

A Lineage of Black Feminist Art

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Abstract

This Black Feminist Art thesis project displays Black lives with full representational impact and it allows a space for agency to be shown. Through an empirical literature review, original poetry and artwork this thesis expresses dimensions of Black feminist/womanist voices. The purpose of this thesis is putting real images of Black lives out into the world in order to have a positive impact, giving young girls an artistic role model that looks like them, and the ability to read a book with images and stories of lives that may resemble theirs, lastly sharing a social commentary as well as a collection of poems from my perspective that sends a message of one Black woman's view about the world around her through different lenses.

Chapter 1

What is Black Art?

Black Art can be best defined by Maulana Karenga. Art according to Maulana Karenga in the fourth edition of his *Introduction to Black Studies* is “cultural production informed by standards of creativity and beauty and inspired by and reflective of a people’s life-experiences and life-aspirations” (Karenga, Maulana 2010) Black Art on the other hand is more than that according to Karenga. Karenga says that “Black art has to have three basic characteristics, i.e., it has to be functional, collective and committing.” (Karenga, Maulana 2010) This is important because this was the standard that many artists in the Black Arts Movement were judged. To be functional Karenga says “art must self-consciously have and urge social purpose, inform, instruct and inspire the people and be an unashamed partisan for them.” (Karenga, Maulana 2010) this means that in order for Black art to be functional it must have a purpose, other than being pretty, given to it by the artist for a reason that the artist decides. To be collective “Black art must be done for all, drawn and synthesized from all, rooted in a life- based language and imagery rich in everyday relevance. It must be understandable without being vulgarly simplistic...” (Karenga, Maulana 2010) Collective art then is art that can be relatable to Blacks and understood by Black but isn’t dumbed down as to say Blacks don’t have a capacity to understand. Lastly, for Black Art to be committing “it must not simply inform and inspire Black people; it must also commit them to the historical project of liberation and a higher level of human life.”(Karenga, Maulana 2010) This means that the art must make its Black viewers realize their value and therefore need more than what America offers now. This definition is not gender specific and doesn’t include Feminist ideas however; Black women in the movement put their Black feminist ideals in their

art. Faith Ringgold said that “Black art must use its own color Black to create its own light, since that color is the most immediate Black truth” (Patton, Sharon F. 1998)

Sharon Barnes explains that the reason Black Feminism came about, was because Black women felt racially oppressed in women movements and sexually oppressed in Black movements. It continues to speak about how although it wasn't always called that, Black feminism, a desire for racial and gender equality, has been around for years. It speaks to the fact that Sojourner Truth with her work and her "Ain't I a Woman" speech set the ground work for Black feminism for years to come. The Harlem Renaissance was a time when there were many Black female artists and writers that spoke to the gender and race inequalities but because of the gender aspect of their writings, they were left unrecognized. Black feminism has been used throughout the years to make political as well as social and economic change in society. This article continues to speak about Black feminist groups like the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective as well as Black female feminist that paved the way for Black feminist writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou

Black Art has been defined by different scholars throughout the years of the Black Arts movement and beyond. This definition many times is not gender specific. However, Black art done by women has existed for decades before Black Art and Feminism even had a name. Overtime the purpose of art done by African American Women has changed and evolved. However, the one thing that always remains the same is that this art gives a voice to the people or person represented in and doing the art.

The Beginning of the Lineage

Although Black Arts scholars may disagree, at times Wheatley's poetry benefits the Black community specifically because she, a Black woman, is the one writing it, not always

because of its content, but, I believe that Wheatley is writing Black poetry because Black poetry is a poem that benefits the Black community because someone Black wrote it, or the author spoke to Black issues in a way that can, in the long run, benefit the Black community. Therefore, whether Wheatley is writing a poem about imperialism, capturing and enslaving Blacks, or other peoples' need for religion; she is still writing Black poetry because she is a Black woman and her writing is benefiting the Black community.

In the poem, "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," Wheatley uses not only the singular lyric voice, but is also speaking for a community of African people. Years after her writing was published Wheatley was criticized for the messages that her poems sent. This poem is definitely one that has been criticized, especially by the scholars of the Black Arts Movement, because it can be interpreted as counterproductive for the broader Black community.

The poem reads in full:

*Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."
 Remember, Christians, Negros, Black as Cain,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train (Wheatley, Phillis 2001)*

This poem is in the singular lyric voice; Wheatley is speaking about her experience of being taken from a pagan land and being "saved." She sees her capture as a good thing because it helped her find a god that she once knew nothing about. This poem is based on her experience of being captured and taught to worship her god. As a Calvinist, she believes that the things that happened in her life were destined to happen.

Wheatley begins the poem using language such as “me” and “my”, which seems as if the voice is solely singular, However, she is speaking for an entire continent when she says, “’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land” (Wheatley, Phillis 2001). Here she is speaking of the entire continent of Africa as a Pagan land, and therefore insinuating through rest of her lines that Africa is filled with people that need to be saved and learn the error of their ways. When she says, “Remember, *Christians, Negros, Black as Cain,*/ May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train,” (Wheatley, Phillis 2001) she is taking her initial claim a step forward by saying not only that the people of Africa need to be saved, but that they can be saved in the same way that she was saved. Wheatley is taking the stance that these people want to be saved and will be better off finding the American God, which was a common belief in her time. Wheatley has a very imperialistic point of view, which would not sit well with the Black Arts scholars because they did not believe that imperialism benefited Black people. “For Black people” implies the poem is written for Black people as an audience or it can imply that the poem benefits Black people.

Another poem that is written in a similar vein is “To the University of Cambridge, in New England.” Wheatley speaks of being saved from a “dark land,” creating the same effect as the poem “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA.” The beginning of the poem reads:

*WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes. (Wheatley, Phillis 2001)*

Here she again speaks of Africa as a place without religion. However, the last stanza of this poem takes a turn that goes beyond proving that she is a person. The section reads:

*Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears*

*Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
 Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
 By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
 Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
 Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
 An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
 Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
 And in immense perdition sinks the soul.*

This poem is showing the possibility that religion can be more powerful than race. Wheatley, as a Black woman, is shaming White educated students for their actions and telling them that they have a chance to be saved like her. Further, she tells them to appreciate their privilege “Improve your privileges while they stay” (Wheatley, Phillis 2001). She goes on to say, “Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,/ By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;/ Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.” (Wheatley, Phillis 2001) Here, she is telling them that they are sinning and need to stop, a huge step during her time, since because she is Black she is seen as intrinsically sinful. Through these lines, she proves that a Black person can be saved and can then save others.

