Artistic Resistance: The Art and Activism of Black Women in America, 1960-1980

Britney Deal
Master Thesis
Erasmus University Rotterdam
School of History, Culture and Communication
667743bd@eur.nl
667743
Supervisor: Pieter van den Heede

Abstract

America in the 1960s to 1980s, was a powder keg of political and social activity. While everyone was advocating for equality in the form of various movements, the Black civil rights movement gave birth to the Black Arts Liberation movement (BAM). Amongst the dominant voices, Black female artists strived to make their voices heard. They rejected the notion that their oppression/discrimination was based solely on gender or race, but a culmination of multiple factors that created a unique set of challenges and perspectives. They used their musical, literary, and visual art as a protest tool to explore notions of race, gender, sexuality, power dynamics, female representation and class while advocating for liberation. Discussions surrounding diversity, racial justice and inclusion have taken center stage in public debate, especially in the United States. These debates have raised questions about how people of various backgrounds navigate these discussions. This has also shed light on the academic scope of Civil Rights and feminist movement scholarship, while vast, has limited focus on groups within the movement and their contributions. Through an intersectional analytical lens, this project highlights the understudied demographic of black female artists within the scope of the BAM, how and why they used specific repertoires of contention in social activism and what this means for the broader implications of both the feminist and black civil rights movements, art and activism.

Table of Contents

1.Introduction

If they don't give you a seat at the table, then bring a folding chair —Shirley Chisholm

Throughout American history, women and other marginalized groups did not have a platform to express themselves. The latter half of the twentieth century was a tumultuous time in America; disenfranchised groups everywhere were calling attention to widespread injustices and demanded equality. This erupted in a flurry of liberation movements, such as the second feminist wave and Black civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s. As the United States reckoned with protests, radicalized activism and demonstrations, history and culture were being redefined. Black power and feminism gave birth to the Black Arts Liberation and Feminist art movements. Feminist art centered on women's experience, but this was often told through a white lens. Prominent voices of the Black power movement were all male. This turned many elements of the movements exclusive instead of inclusive. Nuanced aspects of oppression were "sacrificed" to advance the bigger agenda. Black female artists rejected the notion that their oppression was based solely on gender or race. Through their visual, performative, musical and literary art, black women rejected, reclaimed, and re-envisioned the social norms which hindered their liberation.

The union of art and politics also expressed the social, political, and economic status of Black people and other minority groups in America. Because Black women were among the most marginalized people in America, their struggles brought them into direct conflict with the intermingled factors of oppression: racism, sexism, and classism. Thus, many Black female activists believed that if Black women were successful in their movements, they would have an impact far beyond their immediate demands. Their actions would reverberate throughout multiple groups. As poignantly stated by the black feminist organization, the Combahee River Collective in 1977, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."[1] They recognized that structures of oppression were (and still are) interlocking and the culmination of these oppressions make up the conditions of their lives. It was up to them to recognize their status and spread awareness by various means to bring about change. It was this ideology that took root in the art and activism of countless women.

Discussions surrounding diversity, social justice and inclusion have taken center stage in public debate, especially in the United States. These debates have raised questions about how people of various backgrounds navigate these discussions. By studying these dynamics of the past, we gain a better understanding of them. This expanded knowledge could offer invaluable insight into alleviating present-day tensions and circumstances. Looking into the past provides more tools to better structure the present and future to serve everyone. These discussions have also shed light on the academic scope of Feminist, Black Civil Rights, and Black Arts movements scholarship. While vast and continually growing, these movements still have limited focus on groups within the movements and their contributions. This project highlights an understudied demographic that has contributed to multiple movements as well as how their art and activism helped shape the American social, economic, and political climate during the twentieth century.

[1] "The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977," The Combahee River Collective, n.d., https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf.

Earlier research in black studies and feminist studies have focused on prominent figures but failed to recognize other actors who contributed to the movements. Due to lack of scholarship surrounding their unique position, we tend to underestimate the impact of intersectional dynamics in social movements; an element that is as relevant today as it was then. This research will explore their contributions, but more importantly, *how* they viewed themselves, their art and activism. By uncovering those untold stories, we get the full picture of society and as historians, that should be a goal we all strive for.

1.1 Research questions

To explore the proposed research, I will employ the main question: How did Black American female artists position themselves within the second wave of feminism and the black civil rights movement in the US during 1960-1980 through their art, and why did they do so? The question will invite an intersectional analysis between race, gender, sexuality, art, and social activism, while addressing the attitudes of Black female artists, their contributions and the broader implications for feminism and civil rights during this period. The main research will be divided into two sub questions.

Firstly, what specific themes did the artists explore in their work that challenged or reinterpreted the social norms of Black American women in the 1960s-80s? This question will explore how their artistic activism explored issues like gender/sexual identity, feminine representation, and social as well as political justice. It is in those themes the artists' work took a form of unique resistance which created a new platform to make their vision and goals for liberation heard.

Next, how did Black female artists navigate exclusionary artistic and public spaces in America during 1960-1980? Here, the research will elaborate on how artists felt and combated racial and gender oppression, exclusion from performance venues, galleries, or literary works not being published. I will also investigate what role community and solidarity played in the artistic practices and political activism of these artists. How did various collectives, communication and collaboration amongst different artists, organized protests, and acts of rebellion shape the feminist and civil rights movements? It will also explore the actions, feelings, and thoughts that the artists had about their marginalization from both sides of the struggle.

