the-fittest philosophy that dominated Black education of the time (p. 53), but she persuaded them that high academic and artistic standards led to liberation rather than extinction. Rather than worry about how she was perceived,

Alma was very secure about what she was doing... Alma didn't talk rhetoric, she proved it. She stayed for forty-some years and taught [B]lack kids. (Wilson, 1979, pp. 59-61).

Further evidence of her independence comes from her avoidance of participation in any movement or organization for racial uplift or feminism. "Freedom for Thomas was through art; and if she could be an artist without being a woman artist, or a [B]lack artist, that was her goal (Fitzpatrick, p. 105)." In response to the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement, she said,

Whatever must be expressed must be expressed in a concrete way. Those old [B]lack art guys are just mad at the white man and want to strike back at him. What those artists should be doing is educating themselves. You'd study what's going on today... you can't live off the Africans one thousand years ago...(Spellman, 1973, p. 71).

Her racial struggle was personal rather than collective and the goal was freedom of individual self-expression (Fitzpatrick, p. 105). Similarly, Thomas was not a feminist and did not think of herself in terms of the "liberated woman." When asked by a New York Times reporter if she felt bitterness about discrimination against women, she replied airily, "Everybody says I paint like a man anyway (Shirey, 1972)."

Of the five women, Catlett lived the longest; she died in 2012 in the Cuernavaca art community at the age of 97. Born in Washington, DC in 1919, Catlett became a citizen of Mexico in 1963 following her 16 years as an expatriate and political harassment by the U.S. government. Catlett stated in 1971 that

art is important only to the extent that it helps in the liberation of our people. It is necessary only at this moment as an aid to our survival (quoted in Lewis & Waddy, 1971, p. 107).

Ten years later she stated,

The big question for me as a [B]lack woman is how do I serve my people? What is my role? What form do I use, what content, what are my priorities? (Gouma-Peterson, 1983, p. 48).

These themes governed the entire body of Catlett's sculpting and wood print work, in the service of "four exploited groups – [B]lacks, Mexicans, women and poor people (Gouma-Peterson, p. 48)." Early on, she was renowned for her rigorous technical skill and formal discipline, yet not taken as seriously as an artist as her first husband, painter and printmaker Charles White. They were part of a group that perceived themselves heirs of the Harlem Renaissance artists with a similar drive to blend a social message with an abstract aesthetic (Gouma-Peterson, p. 49). But, it was not until she traveled to Mexico on a Rosenwald Grant in 1946, and subsequently married painter and printmaker Francisco Mora, that she found a way to be an artist, cultural and political activist, wife and mother. Of the five visual artists, she may have been the most "successful" in that she merged an African aesthetic (Pasteur & Toldson, 1982) defined by depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, stylized rendition, poetic and prosaic vernacular, and expressive movement, with refined technical skill, with socio-

political ideologies -- all while making a living for herself and her family and while consciously serving the liberation of African –descended communities.

Did the passion of these African-descended woman visual artists have to withstand greater humiliations than other artists? It is certainly the case that all of the arts have been historically marginalized within U.S.-style capitalist economy for the “white” men who sought to create; racism, sexism, and income needs were even greater barriers to the women and men of color in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who wanted to make art. It seems, in addition, that visual artists were not rewarded with as many outlets or patrons as singers, dancers, actors, or writers. As a result, it seems that the visual artists mentioned here were more likely to teach art as a way to supplement income and to share their craft, than was true of the writers, actors or singers.

Another notable difference between the African-descended visual artists and writers was the greater evidence among the former of formal training in their craft as a direct result of higher family income and education. Coming from middle-class or upwardly mobile backgrounds and having to struggle their entire lives for income and recognition from both the mainstream and their own communities, one wonders what compelled these African-descended women visual artists - or any artist - to create.

I argue that the compulsion was to save their very lives -- if not the souls of their entire community -- in a hostile world that wanted to keep them only sufficiently alive to serve the needs of “white” supremacy.

### **Conclusion**

People, women, and therefore, African-descended women, make art because they must. The vast majority of African-descended women artists in the first sixty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had only two choices: earn money following the mandates of mainstream and Black-owned commercial outlets, as club singers and dancers, as Hollywood servants or Oscar Michaux elites, as writers of romantic poems and stories, as creators of “white man’s art (Fitzpatrick, p. 105);” or attempt to earn money following the demands of Black male and female intellectuals and organizers to uplift the race, celebrate African-ness, rescue Black womanhood, and/or explicitly tear down “white” supremacy. And, sometimes these women soared above the noise to produce indisputably revolutionary art.

Despite this choice, African-descended women artists in the Western Hemisphere committed the revolutionary act of claiming space. In doing so the question is whether what they produced was art or propaganda, and if art, defined by what aesthetic --The stoic and heroic social realism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? The celebration of folk idioms in the modernism of

mid-century? The depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, stylized rendition, poetic and prosaic vernacular, and expressive movement defined by Pasteur and Toldson (1982) as a more “universal” Black aesthetic?

The aesthetic of African-descended women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the Neo-slavery/Jim Crow<sup>4</sup> era, might argue that any art worthy of the title would necessarily make a social justice claim that looked suspiciously like propaganda to any leisure class that believed in art for pure beauty, for entertainment and escape, for indulgent self-expression, or for its own sake. Among the African-descended women who rejected an explicit social justice claim – such as Alma Thomas and Madame Evanti– they either deliberately stood outside of the mainstream of the African aesthetic taking a different kind of social justice stand as independent women opposing racial conformity, or they were, in fact, acting as subversives by infiltrating “white” domains and boldly asserting equity, if not superiority.

We do not know all of their names or their works. Particularly silent and invisible are the African-descended women who lived in Neo-slavery in the American South, in colonial regimes in the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and Africa during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in rural areas. Yet, there is evidence of their boldness, their courage, their resistance in the face of violence designed to strip their very souls. Their art – however esoteric or common, however strident or silly, however African or European – did what art is supposed to do: declaring, “I am; I am here; I am here remaking/reimagining the world you are destroying.”

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<sup>4</sup> Blackmon (2008) argues for renaming the period in history the Age of Neo-Slavery rather than the Jim Crow era. He states, “How strange that decades defined in life by abject brutalization came to be identified in history in the image of a largely forgotten white actor’s minstrel performance – a caricature called “Jim Crow.” Imagine if the first years of the Holocaust were known by the name of Germany’s most famous anti-Semitic comedian of the 1930s. Let us define this period of American life plainly and comprehensively (p. 402).”

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