When reading this poem, Black Arts scholars failed to acknowledge it as a Black poem. Wheatley has an imperialistic point of view. She agrees that there are people that are born inherently less than and need to be saved, and she views Africa as a Pagan land. However, this is Black poetry because the author, as a Black woman who writes reads and believes in God, demonstrates what a Black person can achieve. She changes what it means to be a Black person, as well as what they are allowed or capable of in society. Wheatley uses her poetry to prove Blacks are humans, and not just property. She proves that Blacks have the capacity to imagine, learn, and believe in a power as great as God, and further, understands the stories of the bible. She makes that clear when she references Cain. She uses Cain is because she knows that the story of Cain is used as a justification for slavery. She knows that she is “Black as Cain,” just like the Blacks that are enslaved, but that they can be saved just as she is. Wheatley opened the

doors for many poets and artists. Her legacy ensured that the next big Black women poets did not have to prove that they had imagination or intelligence; they just had to be good poets.

On the other hand, another one of Wheatley's poems, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth," would have made the scholars of the Black Arts Movement proud.

Although the entire poem is important, the section of the poem that Black Arts Poets would have loved is the part that reads:

*Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (Wheatley, Phillis 2001)*

Here, Wheatley uses her subject position to show why she can speak about freedom and why she understands it. In using the lines, "I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat: / What pangs excruciating must molest,/ What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?" (Wheatley, Phillis 2001) Wheatley is not only showing her love for freedom, but also creating sympathy for the Africans that are captured and taken away from their families to an unknown place. One feels sympathy both for the child that is taken and for the parents that are losing a child. This poem allows people to see the Africans depicted in the poem, specifically Wheatley, who has proved her humanity, as humans whom were unjustly taken away their families. This benefits Black people because she is showing that Blacks are humans too, or at least can be, and that they have feelings like those of Whites. It is possible to sympathize or

empathize with people once they are seen as people. This poem is Black poetry not only because Wheatley is Black, but also because she is writing words that specifically help Blacks in America and Africans. Her poem reveals that the people saved, or not, have feelings, and do not want to be separated from their families. This poem is by a Black woman, for Black people, and about Black people.

Wheatley's poems that do not speak about race, which would not be recognized by the Black Arts Scholars, are Black poems because she is Black; it is made clear elsewhere in the collection that she is Black. She does not mention her race in order to show that, she can write poetry that is just as good as poems written by White people. Through this action, she proves that it is possible for a Black person to write poetry comparable to that of Whites. This is Black poetry because it benefits the Black community long term because Wheatley is Black and her poems show people that Blacks have the brain capacity to have an imagination as well as the ability to write poetry. Wheatley let it be known that Black women can be equal and should be equal, just by showing her talent. One poet that she opened the door for was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

“Frances Ellen Watkins Harper heads a long list of Black poets whose poetry was motivated by their social activism.”(Pettis, Joyce 2010) She used poetry as a platform to speak about issues facing the society and more specifically the Black community. “Harper's commitment shaped the rest of her life, her work, and that of many other Black and white people, helped end slavery. Between 1854 and 1860, Harper spoke against slavery and read her poetry, sometimes twice a day.”(Pettis, Joyce 2010) Poetry and her commitment became something she not only enjoyed but something she needed to do. Harper “devoted her life's work to abolitionism, race advancement and equality, women's and children's rights, Christian morality,

and temperance.” (Honey, Maureen 2006) Harper unlike Wheatley was never enslaved but she wrote many slave narratives that were meant to evoke sympathy in the reader as well as other emotions that would further her cause.

In Harper’s poem *Bury Me in a Free Land*, which is literally about not being buried in a land where there are slaves, she uses imagery in order to explain the horrendous details of slavery in a way that may get some people to see the enslaved as humans and the slave masters as animals. An example of this is when she writes “I could not sleep if I saw the lash/ Drinking her blood at each fearful gash, / and I saw her babes torn from her breast’/ Like trembling doves from their parent nest...” (Honey, Maureen 2006) The image of babies being negatively impacted and the images of blood and whips evoke fear as well as sympathy. Harper also uses rhyme to evoke feeling. In the poem *Eliza Harris* Harper uses Rhyme to mimic the running that Eliza is doing with her child in her arms and her word choice causes a sense of this urgency and this combination makes you feel a need for Eliza to be free so you can have relief.

The History

Around the same time that Harper was making changes with her poetry and using her voice for the benefit of the African American community Madame C.J. Walker was making strides by helping African American women feel more beautiful when before they were made to feel even more worthless than slavery already did. This action can be considered Black feminist because she attempted to lift Black Women up but making them feel good about themselves which was not the case before.

Because Walker's unabashedly Negroid facial features and hair were like those of most African-American women, she understood the wishes of her sisters to be attractive to themselves and to men in a society that assigned both caste and class on the basis of skin color and hair texture. Acutely aware of the debate about whether Black women should alter the appearance of their natural hair, Walker insisted years later that her hair-care system was not intended as a "hair straightener," but rather as a grooming method to heal

and condition the scalp to promote hair growth... She once told a reporter. 'I want the great masses of my people to take greater pride in their personal appearance and to give their hair proper attention.'(Bundles, A'lelia 1996)

Madam C.J. Walker was the beginning of the efforts out there by members of the Black community that have noticed the self-esteem issues of members of the Black community and have profited from the feeling but also have tried to make African American women see that they are beautiful. There were many images of what was beautiful and they were not images of African American women with their natural hair. Madam C.J Walker used what she had which were money and her talent in making hair products to help efforts in the Black community. Her feminist work was done through her business and the feminist work of artist is done through them just making art, not only showing that they can but sometimes the content is also Feminist or womanist and the fact that they are Black makes it even rarer. However, it isn't rare.