1.2 Main Theoretical concepts

To carry out this research, I focused on concepts drawn from Black Feminism and social movement studies, particularly intersectionality theory and repertoires of contention. Given the importance of intersectional dynamics and the lack of research developed with this lens in mind, this research focused on how the studied artists position themselves with particular focus on the themes they explored, but also the specific actions they used, both in groups and individually, in order to draw attention to their struggle.

In order to highlight the importance of an intersectional lens to analyze historical social movement actions, intersectionality must first be defined. Officially coined in 1988 by critical race theory professor and activist, Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality recognizes that individual's identities and experiences are shaped by multiple intersections factors like race, gender, sexuality and class.[2] These factors are non-mutually exclusive. Meaning they often operate together and exacerbate each other, creating unique perspectives and challenges for the individuals experiencing them. It considers the interplay of multiple social dynamics, power relations and identity construction.[3]

While entering academic scholarship only in the last two decades, the concept of interlocking oppressions is not new. It took true shape in the 1970s rooted within Black feminist discourse. Black feminist politics had an obvious connection to the movements for women and Black liberation. Many women were active in the movements of the 60s and 70s and were shaped by the movements' ideologies, goals and tactics used to achieve those goals. But their experience on the periphery led to the need to develop politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.[4] Groups such as the National Black Feminist Organizaton (NBFO) and the Combahee River Collective (CRC) were founded as a reaction to the racism, sexism and elitism that obscured minority women's participation in the women's movement and Black liberation movements. The opening statement of The Combahee River Collective's mission from 1977, succinctly explains their mission which provided the base for future intersectional frameworks:

> *The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all wome of color face.*[5]

Much like Crenshaw discovered a decade later through her work in legal discrimination, the activists of the CRC knew it was not their identity alone that produced the discrimination, but in relation to a particular way of institutional structuring and social conditioning. Their

---

[2] Barbara Giovanna Bello and Letizia Mancini, "Talking About Intersectionality. Interview With Kimberlé W. Crenshaw," *SOCIOLOGIA DEL DIRITTO*, no. 2 (October 1, 2016): 11–21, https://doi.org/10.3280/sd2016-002002.

[3] Bello and Mancini, "Talking About Intersectionality. Interview With Kimberlé W. Crenshaw," 3.

[4] "The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977," 2.

[5] "The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977," 1.

political realization came from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. Black feminism provided the intersectional lens that was needed to conceptualize the realities of their struggles. This personal connection is reflected in the art and activism of black female artists. Looking at their artistry through an intersectional lens highlights the social dimension of their activism. It also provides the theoretical framework for the Black feminist art movement to be viewed as it's own social activist movement.

Social movements are one of the foremost vehicles to social change. Prominent American sociologist, Charles Tilly defined social movements as a series of contentious performances, displays, and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others.[6] He along with fellow scholar Sidney Tarrow posit that social movements are defined by four main categories. They combine sustained campaigns of claim making; have an array of public performances including marches, rallies, demonstrations, creation of specialized associations, public meetings, petitions and lobbying; display of commitment either through physical symbology; they draw on the organizations, networks, traditions and solidarities that sustain these activities providing social movement bases.[7] Scholarship on social movements studies is extensive and ever-expanding, so for the purposes of this research I will focus specifically on the concept of "repertoires of contention."

Charles Tilly defines repertoires of collective action or repertoires of contention as a set of protest related tools and action available to a movement or organization in a given time frame.[8] He traces the development of 19th century repertoire from mass participation in national politics. The mobilization of numbers and commitment on behalf of articulated claims to power and/or on power holders. It's this phenomenon that can be applied to demonstrations, strikes, public meetings, social movements and similar forms of collective action.[9] His development of the concept of repertoires provides insight into the epochal shifts created by the emergence of industrial society and democratization. Scholar Sidney Tarrow speaks to the "modularity" of repertoires. While they are culturally specific, once particular forms of protest become recognized parts of public life, they can become "modular." This means they are adoptable and adaptable by other movements, often with very different aims, in multiple situations.[10] This claim explains why demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins and petitions have become normalized and part of civic life. This interconnection of repertoires and modularity connect culture, tradition, everyday life and movement action. According to scholars Doherty and Hayes, this modularity proves problematic as protest tactics are likely to be affected by path dependency; in which institutional constraints, tradition and prior understanding limit the possibilities for tactical innovation.[11] They also point out that this frame of thinking does not consider new communication technologies which can affect how tactics are received and implemented.

---

[6] Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
[7] Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics,* 3.
[8] Charles Tilly, "Nineteenth-century Origins of Our Twentieth-century Collective Action Repertoire" (CRSO Working paper #224, University of Michigan, 1981),1-125, https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/51016/244.pdf?sequence=1.
[9] Tilly, "Nineteenth-Century Origins of Our Twentieth-Century Collective Action Repertoire," 4.
[10] Brian Doherty and Graeme Hayes, "Tactics," in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements,* no.2 (2023): 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm210.pub2.
[11] Doherty and Hayes, "Tactics," 3.

Instead, their research focuses on understanding tactical choices, the how and the why behind strategic choices made by actors. They explore innovation as a combination of cultural codes and situational "hacks". These hacks can be anything from found materials to creative artifacts. They are interested in improvisations and disruptions that temporarily shift power inequalities and create situational advantages.[12] They also draw attention to the need for analysis of the internal processes within movements. All too often is analysis of repertoires of contention focused on the variety of tactics that gain the most public attention, but this should be complimented by analysis on actors as well as interactions and especially on how *movement identity and emotions* shape and are shaped by tactical choices.[13] This has particularly been reflected in women's movements scholarship as scholars have challenged the limits of the contentious politics definition to the public sphere, affirming the importance of movement identity and tactics.

Scholar Donatello Della Porto, looks more into the future, studying how "new repertoires" are coming on the scene. While the core repertoires still exist—demonstrations, boycotts, petitions and barricades, new elements can be identified. First mobilizations are more transnational. While most movements still start at the local or national levels, many are moving and developing beyond borders. There is also increased activity from international governmental organizations and worl social forums.[14] Not surprising, Porto also mentions the role computer-mediated communication has transformed social movements. The cost and speed of tech based media has transformed the ambitions and intervention capabilities of social movements. While modern repertoires of protest are still based on logical choices (influencing decision-makers with shows of strength), Porto suggest another symbolic logic has been employed—the logic of bearing witness, designed to convince rather than to win. The scholar also posits that perfomances tend to adapt to different genrational tastes. Younger cohorts tend to take older repertoires of action, like marches, re-orient them from showing unity and organization to more theatrical displays, allowing space for colorful expressions of diversity and cultural changes.[15] Porto explains this shift in repertoires as reactionary to shifts in the environment. The change in capitalism from nation-state- based industries to multinational corporations, influences of supranational entities and new means of communication have allowed protest tactics to adapt to broader contextual changes.[16]

[12] Doherty and Hayes, "Tactics," 4.
[13] Doherty and Hayes, "Tactics," 4.
[14] Donatella Della Porta, "Repertoires of Contention," in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements,* no.2 (2023): 1-3, https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm178.pub2 .
[15] Della Porta, "Repertoires of Contention,"4.
[16] Della Porta, "Repertoires of Contention,"3.

1.3 Literature Review

To contextualize my research, I will draw from the historical scholarship of American social movements of the 1960s-1980s with particular emphasis on the Black Arts Liberation movement. Below I will discuss some dominant trends in related scholarship as it pertains to my chosen subjects. Much like the recognition of Black women's impact during social movements, scholarship on Black female artists during the Black Arts movement (BAM) is lacking due in part to their contributions being absorbed into other academic writing. Their stories told as merely a footnote in Black Civil Rights or Feminist writings. The limited scholarship that speaks of Black female artists during the BAM is disjunct, with emphasis on various aspects but never giving full attention to the intricacies of their impact. In exploring this gap in academia, naturally literature on the Black Civil Rights movement, second Feminist movement and Black Arts Movement needs to be discussed.

Black Civil Rights Movement

Since the 90's, the scholarship on the Black Civil Rights movement has had a wide breadth of topics explored. There is a plethora of writings on black culture, aesthetic, history, sociology, and politics. Many scholars debate the origins of the movement. Academics like Jacquelyn Hall, argue for the need to go beyond the "dominant narrative" which is the movement began in 1954 with the Brown decision and proceeded through the protests of the segregated South, to Martin Luther King Jr. as the figurehead with his "I have a dream…" speech in 1963 and ending with the Civil Rights Act of '64 and Voting Act of '65.[17] Hall along with other scholars, sees the origins of the movement in the 1930s & 40s starting with Roosevelt's New Deal agenda. Roosevelt's reformist views emboldened The African American community to ensure their own social/economic justice through industrial relations, labor and social welfare reform.[18] This was a pivotal first step in what Hall refers to as the "Long Civil Rights Movement."

Other early writings often focused on more specific topics like school desegregation, protest organizations, prominent leaders, or different strategies like violence vs. non-violence.[19] Later quantitative approaches were taken to study the impact of racial changes, like Gavin Wright who looked at the economic improvements in black politics, businesses, and public infrastructure. [20] By the late 80s & 90s, a lot of scholarly work turned to intersectional aspects like religion, women, and labor.[21] Unfortunately, there is still limited work on the impact of black women during the movement. Belinda Robnett in '97 wrote the first complete book of black women's contribution, but it had limited appeal and utility for historians due to its heavy theoretical content.[22] Biographical works also became a popular form of study to tell the intricacies of the movement through the lives of figureheads like MLK, Malcolm X and Thurgood Marshall.[23] Also, a lot of early scholarship was dominated by journalists, movement

---

[17] John A Salmond, "'The Long and Short of It': Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 1 (July 2013): 53–61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43863826

[18] Salmond, "'The Long and Short of It': Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement", 54.

[19] Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *The Journal of Southern History 66*, no. 4 (November 1, 2000): 815-848, https://doi.org/10.2307/2588012

[20] Katarina Keane, "New Directions in Civil Rights Historiography," *History Reviews of New Books 44,* no. 1 (December 15, 2015): 1–4, https://doi.org/10.1080/03612759.2016.1084809.