The Lineage

There are many Black Women artist that would be considered part of this lineage. Many of these women when doing art are also fighting stereotypes such as the Jezebel. The authors of the articles, "Breaking the Chains: Examining the Endorsement of Modern Jezebel Images and Racial-Ethnic Esteem among African American Women.", Felicia, Rhonda, and Danice, begin it with a definition of the African American female stereotype of Jezebel along with its implications in society. "The historical image of the Black Jezebel – a hypersexual, seductive and manipulative slave woman – has been one of the most pervasive and evolving images influencing the sexual socialization and perceptions of African American women today"(Brown) The article speaks of a study that analyzed the generational differences in the endorsement of the depictions of modern Jezebel. The article goes into the negative impact on self-worth as well as the negative sexual implications of slavery and how those implications can still be seen today. This article continues by speaking about how these images of African American women

stereotypes such as Jezebel are perpetuated through the media and may result in the internalization of these stereotypes by African American girls. Black female artists put good images out there that can inspire young girls and help them internalize their beauty and power instead of what they are told by media to aspire to. According to the article the Jezebel is perpetuated in Hip Hop through the music videos and explicit song lyrics usually referring to Black women, which is wretched because it began with images that were used to empower women. The article continues by speaking on the correlation between the Jezebel image in music videos and male sexual aggression towards African American women. When the Black female artists put out positive images they negate the negatives put out there to bring African Americans down.

Some of these women include Augusta Savage, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Faith Ringgold, Deborah Willis, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, etc. The list is huge for the amount of Black women that have throughout time made Black feminist art even if it wasn't meant to be. Just the act of these women making art and displaying their voice and their talent, puts them on the same playing field as White Males. Then when they prove themselves by making noteworthy art they not only make waves for Black artists but they become an example for Black women everywhere. They give inspiration to people that look like them while they take oppressive power away from people that believe that because they are Black women they are lesser and incapable. They use their voice not only to make a difference in communities but to continue a lineage of Black poetry that displays the Black woman's voice.

Born Augusta Christine Fells on February 29, 1892, in Green Cove Springs, Florida, Augusta Savage was an important African American artist and arts educator. "Augusta Savage was an internationally renowned sculptor and a highly respected teacher in the 1920s and 1930s,

and one of the key leaders of the New Negro Movement. She produced over 130 sculptures in clay, plaster, wood, and bronze, won significant awards, and exhibited her work at prestigious salons in Paris and in numerous galleries in the United States" (Leininger–Miller, Theresa 2010). Her "sculptures include realistic portrait busts of Harlem leaders and ordinary people from the African diaspora, religious and classical/mythological themes, genre scenes, metaphorical, abstract pieces, and commemorative statues." (Leininger–Miller, Theresa 2010) She is putting Black bodies at the fore front of her work. This is then showing that Blacks can be art and that they are beautiful and can be something to be admired. Some of her work includes,



(The Harp, 1939), also as mentioned her work also included sculptures of important figures, the first of those figures being W.E.B. Dubois. Having prominent figures up in areas like Harlem, which are heavily populated by Blacks makes it so that these children can see prominent people that look like them, and they can aspire to be that way. Also, Savage's work lobbying the WPA on behalf of African American Artist shows that she wanted equality for all even in art. A

women being the face of this lobbying makes the decision makers more inclined to see that women can do the work and deserve the funding.

Another Black female is Margaret Walker, a poet. She was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1915. Margaret Walker was the daughter of a Methodist minister. Her parents showed her the wonders of literature. (Harper, Michael S. 2000). She wrote poems like “For My People” and “Molly Means.” Next, there is Gwendolyn Brooks who was the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. She was born in in 1917 in Topeka, Kansas and raised in Chicago. It is said that the “Terrain of Chicago’s South Side would leave an indelible imprint on Brooks’s imagination, providing the material for one of the more remarkable and sustained bodies of work this century. Brooks’s objective has been to give voice to the unique precincts of the ‘projects’ and the lack working and middle classes.” (Harper, Michael S. 2000) Brooks was a master of free verse and form as well as classicism and folklore. It is said that “her verse is marked by sharp images of people and place; her diction and careful irony, while emerging from contemplations on the African American experience, transcend these to universal relevance” (Harper, Michael S. 2000). She is using her voice to give voice to the broader community as well as share with the world real experience. Her poem “We Real Cool” reads “THE POOL PLAYERS./ SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL./ We real cool. We/ Left school. We/ Lurk late. We/ Strike straight. We/ Sing sin. We/ Thin gin. We/ Jazz June. We/ Die soon.” (Harper, Michael S. 2000) and this poem was written because she cared about the lives of the boys she was writing about she saw their lives and she wrote about what is and could become. She was trying to make the point that just because they are in the circumstances that they are in, does not mean that it is too late to turn it around, until it is too late. This act of compassion for others of

her same race shows that her poetry is for the betterment of all in her race which makes this a very womanist poem.

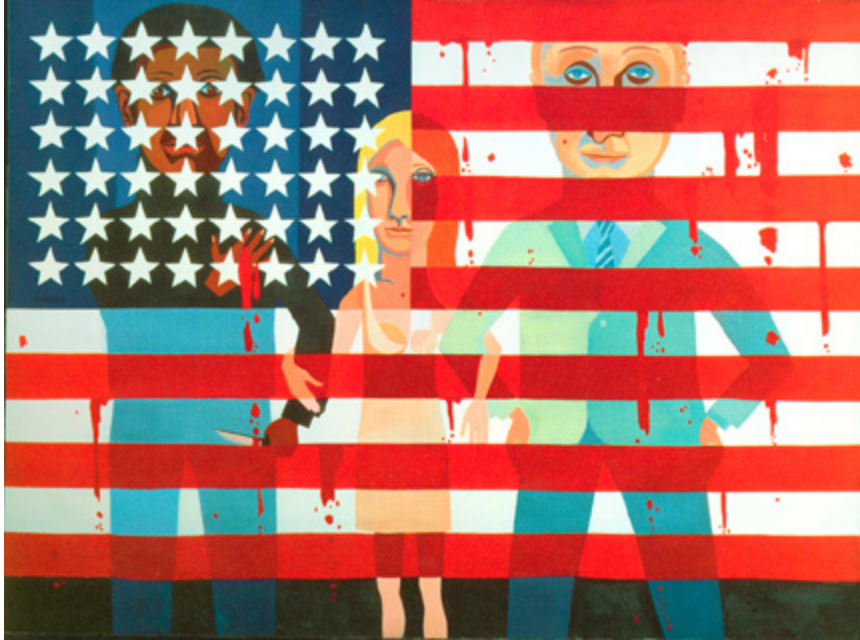
Faith Ringgold born in 1934 “unconcerned about collectors and art critics, has used her art to voice her dissatisfaction with racism and gender inequality, and the absence of the Black image and subject-matter in contemporary art” (Patton, Sharon F. 1998) Her Black feminism is shown through the fact that “she deplored the minimal presence of women in all important American art exhibitions, particularly African- American art exhibitions” (Patton, Sharon F. 1998). The reason for Black feminism is just this, is the fact that Black women are neglected not only by other women but also other Black men.

Her series *American People* (1967) focused on racial conflict and discrimination. One of the series, *Riot* (1967), portrays two (one white, one Black) children huddled together amidst the slaughtered victim, of men and women, of racial conflict. *The Flag is Bleeding* (1967), showing a bleeding Black man standing next to a white couple, denotes a rapidly disintegrating alliance between whites and Blacks, and points to the ‘front-line’ position of the Black male in the battle against economic and political colonialism. (Patton, Sharon F. 1998)

Riot(1967)



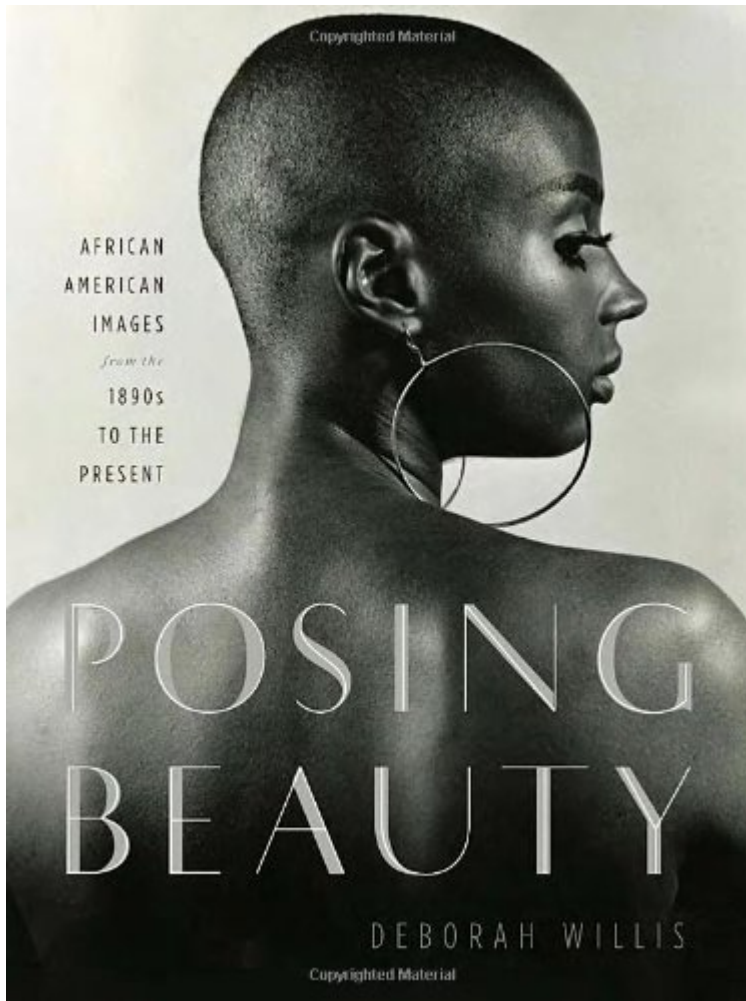
The Flag is Bleeding (1967)



Through her art she made statements about race in a way that not only made people uncomfortable but it also sparked a lot of conversation. She does not separate Black and White instead she puts them together to show how horrible discrimination against one group can negatively impact all groups. Ringgold was an artist and also an activist and was arrested for participating in a rally for her beliefs about the America that she lives in versus the one that she wants to live in and the hypocrisy of the government.

The next artist is Deborah Willis was born in 1948 and is described as "The Washington D.C.-based photograph historian, curator and photographer/mixed media artist is a leading scholar in the field of photography." (4 Kennedy, Winston 2000) The director of a studio in Harlem believes that she has invented a field of African American photographic history. "First, she organized the exhibition Reflections in Black at the Smithsonian's Center for African American History and Culture. Second, African American photography was selected as the subject of the 11th Annual James A. Porter Colloquium on African American Art at Howard University in April 2000." (Kennedy, Winston 2000) She engages in a lot of "reading of images

of Black women's bodies as a cultural signifier"(Kennedy, Winston 2000) which is a topic that is heavily studied and debated on the significance. Willis also compiled a book called posing beauty which features her photography on the cover.



As a student in the 1970s, Deborah Willis came to the realization that images of Black beauty, female and male, simply did not exist in the larger culture. Determined to redress this imbalance, Willis examined everything from vintage ladies' journals to Black newspapers, and started what would become a lifelong quest. With more than two hundred arresting images, many previously unpublished, *Posing Beauty* recovers a world many never knew existed. Historical subjects such as Billie Holiday and Josephine Baker illuminate the past; Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali take us to the civil rights era; Denzel Washington, Lil' Kim, and Michelle Obama celebrate the present. Featuring the works of more than one hundred photographers, including Carl van Vechten, Eve Arnold, Lee Friedlander, and Carrie Mae Weems, Willis's book not only celebrates the lives of the famous but also captures the barber shop, the bodybuilding contest, and prom night. *Posing Beauty*

challenges our most fundamental assumptions about what it means to be “beautiful.” (debwillisphoto.com, 2009)

The idea that Blacks can be beautiful and in art is something that these artists had to fight for. However, the more representation of positive Black beauty in the media will be a cause for a change in the idea that Black is not Beautiful or that it is less than.

Deborah Willis writes about Carrie Mae Weems in the article "Translating Black Power and Beauty--Carrie Mae Weems.", explaining that she was “an artist concerned about iconography and the creation of icons, over the years she has constructed a series of works questioning Black women’s presence in popular and material culture as well as art history.” As a photographer she took the things she saw in the world and questioned it with her art. “Weems invites us to look at the representation of women as she is situated in the context: a context in which her beauty-and the value-laden concept of ‘beauty’ – operates historically, culturally, and politically’ (4).” Carrie Mae Weems was born April 20th 1953 in Portland, Oregon. One of her famous collection of works is “The Kitchen Table Series” in 1990. Some of the art work included images such as this image,



This image shows how a daughters’ perception of beauty come from their mothers. The daughter is mimicking her mother. These images as well as others in this Series shows’ that what happens at the kitchen table can help combat what a girl is

being told outside. This is feminist because it is showing how beauty can be molded in a positive way by parents and because of how positive it is, it is showing that this type of interaction should happen. It is showing the power that women have over their lives and the lives of their children. The next image,



is displaying an intimate moment for a Black women. This is a time when conversations are had. It is when ideas of beauty and morals are shared, and here it is all happening at the kitchen table which can also be the dinner table; however in her work it proves to be more significant.