[21] Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era", 829.

[22] Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era", 831.

[23] Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era", 825.

activists and non-historian scholars who wrote with unusual intimacy and tended to emphasize one side of the struggle and neglect the other side (segregationist side, marginalized people who did not participate in the movement). Charles Eagles argues the field could benefit from more objective research. Most works presented only positive interpretations of the movement and shy away from criticism of its leaders as well as failure to achieve the goals of racial justice.[24] Gunnar Myrdal also argued that viewing the white resistance is essential because the racial problem was in the white mind.[25] To include their views will heighten appreciation of the achievements of the black freedom struggle and show its timeless relevance and necessity. Although there is a wide scope of scholarship on the Black civil rights/power movements, there is not a whole lot of mention of black women's contribution. Much like their role during the liberation movement, black women's activism takes a supporting role in academic literature. Their impact is minimized and mentioned in a single paragraph or footnote. Throughout my research I will highlight the significance of their impact and why future research is needed to explore the "Black female artist movement."

Second wave of Feminism

Most early literature on feminist writing centered on what Becky Thompson would define as "hegemonic feminism." It was often white led, marginalized the views of women of color, focused only on the U.S., and treated sexism as the ultimate oppression. It deemphasized or ignored class and race analysis and was based on individual rights, rather than a justice-based vision for social change.[26] The dominant narrative of the second wave usually starts with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, to the founding of the National Organization for Women in '66, culminating in the emergence of women's consciousness-raising groups (a black feminist invention) of the late 60s.[27] This normative account typically leaves out the story of multiracial feminism, which pioneered many institutionalized feminist notions, challenged limited non-intersectional views and whose work extended beyond women-only spaces. Many claim that women of color groups formed on the tail end of the movement in reaction to white feminist exclusion. But in fact, many multiracial groups organized before the mainstream movement.

It was those diverse groups that fueled an explosion of writing by women of color in the 70s and 80s like Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* or Maxine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.[28] Militant women of color and white worked in tandem against white supremacy and imperialism. The omission of militant women from second wave herstory hides the notion that the women's movement drew from the Black Power movement which impacted women's activism. The narrative of radical activism also contradicts the narrative of women's peace-loving approach, and that liberation would come from "powerful sisterhood".[29] Much like Civil Rights scholarship, many feminist scholars also challenged the timeline of second wave feminism.

Many argue that the "heyday" for feminism was the 60s and 70s but from the perspective of multiracial feminists that was the low point as many women of color/white antiracist feminists had to put feminism on the back burner to work against racism. Sociologists Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier consider the mass mobilization of feminism from '72-'82 with the failed passage of the Equal Rights amendment in '82 as the end of the movement. Ironically, the period of decline cited by many white feminists is the time of mass mobilization of antiracist

[24] Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era", 840.
[25] Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era", 842.
[26] Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies 28*, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 336-355, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178747
[27] Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism", 338.
[28] Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism", 340.
[29] Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism", 341.

women, black and white, straight, and lesbian.[30] As Gluck posits, 1982 is when groundbreaking writings and anthologies about women of color, written by women of color opened a new chapter of American feminism and allowed a more expansive form of activism to take hold. Intersectional aspects of academia emerged like Rymph and Schreiber's works on feminist and anti feminist contributions to right-wing politics through different organizations and political clubs.[31] Or Gilmore's anthology *Feminist Coalitions* which highlighted the different groups of women that took separate roads to feminism. Or Enke's *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space and Feminist Activism* which focused on how 'sites of activism' were transformed as a result of social movement. [32] Even books on black feminist ideology took center stage like Kate Weigand's *Red Feminism* which speaks to the underlying Communist rhetoric that shaped much of U.S. political landscape.[33] Essentially, many of these visionary works, much like the diverse women of the movement, challenged the dominant narrative and spoke to all of women's issues that could not be addressed separately from racism, economic exploitation and societal exclusion. I will add to diverse works like Enke, Gilmore, or Weigand. Diversity and intersectionality in feminist scholarship is still so new that there is so much room for growth. My research will expand this growing field and inspire others to continue innovative work exposing the underlying intricacies and impact these women had to two major social/political movements.

Black Arts Liberation Movement

Studies in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) have grown since the 1990s, when historian David Smith bemoaned about the lack of scholarship on the affluence of African American culture, intellectualism and politics that spanned the 60s-80s. Since then, a multitude of scholars have examined the intersectionality of aesthetics, race, gender, sexuality, and class that happened during the movement. Scholar Lisa Collins revealed that although both the black civil rights movement and women's liberation movement shared similar traits and goals they were portrayed as parallel struggles and not intersectional.[34] Many leaders of both movements hesitated to acknowledge the complex diversity of their constituents because they felt that true recognition of diversity would hinder community building and slow their own cause.