The author of the article "Beauty, Power & Glory"2014, speaks about a haunting poem that tells about how Black women can't know the author's beauty and has no glory. Then it continues to speak about how Carrie Mae Weems along with other Black women knows their beauty and reflect their glory through works of art. The article then shows some of Carrie Mae Weems art work which has Black women in the center of the viewers gaze. A quote for her is "It's fair to say that Black folks operate under a cloud of invisibility — this too is part of the work, is indeed central to [my photographs]... This invisibility — this erasure out of the complex history of our

life and time — is the greatest source of my longing.”(Weems) Her art work appears to be in response to this quote.

Lorna Simpson is a notable African American photographer." Simpson had the distinction of being the first African American female artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She has had innumerable group exhibitions and an impressive list of solo shows at major exhibition spaces nationally and internationally" (jegede, dele 2010) She was raised in a middle class family where art was appreciated and she ended up in an art school to learn the craft. She gets some of her inspiration for African American female artists like Carrie Mae Weems. "Simpson's photographs during the second half of the 1980s were concerned mainly with the exploration of issues pertaining to gender and culture, and the construction and interpretation of identity."(jegede, dele 2010) Her artwork during this period most closely relates to mine because of the focus on gender, culture and identity. Not only that but she also has the human body in her art.

In ""Bye, Bye Black Girl": Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat." Copeland is describing the work of Lorna Simpson, speaking about the crimes against the women depicted in the art and the criticizing the work. Copeland sites another art critic that describes Lorna's work saying her "work comments on the often ugly facts of life without simply reporting them" Not only does the art work mean something but her words and titles is what really helps bring meaning to these Black women that seemingly look "normal." In “Guarded Conditions” you are staring at the back of women that are seemingly normal but at the bottom you can see why they may be guarded. The art focuses on skin attacks and sex attacks which is a Black feminist ideal. The idea that you can be attacked because of your skin color like your male counterparts and then also attacked based on your sex like your female counterparts. Except Black women have to face both and this

shed light on that without ever showing the faces of these women. This is a universal image that is being portrayed.



There came a point where Lorna was stuck speaking about the plight of Black women. Her work AEIOU focuses on the invisibility of African American work and my work is hoping to take that cloak of invisibility off. It is also focusing on education. A big part of this piece is that those words under the picture are easy for whom to say.



The interesting about her work "Bye, Bye Black Girl" is that she took the Black female out of the picture to make her point. She began to realize that when you depict the Black body it is speaking universally about Black bodies but when you depict a white body you are just speaking universally about the body period. That is a Black feminist realization, the fact that although they are all women they are not equal, not even when represented in art.

Mickalene Thomas is a New York based artist who is best known for her elaborate paintings composed of rhinestones, acrylic and enamel. Thomas uses her work to express what it means to be a woman and be beautiful is. In the article, "Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness" by Derrek Conrad Murray the author argues that Thomas' work opens up a conversation around post-Blackness which challenges the traditional and heteronormative definitions of Blackness. He particularly focuses on the depiction of African American women in Thomas' works, including the painting "Hotter than July."



Murray describes this painting by saying

The artist's mixed-media painting *hotter than July* depicts a reclining Black female nude in a seductive mode: breasts partially exposed and mini skirt hiked up. The figure stares into the distance wantonly, with that slightly detached and glazed over expression common in soft-core pornography. (Murray, Derek Conrad 2014)

The author argues that in this and other works, Thomas takes on the stylistic tropes of heteronormative images and rearticulates them through a distinctly queer-feminist lens. Murray continues in his article to speak about how Thomas' work serves the purpose of being Black and feminist by creating images which "critique American media culture's debasement of Black women, but they simultaneously take aim at misogyny within the Black community, particularly in the male-dominated 1970s Black Power era." (Murray, Derek Conrad 2014) Black women are constantly have two identities that are at war which is the Black and the woman. The work of Thomas works to try and find the balance of respecting and advocating for both identities.

Other examples of Works by Mickalene Thomas are



The image on the left is “Sister Sister” made in 2007 and the image on the right is titled “A Little Taste Outside of Love” which was also made in 2007. According to Murray “Sister Sister” “positions the Black female body somewhere between racial fetishism and feminist transgression.” (Murray, Derek Conrad 2014) while “A Little Taste Outside of Love” is,

A colorful painting that adapts its title from the equally vibrant Millie Jackson song, is classic Thomas. A lone female figure reclines on a decorative sofa, surrounded by ornately designed duvets and pillows. The woman's posture echoes Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's 1814 *Une odalisque (La grande odalisque)*, in which a concubine presents her backside while gazing impassively--almost defiantly--at the viewer. In the case of Thomas's figure, brown skin and ample afro convey protestation that somehow undermines the *mise-en-scène*, while still remaining seductive. (Murray, Derek Conrad 2014)

All of these images take the Black woman and centers her and she then uses these images to make a commentary about something going on in the world. These images can stand alone as pieces of activism. She uses her images to evoke something in people that can lead to her definition of social justice for the Black Woman and therefore for all.

There has been a lot of art that has come out of the Black live matter movement from painting to poetry. An example of a Latina artist that has taken that on is María María Acha-

Kutscher. Although she is not Black she takes on issues of many women of color and depicts them in her art. She uses illustrations to increase the visibility of female activism, images such as



Which she describes on her website saying

One of the protesters of DREAM DEFENDERS raises her arms and shout 'hands up, don't shoot' outside the James Lawrence King Federal Justice Building where the U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Florida, is located on August 14, 2014 in Miami, Florida. The protesters say they want justice for Mike Brown, shot and killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9"(www.acha-kutscher.com) .

This is a digital drawing based on photo by Joe Raedle.

Not only does she comment on things that are going on in America but she also uses these images to comment on things happening to Black and brown girls all around the works with an image of a hands that on it says, #Bringbackourgirls which was the hashtag for the movement that occurred after The kidnaping of the young girls in Nigeria.



The works of these artists and poets have paved the way for the work that I have done and will continue to do.

Chapter 2

Poems

The poems in this chapter are explorations of issues that I feel are within and without the Black community and are affecting it. These issues include things like beauty, colorism, the educational achievement gap, internalized racism and much more. I explore these topics using personal experiences as well as outside experiences and stories in order to create a picture of some of the negative but also the positive. Some of the positive includes resilience and beauty and strength along with many other things that are highlighted. I decided to handle the poems this way because although there are things that can be fixed there are also many things that need to be celebrated. These poems are not intended to represent all Black people of the Black experience however they are meant to create dialogue and tell stories that others may be able to empathize with. These poems are meant to be catalysts for social justice but they are also meant to just be a way to vent and share anger caused by systems of oppression.

First Grade Graduation

When one parent never made it past middle school

And the other stopped at 12th grade

And you live in a place where you are taught to mistake gunshots for fireworks

In the middle of December

Where because of the skin you're in

And where you reside

They think you are less likely to succeed or even survive

They believe that the adversity you face on a daily basis will hinder you from going places

And even if taught how to speak to police from the sound of your first cry

If you walk away with your hands up you may still die

In a world where you can be pushed through a system

And dropped off before the success train leaves

Because low ranked schools can only help the top of the class succeed

It's no wonder a first grade graduation becomes a noteworthy occasion

Black Babies Black Bodies

This poem may contain truths that are too hard to swallow, too blunt to force and too real to deal

Congratulations Black women

You just birthed two Black bodies

That two girls

Meaning double the brown sugar, the womanly spice, and the not just right

These are the ingredients chosen to create the perfect societal punching bags

Even if they wanted to be the perfect little girls

God added a special ingredient to the concoction, melanin x

Thus these twin Black bodies were formed

Giving them the ultimate problems

Kelly, Kayla and Kiana have had their lives dedicated

To witnessing the persecution and execution of their people

See this beautiful Black birth is always tainted with the inevitable

Because Black bodies can't birth anything but Black bodies

Congratulations

This birth is part magnificent gift part horrendous curse

You get the privilege of saying you have known joy and the burden to say you have known past

Present and future pain

Getting attached to a bundle of bullets

Never just a person but a reputation or representation

Not a boy but a monster born too tinted to be anything but served and never protected

Not a girl but a Jezebel a mammy a sapphire

Not man not woman but human turned property turned 3/5ths turned human turned threat turned

Target turned inventor turned threat turned target turned scholar turned threat turned target

Black bodies birth Black bodies

So sometimes we are told to lighten until we erase but for the women that make the decision to

Keep the bloodline Black

All I can say till the world changes is

Congratulations

You birthed a Black body

Born in God's image and

Given the opportunity to get closer to get closer to him by experiencing societal crucifixion and

Public execution because of skin color in the land of the free built on the foundation of slaves

So tell your baby be brave and you be brave too

'Cuz Black bodies can only birth Black bodies

Elder

They say you don't know where you're going unless you know from where you once came

Well me

I was birthed from humans turned slave in the land of the free

Birthed from the slaves, the reason America is called brave

Birthed from the slave master fathers that don't claim me and their wives that are quick to shame

Me

Birthed from resilience and nurturing and love and affection

Birthed from the power struggle of legalized rape because his property was only 3/5ths see

Birthed from inventors and the Garvey's of all generations from congressmen and

Mathematicians was we

Birthed from lynching and castrations

Birthed from dreams turned action turned progress

Birthed out of segregation, humiliation, and a semi-emancipation

Birthed from a bad history displaying how resilient my people can be

Birthed from middle class Black and systematically perpetuated poverty into a repetition of

History

And without them I wouldn't be me

I couldn't be where

There would be no how or what and when would be now

So I must pay homage to the good and the bad of before

Because they opened doors

And I know that right now their bodies are turning in their graves because

Once opened are continuing to become closed doors because

History in repetition because

Lack of appreciation because

Sad realities

They tried all they could to give our generation the best

And now it's up to us to finally put them to eternal rest

Graduation Part 2

You may wonder why I focus on graduation

Why I let a cap and gown be a shrine

Well when rappers are screaming "nigga we made it" and "started from the bottom now we Here"

But all the people that rap in the trap are in the same place they have been in for years

I don't knock the hustle and I believe in pipe dreams

But I wanna see more people really make it in my community

And sometimes I believe that people chose to rap or find sports to play because they really love it

Or the educational path led them astray

I wanna see people get where they want to be

And a high school graduation followed by attaining a college degree is just one way

It's the path for me

So I can help others get there too

It's not for everyone and that is so true

But for many more it can be

Especially in low income communities

Where people want to be in a better situation

And need guidance to make it a reality

Not because of incompetence or lack of common sense but instead a lack of a road map or

Lack of a person to lead especially in their immediate family

I get that and I see progress as success

We can all make it we can fulfill our dreams and
That's why graduations are so important to me

Nubian Queen

This is a letter to my future daughter

Dear beautiful Black girl

You radiate a melanin so unique that you glisten like a twilight star in moonlit night

The beauty you are remains unmatched

And no matter what the rest of the world tells you

You deserve to be treated as Queen

Not a figurehead

But a Nubian Queen with all authority, respect, and admiration

I need you to know

The second you love your hue

You become an inspiration to way more than few

When you embrace your face

Instead of trying to use creams to erase

You take the right steps towards accepting your race

Dear beautiful Black girl

You deserve to be treated as Queen

Have you ever seen a Queen with her head bowed?

Have you ever seen a Queen look ashamed?

So to be treated as Queen you must act as Queen and that starts by embracing how you are made

Your shade

Be brave

Because many may try to humble you and knock you off your throne

But staying true to you and knowing your beauty is nothing less than foolproof

Will keep your status known

That's my advice to you Black girl

One that I hope you keep

Just to reiterate my beliefs

You are beautiful

Black girl

And you deserve to be treated as Queen

Interracial Couple

Mocha chocolate mixes with starkly white sugar crystals

They begin to disappear into each other

Taste of one color of the other

Milk gets filled almost half way with chocolate syrup

Once together inseparable

Ain't it sweet?