Other notable books have advanced the research of the BAM. James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* focused on the regional development and national coherence of the movement through circulated periodicals and active universities and groups.[35] Cheryl Clarke's *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, openly talked about the hybrid effort of feminism and racial-political activism which counteracted the movement's penchant toward patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia.[36] Along with other authors of the early twenty-first century, Clarke's book was especially important to BAM scholarship as it brought awareness to black women's defamation through racism of white feminists and the patriarchal alignment of black and white men. In her novel, Clarke also elaborates on the notion of the "black aesthetic" and its importance to Afro-American's call for self-determination and nationalism. Through a series of famous female writers, Clarke draws

---

[30] Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism", 344.

[31] Louise M. Newman, "Talking About a Revolution: New Approaches to Writing the History of Second-Wave Feminism," *Journal of Women's History 23,* no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 219–28, https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2011.0014

[32] Newman, "Talking About a Revolution: New Approaches to Writing the History of Second-Wave Feminism", 224-225.

[33] Erin D. Chapman, "A Historiography of Black Feminist Activism," *History Compass 17*, no. 7 (June 6, 2019): 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12576

[34] Lisa Gail Collins, "Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the United States," *Signs 31*, no. 3 (March 1, 2006): 717–52, https://doi.org/10.1086/498991

[35] Gene Andrew Jarrett, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Scholars," *American Quarterly 57*, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 1243–51, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2006.0010

[36] Jarrett, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Scholars", 1247.

delicate lines between the complexities of black female identity, racial politics, masculinity, sexism and sexuality.

More eclectic forms of analysis also dominate the field with authors like Mike Sell, who wrote about the importance of different forms of performance throughout the BAM. He wanted to focus not on the content of protest performance but how that intent was presented, manipulated, and excluded in major scholarship.[37] He spoke of the development, disappearance and then resurgence of Black Studies from higher education and the parallels with the flow of the Black Arts movement. Sell spoke to the emergence of scholarship that encompasses historic and sophisticated understandings of different performance forms in the articulation of "blackness".[38] As work in this field grows, hopefully new scholars (myself included) will expand on the lessons of first wave visionaries like DuBois and Locke, second wave insights of Neal, Baraka and Teer and finally tying it together with third wave revelations of Smethurst, Collins and many others in order to provide new insights into the complexities and contributions of the bold and creative individuals behind the movement.

At the crossroads of the Black Civil rights, Feminist and Black Arts movement, stands Black female artists. How do they fit into modern day scholarship? As previously stated, despite the wide scope of scholarship on various black and feminist movements, most writing focusing specifically on black female artists and the contribution is vastly lacking. Current writings cover a wide and varying range of topics. Many speak to the origins and development of female led organizations. Like Kay Brown's account of the collective Where We At, in which she detailed the humble beginnings from an exhibition turned organization. She also emphasized the importance of the collective in advancing black female artist representation and their vision to "teach, inspire and change" the state of its people.[39] Scholar Michelle Moravec talked about the far reaching and pivotal work of the West East Bag (WEB) which was a bicoastal national organizing tool that networked women artists nationally, encouraging them to make connections, organize protests and create art registries that revolutionized female artistic representation.[40] The creation of these organizations along with countless others throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, empowered women who identified as artists and provided another means to understand the wide impact of the feminist/black arts movement.

Rosalyn Baxandall, takes a similar but more historical approach, tying origins of mainstream liberal female organizations to early black feminist groups. She posits, that historically, African American women were more feminist than white women. They cared deeply about women's independence and believed that issues like daycare, equal pay, equal work, and equality in relationships was at the heart of women's struggle.[41] She argued that many early black female groups like Mt.Vernon, Third World Women's Alliance and many others started in the early 1960s or earlier served as the archetype for women's liberation movement. Other scholars like Cheryl McMillon take a more spiritual approach to the struggle of Black women. In her analysis, she talked about the ancestral tools of poetry, art, music, and community that allowed Black women to survive slavery, white oppression, patriarchy, and economic exploitation. She argued that the Black female artists used those tools to reclaim the essence of Black womanhood

---

[37] Mike Sell, "Don't Forget the Triple Front!: Some Historical and Representational Dimensions of the Black Arts Movement in Academia," *African American Review 42* (September 22, 2008): 623-640, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/40301258.pdf

[38] Sell, "Don't Forget the Triple Front!: Some Historical and Representational Dimensions of the Black Arts Movement in Academia", 640.

[39] Kay Brown, "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The Founding of 'Where We At,'" *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art 2011*, no. 29 (November 1, 2011): 118–27, https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-1496399

[40] Michelle None Moravec, "Toward a History of Feminism, Art, and Social Movements in the United States," *Frontiers a Journal of Women Studies 33*, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 22, https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.2.0022.

[41] Rosalyn Baxandall, "Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists," *Feminist Studies 27,* no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 225-242, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178460

and empower the entire Black race.[42]McMillion's unique take on the women of the BAM represents voices that have not been celebrated in the same manner as their male counterparts. By saying their names and work, she articulated their importance.

Lastly, other writings on Black female artists of the BAM, take a more analytical approach like Lisa Farrington's book, which takes a deep dive into artistic analysis. Farrington also spoke of other scholars like Lucy Lippard and Linda Nochlin, who analyzed the history of gender chauvinism of Western art society which created a long history of impediments that have hindered women from becoming "great artists."[43] The clichés associated with women in art, reinforced the expectations of women in society. Farrington went on to showcase several visual artists and their art. She explained at length how their art reflected the complexities of their struggle. Black female artists skillfully negotiated the precarious tightrope that linked the parallel movements. Many embraced the intersectionality of their experiences at a time when most African Americans and women were rejecting/ignoring it, which made their work highly politicized, revolutionary, and vital to the history of women's liberation and black rights oppression. My research will add a needed perspective to this growing body of scholarship on black female artists by speaking through their voices. Their perspectives about both movements, challenges, triumphs, motivations and ways in which they protested through art will enrich the current body of academia.

The late, great Nina Simone once said, "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, and musicians. As far as I'm concerned, it's their choice—but I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself." It was a poignant statement that encapsulated the mentality of Black female artists during the 1960s in America. In a world that hindered their basic liberties, they used their creative skills to express their grievances and fight for equality. Through this research project, I will fill a gap in both Black studies and Feminist scholarship. I want to highlight not only the artists' contribution which bridged two pivotal movements but also shaped socio, economic and political atmospheres. By focusing on first person accounts, the artists' thoughts, feelings, and motivation offer another analytical lens to their actions, enriching the field of social movement studies. In the following sections I will elaborate on my subject selection and why I have chosen to focus on biographical content in relation to social movement studies.

---

[42] Kim Cheryl McMillon, "The Women of the Black Arts Movement and the Rise of the Ancestors," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no. 6 (April 1, 2018): 175–85, https://jpanafrican.org/docs/vol11no6/final-Kim-21-McMillon.pdf

[43] Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-347.

1.4 Sources

In order to complete this research, a variety of biographical primary sources were analyzed. The primary sources of my thesis are first person accounts of black female art and activism contextualized in autobiographies and biographical material such as interviews, short films, documentaries, and oral histories. Why use first person accounts when studying protest movements? Like scholars Doherty and Hayes, I see the value in biographical material in connection with protest tactics. Studying biographical material can help explain decisive but unplanned actions taken during movements or how audience reception influences action choice or why some demonstrations turn violent, and others do not—even where contextual conditions and actors are seemingly similar.[44] Close analysis of biographies provides extra insight or even an explanation for people's specific actions adding another layer to social movement phenomenons.

The mixture of various artistic genres and media will assemble a comprehensive view of their unique forms of creative expression. While there are many examples of notable women who contributed to the movement, I needed to make specific choices in order to fit within the parameters of my research. Starting from a corpus of around 20 artists I then narrowed that down further based on specific criteria: they are female artists of minority descent; they participated in the Black Arts movement anywhere from 1960s-80s in some capacity whether through art, advocation for liberation (vocal or physical) and they had accessible autobiographical material. I also wanted a mixture of different artistry, so I try to represent 2-3 artists from each discipline: visual, musical, and literary. As a result, my research will focus on the artistic activism of visual artists: Faith Ringgold, Dindga McCannon & Betye Saar, musical: Nina Simone, literary: Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis & Audre Lorde.

In bringing the stories side by side, I will highlight the various intersectional experiences, factors, and struggles that brought them closer to self-determination, empowerment, and defense of being an artist, activist, and black woman worthy of recognition. As mentioned previously, scholarship on any form of Black studies tend to hold a certain amount of bias. As an artist and mixed-race woman, myself, I feel a certain personal connection to the material and its subjects and as a result could fall into the trap of hagiography. Balancing out the material with critical views of the artists and sticking as close to their voices as possible, will help to alleviate bias. Other scholars also tend to depict the movement in a positive light and shy away from criticism of its leaders and tactics. This is due in part to criticism that follows any research contrary to the dominant narrative as well as unresolved racial dilemmas that persist in many parts of the world today.[45] I will be cognizant of represented biases and avoid heavy editorializing and undue reverence. I will present the unaltered views of the artists as it pertains to their art, activism, and the broader social movements.

[44] Doherty and Hayes, "Tactics," 5.
[45] Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," 840.

1.5 Methodology

I employed a qualitative thematic biographical approach to analyze my source material. I collected sources from various archival collections, magazines, books, and scholarly databases. The focus of my work will be the artistic activism from the artist's experience. I want to contribute to the current discourse by highlighting the artists' experiences and motivations. To do this I will need to take a collective biographical approach. A method that has gained popularity in recent years, collective biographies focus on several individuals with overlapping features. Interest lies more on how the group impacted certain things—organizations, institutions, systems—rather than how engagement with these things affected the individuals.[46] This research can be enhanced by a biographical approach, as it will incorporate personal perspectives onto the past. It will also be helpful in researching more personal themes such as sexuality. Personal perspectives are also apart of answering a range of questions from individual motivations and experiences to the complex nature of broader social movements.[47] Despite some historians' criticism, collective biographies do not try to privilege personal experience over other forms of knowledge about the past or claims that this method provides more trustworthy evidence. Liz Stanley explained biographical methodology best as a "kaleidoscope": each time you look, you see something rather different, composed certainly of the same elements but in a new configuration.[48] Good collective biographies do not separate individual experiences from the social and political contexts in which they are situated. Any structural framework can not be analyzed without understanding the individuals' actions that they conditioned.