These bodies throughout time have always intertwined

In public or in secret

But instead of mix it's like two strings of a Twizzler they just stick

Each separate but ingested together

Does their separation on the color spectrum or their need to be together make them different?

Is it the years since ancestors traveled from Africa that make them wrong

Make them something to fear

Make them weird, better

Can they ever be two birds in a feather?

Some would say yes

Some continue to say no and perpetuate hate

Even those people that say they don't see race

Some even go as far as sayin' it's cool as long as it's outside the familial blood line

Yet and so we are in a post racial society?

sips tea

Light Skin vs. Dark Skin

Beautiful

Cotton, caramel, hazelnut, almond, mocha, licorice

The spectrum of Black skin is endless

But we continue to let a brown paper bag and a pencil separate us

We continue to believe if you're one of lighter hue you're the chosen few the better the more
supreme

This race that sees skin and hair as status

As beauty

As strength

It started with house vs. field

And the fight goes on till today

The struggle to be Black and try to emulate White

The struggle when you feel that you raw and real doesn't appeal

The struggle to be born bright and feel that your own are the first to fight

And media just perpetuates the situation

Feeding the fire using insecurities and fuel

But slowly there has been a change

And as time move forward it's important to remember and continue to say

Black is beautiful in all shades

Black couples

I once heard a Black woman say "I don't date Black men"

I once heard a Black man say

"Too independent, too mean, good for nothing," when describing a Black woman to me

I once heard a Black mom say

"Why would you date him, you'll only create nappy headed babies"

I once heard that Black on Black should be considered an abomination because instead of a purification or dilution it's a concentration

I once heard a poet tell a story where she was asked "Why would two oppressed people want to Be together"

It's like 2 times the judgement the ridicule

Wouldn't you be afraid of creating a young Black man

A young Black woman

A young Black human

And what if they turn out to be LGBTQIA or they are low income or lack religion or have a Disability

Like being Black isn't enough to make them question where they stand in the land created for the Christian elitist cisgender able bodied heterosexual white men...

To the people who believe those things to you I must say

Black is beautiful and that is fact

But past that

Black on Black is something many people have an issue with when they are intertwined

When these bodies are combined forces push them together while others attempt to tear them
Apart

But love comes from the heart and doubt comes from the brain

And love will still be love in all colors even is those colors are the same

Mother Daughter

Black moms you are the North Stars leading the next generation to freedom or capture

We must lead our daughters to liberation

Black moms have so much power over the outcomes in their baby's life

Not only do you teach wrong right and morality

You begin her self-esteem

When she looks at you, what does your daughter see?

A strong Black woman that embraces her race?

Or one that can always find something that needs to change, rearrange, alter, cover up, fix,

Replace, erase?

She has your hair, your eyes, your nose, your skin

If not, do you always make it a point to compare?

If so, do you show her how to love herself?

How to fit in?

Or are you obsessed with being thick or thin?

Do you listen to the negative things people say?

Or do you hold your head up and teach her to do the same?

Do you teach her how to love herself even when media and society tells her to be ashamed?

There are other influences but you still stand to be one of the main

So teach her to love herself

help decrease the pain of feeling like how you are good enough

I'm sure many moms can relate

Black moms out there know your beauty and worth and let your daughter know too

She is beautiful

But also let her know

Her inside is more important than her outside

But that her outside is great too

We all know she will be judged by her cover

But it is way more important for her to have pages

And her self-esteem will develop in stages

But at stage one help her see

She was born, created, as a unique masterpiece

And so were you

That beautiful is what you both are and will always be

Even if that is a fact society has yet to see

Navy strong

A poem for my mother

My mother finished her service but she never stopped being navy strong

My mother is the definition of resilience and inspiration

Ever since the day we were born I don't believe she has put herself first

She's assertive and alert

Caring and kind

A beauty Queen

A beautiful Queen

With a great shape and the personality to match

Greatness unmatched except hopefully by me

The outcome of our lives is always the first concern in her mind

From the emphasis on education

To the never ending protection and affection

Cheerleader dancer pageant Queen

Skin smooth ebony

Mother like no other

I appreciate your time and all you do

Without you I would honestly be like others I see

Stuck in the same cycle of poverty with a diminished chance to leave

You pushed us hard

And made sure that we were always handled right and our grades and health was a top priority

Without you I couldn't be me

More than anything

I hope you see it to be true

That I love you and I have seen and appreciate all you do

Best Friends

A poem for my twin Kayla

We were designed as a puzzle meant to create the same picture

We have always been composed of different shapes pieces

I've had the privilege to stare deep into the eyes of my reflection

Almost like a mixture of fun mirrors to me

But it's always 'bout perception

As we grew life would distort my exact-like view

Making an image that refused to imitate

An image that sometimes couldn't relate

And then as if it we ate

This distorted view grew and began to mold and so did you

And although different we just fit

She's my other half

My best friend

The one who protected me from the monsters that lived in my home

The one that held me while I cried

The one angrier than me when I'm wronged

Yes, we know each other better than better

No, if you pinch me she can't feel it

Yes, having a twin is the best

No, from miles apart she can't sense my pain

At least not in a literal vein

If someone hurts me

My best friend will understand and gets hurt too

And when I call her crying with my souls and heart on my sleeve

Her heart gets heavy and her tears flow too

It's just what best friends do

And to my best friend I will always be true

Past death but instead

Until the dimensions collide, the meaning of life changes, and the existence of reality does us

Part

As a pair we only work as 2

The love I have for you will never be through

And no matter what

You will always have a room reserved for you in my heart

Daddy's Little Girl

Growing up around white racists

Being chased down dark roads

Seeing the barrel of a white man's gun

Around people who didn't believe he could succeed

He came from drunks and drugs

A path hard to retreat

He was on a downward spiral

And his path would split and the road he traveled created me

This is a poem for my father

I've never been a daddy's girl

That was always my sister's role not me

Although I love him very much and gave him my trust

Our personalities were too similar to meet

My mom a social butterfly

My dad socially meek

Performances the only time our personalities really shine in big groups

He always made sure he was home

We were fed

And most importantly safe

He did the best he could to give us more than he received

And without him I wouldn't be this version of me

He always made me feel I had the potential to be whatever I wanted to be

For that I am nothing but pleased

This poem is for my dad

A resilient King

Where I'm from

They always ask me where I'm from

And when birthed from the backbone of America

Being part slave, part slave master isn't enough I say

I'm from the Bronx

Like Phoenix birthed in a disastrous fire into something even more

Magnificent

I'm from a fun size mirror image of Jane Adams Hull house's called new settlement

I'm from green gates and green paint with green doors with hardwood and tiled floors

I'm from laughing like hyenas so loud but it seems only my head turns

Thick blue arm veins that carry blood away

Kissed awake by coffee hazelnut light and sweet with cream morning breath

Which is always the best

I'm from three televisions running at the same time

I'm from the haves and the have not's

Like alcoholics and recovering drug addicts

Like houses and brownstones

Or shelters in the worn down couches in the basement of friends' homes

I'm from tough love and affection

I'll beat you 'till the white meat shows because nothing less than 80 can come home

I'm from food deserts and CSA's

And two McDonald's, one Wendy's, one Burger King, five pizza shops, three chicken spots, one

Popeye's, two Chinese all within a three block radius of me

I'm from the belly of a determined and beautiful beast

I'm from a home where my heart is

I'm from an image of me in someone I don't need a mirror to see

I'm from men who cry and women who hold everything in

I'm from beauty is perception of what lies within

I'm from the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement

I'm from Africa

I'm from long journey still not ending

I'm from imagination but a lack of pretending

I'm from everywhere and nowhere at the same time

Everywhere?

Nowhere?

Same time?

Me

I'm from

Chapter 3 Artist statement and Art

My artwork is rooted in my personal experiences. To create my paintings, I use poetry and my own family photographs. I either, begin with a poem and then find a family photo that relates, or I pick a family photo that resonates with me and then write a poem in response. I am inspired by Black female artists such as Augusta Savage, a sculptor who made monumental figures of Black people that not only showed their struggle, but also emphasized their beauty and importance, and artists like Deborah Willis and Carrie Mae Weems who use photos to show the raw and real beauty of Black women across the many spectrums of identity.

Carrie Mae Weems uses everyday life and familial relationships to make a point about the influence families—and more specifically, mothers—have in their daughters' lives. This relationship between mother and daughter is a main focus in my poems *Mother Daughter* and *Navy Strong*. Formally, I am inspired by Mickalene Thomas' use of composition. In her paintings from 2006-2008, she places her figure(s) in the foreground, amidst a patterned background that is sometimes collaged and sometimes simplified. Whether the environment has a lot of information or a little, the figure is what holds the most importance. This is similar to my backgrounds; they are made to show the figure as the most important component.

I am combining painting and poems in this book and it will serve various purposes. The first purpose is putting real images of Black lives out into the world in order to have a positive impact. Every day media bombards us with negative images and stereotypical portrayals of Black people from the news, to music, to reality television. However, real experiences like mine can act as a positive image, not because it is all pleasant, but because it is all real. The second purpose is giving young girls an artistic role model that looks like them, and the ability to read a book with images and stories of lives that may resemble theirs. Lastly, a major purpose is sharing

a social commentary as well as a collection of poems from my perspective that sends a message of one Black woman's view about the world around her through the lens of family life in a low income

This painting is called "Father Daughter"



(16x20)

This painting is painted from a photograph of my father holding my twin sister in the air toward the sky. The way this is painted has a lot of meaning to me. The figures are very clear just like the image of them in my head while the background is a bit chaotic. This is because in the poem I speak about my father's past and it is not a proud one and it is not important. The important thing is what my father has become once he had me and my twin sister and I try to display that in this image. He puts my sister above himself but she is also shielding him at the same time and I love that imagery and I decided to paint that. This family photo is so important because it shows a relationship between my sister and my father that I don't necessarily relate to but I can observe and appreciate it.

This painting is called Black babies Black bodies.



I chose this image to represent the poem Black Babies Black Bodies because this poem is about the fact that Black babies are gift and should be cherished however they are not always seen that way. These babies look innocent and in their Christmas colors they look like they can fit right under the tree. I use this photo because when a child can be confused for someone years older than what they are and therefore more dangerous than what they are I think about this.

Young babies, which is what many people always are to their families, being killed. The chubbiness of their cheeks was important for me when it came to this picture in order to accentuate the qualities that make them youthful and adorable. This next image also goes with this poem



This painting is called Light skin vs. Dark Skin



I chose this image because it is of my mom and one of her best friends. This is important because although they are friends regardless of their skin tones there are other members of the Black community that would stray away from friendship with someone that was different in that way. They are also cheerleaders which represents ultimate popularity and beauty in high school but it then takes the poem to does this light skin versus dark skin issue have to exist. This image is an attempt to touch on the issue of colorism in the Black community. Colorism has existed

since slavery because the lighter skin you were the closer to the masters you were. Colorism is a false, light skin dark skin dynamics are a social construction and mindsets and economic systems that make \$ off of exploiting colorism should be challenged, and this poem is my attempt at challenging these systems.

This painting is called graduation part two



The next painting is called First Grade Graduation



These paintings are very monotone in skin color and they represent the factory type style that the school system has become especially in the Black community. These paintings touch on the issues that I have seen with the school systems from my own personal experience but the way it is painted is to represent that it could be and is the experience of many in the Black community.

The next two paintings are called Elder



(30x36)



The size of my grandmother in the first painting is so important because it shows how important she is to me but it also represents how important ancestry is to not only me but to the entirety of the Black community. She has presence in this photo and she sits in the middle of the page with her hands being the biggest part in order to show her helpfulness and her work. She is vibrant and beautiful and represent elders in general dead or alive and their importance.

This painting is called Navy Strong



(16x20)

Some of these poems are meant to make changes in society and the images that follow and this image for me is just my way of saying thank you to my mother. She served the country and then she served me. I used more feeling and emotions and memory to paint this photo than I did the photograph. My mom is thin and beautiful and neat and she has a one million dollar smile that she prides herself with and I wanted to accentuate that.

This painting is called mother daughter



(16x20)

This painting is not of my blood family but is still of my family and it touches on the relationship between mother and daughter. I use this photo because my cousin had a lot of confidence and is very strong and she got much of that from her mother so I believe that their relationship is a prime one to use in order to explain the fact that mothers' have a huge impact on the ideas of beauty that their children have about themselves.

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