In terms of innovative aspects, this research project aims to fill and bridge a gap in Black activist women/artists scholarship. The scope and depth of writings on Black and Feminist art movements do not pay enough attention to the involvement, intersectionality, and contribution of black women. Although recent years has seen a growth in scholarship, many works still present their activism as a supporting role instead of an independent movement. This research will further dive into their artistic activism and the depth behind their art. This project also seeks to offer a more sociological view of key historical moments such as the Black Arts liberation and Feminist art movements. By using the voices of key actors, we acquire fresh insight into dominant narratives. In order to gain a deeper understanding, it is important to look at social behavior, patterns of relationships, social interactions, and cultural aspects that drive human beings to collective action. It is a fresh way to uncover the lives of those considered marginalized to historical mainstream narratives. Biographical views also make historians consider how to interpret and present lives and take into consideration individuals whose actions may intersect with others, painting a richer tapestry of knowledge. A biographical method is an invaluable way of recovering past experiences, seeing their connection to others, and the ways in which they shaped broader structures in which they live.

One major criticism is that this method lacks precision in the selection process. But that can be combated as long as there is sound rationale for the individuals chosen. I will avoid a "patchwork of individual stories" which can lead to a lack of coherence.[49] As previously described, I selected female artists based on set criteria to avoid the trap of allowing better-represented sources to dominate the narrative. Naturally, some subjects will have more source material than others, so I will use a mixture of

[46] Lucy Faire and Simon Gunn, *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh University Press eBooks, 2016), 1-257.
[47] Faire and Gunn, *Research Methods for History*. 94.
[48] Faire and Gunn, *Research Methods for History*. 96.
[49] Faire and Gunn, *Research Methods for History*. 95.

chronological/thematic approaches as well as selectivity in the examples to ensure that different voices get equal representation in the narrative. As stated earlier, I will stick as closely as possible to the artists' account to avoid bias in interpreting the data. There is also the limitation of applicability to larger groups without generalization. Also, due to the size of material, particular source selection resulted in some sacrificed material which could affect the end results. Lastly, memories are fallible. They are subject to misrepresentation or forgetfulness. To combat this, I cross referenced important anecdotes and quotes within multiple biographical sources to check consistency.

2. Chapter 1: Historical Background of the Black Arts Movement

Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past. —Malcolm X

During the 1960s-1980s, as the various movements gained momentum, artists and political activists called for unique and far-reaching tools to inspire Black culture through art and political consciousness. This organized front later developed into the Black Arts movement (BAM). Artists and activists alike used their art as a means of communicating their issues, needs, social inequality, forms of empowerment and inalienable rights as American citizens. Dubbed the "spiritual leader" of the Black Power movement, the Black Arts movement deeply affected how African American literature, music, art, culture, identity, and politics were understood both within and outside the African American community. The need for attention in the sociopolitical and cultural realms of the black community was not a new phenomenon of the 1960s. The need to define themselves, demand recognition and obtain true equality stemmed from the ancestral examples for the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movements. Their predecessors were inspired and also aspired to alter the conditions of African Americans in the United States.

2.1 Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement

Harlem Renaissance

A pivotal movement in African American history, the Harlem Renaissance began on the heels of WWI. Black soldiers who fought for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," were not afforded the same freedoms they gave their lives for. Upon their return they were met with widespread discrimination, horrific lynchings, and institutionalized segregation. It was in this social climate that the Harlem Renaissance was born. In a ten-year span, from the 1920s-1930s, this self-conscious literary movement affected African American culture and intellectual life from the end of World War I to the Great Depression.[50] Its impact redefined black music, theater and the visual arts. The movement birthed the term "The New Negro" which became synonymous with a more militant/radical/political consciousness and pride. Fueled by the growing black population from the Great Migration, it highlighted the urbanization of the black community, growing racial tensions like those seen in the 1919 race riots, and the ideology put forth by intellectuals like W.E.B DuBois and organizations like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Much like the Black Arts Movement, the Harlem Renaissance aimed to end the misconceptions about Black identity while developing self-awareness and a right to self-expression.

While considered a self-conscious movement, the Harlem Renaissance lacked a cohesive ideological and aesthetic center.[51] It was viewed more like a community of writers, poets, critics, artists, patrons, and publishers, who orbited around central intellectuals and organizations. It was a period of artistic explosion which transformed art into a vehicle of expression to bring the realities of the black community in a segregated America to light. Named after the borough in New York City, Harlem became the cultural epicenter where middle class Black people showcased their talents and culture to white and mixed audiences in various venues. Seasoned intellectuals of the movement simultaneously tried to define it, advocate for it, and criticize it, while serving as a liaison between writers and the white patrons and publishers who dominated

[50] Cary D. Wintz, *Black Writers Interpret the Harlem Renaissance,* (Routledge eBooks, 2020), 1-3.
[51] Wintz, *Black Writers Interpret the Harlem Renaissance*, 3.

the American literary scene in the 1920s.[52] The racially mixed involvement of the movement was one of the major differences (and future criticisms) from its successor in the 1960s. Haki Madhubuti (previously Don Lee) wrote in 1971, that the movement of the 20's was of minimal influence and virtually went unnoticed by the majority of black people in the country.[53] Artists of the Black Arts movement believed one of the main reasons behind the short life of the renaissance was that no black people other than the artists were involved. Other reasons for its decline were that no lasting institutions were established, strict adherence to a dominant aesthetic ostracized some artists, and a heavy reliance on white patronage. The movement's disconnect from the African American population at large and ideology would set the framework for the Black Arts movement to build on.

While the parameters of the movement are hard to delineate, there were many influential actors that contributed to the foundation of the movement. Dr. Alain Locke, a professor at Howard University, coined the term "New Negro" in a pivotal essay that laid the groundwork for an anthology which became the signal text of the movement. Charles S. Johnson, the editor of "Opportunity" magazine for the National Urban League and Jessie Fauset the editor of "Crisis" magazine for the NAACP, were instrumental in publishing vital works that propelled the movement forward. Notable artists emerged during this time were Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer and many others published works that addressed issues of the conditions of the Black community).[54] They also shared their inspirations to create art for their people to see themselves and understand the conditions they endured as historic repercussions of slavery.

As issues of race, political and social justice took center stage, different ideological paths took root. Jamaican political activist, Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement was a key part of black nationalism and emphasized African descension as the key to self-determination and later independence. While others like intellectual and activist, W.E.B. DuBois preached social justice and higher education as the means to equality.[55] These ideological backdrops served as new approaches to combat oppressive conditions implemented by white idealism. While the movement had a significant impact socially and politically in the African American community, the minimal scope of the movement led to its steady decline by the 1930s. Factors such as the Great Depression, lack of funding and little interest in artists' work outside of the core community, led to the deterioration of the movement's artistic contributions.[56] But the legacy lived on, with the spirit finding its way thirty years later in "the New Harlem Renaissance" what came to be known as the Black Arts Movement.

Civil Rights Movement

---

[52] Wintz, *Black Writers Interpret the Harlem Renaissance*, 5.
[53] Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 1-379.
[54] Wintz, *Black Writers Interpret the Harlem Renaissance*, 8.
[55] Abney Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s" (University of South Florida, 2014), 1-113, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6432&context=etd.
[56] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s," 22.

As the United States became a powder keg of racial, economic, and social tensions, the need for widespread action grew. The Civil Rights era of the 1950s-60s opened new doors to fight discrimination and segregation. The movement's diverse protest tools, key figures and pivotal moments led to some of the most important judicial reforms in American history which altered the status of African Americans and other minorities in society. The era dealt with multiple issues of racial discrimination, poverty, civil rights, human rights, and opposition to war.[57] The movement aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination in all aspects of life, including education, housing, employment, and public law. The struggle for social justice aimed at achieving equality to provide the same rights and opportunities for African Americans. Beginning since the end of Reconstruction in 1870, African Americans have fought legal, social, and political discrimination. They were subjected to the legal oppression of the black codes, The Compromise of 1877, and the landmark case of *Plessy vs Ferguson* in 1896, which cemented "separate but equal' dooming Black Americans to second class citizenship with minimal opportunities.[58] The turn of the century brought prominent thinkers and activists like W.E.B. Dubois, who developed the notion of the "black consciousness," instilling self-determination and a readiness to fight for social and economic equality. Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) became the face of racial equality. World War II saw the desegregation of defense-related industries, opening the job market for hundreds of thousands of Black Americans. Despite endless accomplishments by Black Americans in service to their country, post WWII, highlighted the lack of recognition of their contributions.

The Civil Rights movement brought attention to the mistreatment of Black Americans through the social injustices of Jim Crow segregation. Various groups and leaders demanded integration and equality. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, James Farmer, and others organized with groups like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).[59] These leaders and groups spoke on behalf of the black population that faced daily social and political oppression. They sparked a burst of organized boycotts, marches, sit-ins, rallies, and protests that defined the era. Many walked nonviolent paths to endorse integration in all public spaces as well as legal opportunities such as the right to vote. The 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* court case, the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the 1965 *Voting Rights Act*, were pivotal factors that changed legal segregation and laws preventing Black citizens from voting.[60] Despite the judicial landmarks, the unfair practices against the Black community did not cease. Widespread social unrest, violence and chaos persisted.

The years of 1965-1968 saw a surge of urban violence in the form of riots and rebellions in over 120 U.S. cities.[61] This led to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967 to issue Executive

---

[57] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s," 23.
[58] Salmond, "'The Long and Short of It': Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," 57.
[59] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s," 23.
[60] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s," 24.
[61] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* 1.

Order 11365 that established a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the "racial disorders" that have taken hold of the nation.[62] Their findings culminated in the 1968 Kerner Report. The 425-page document opened with a warning about the current course of the nation: "Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." It further explained that poverty, prejudice, segregation, discrimination, and feelings of powerlessness were the underlying causes of the "civil disorders." The commission believed the solution was the elimination of barriers to jobs, quality eduction, and affordable housing as well as integration of outlying metropolitan areas.[63] The goal for the commission was to "create a single society with a single American identity" making good on the promise of American democracy to all citizens. Sadly, that recommendation of a unified America did not happen, which set the backdrop for the emergence of Black Power. The summer of 1966 saw the public proclamation of "Black Power!" A new breed of activists came on to the scene feeding African Americans hunger for righteous militancy and collective self-determination.[64] Prominent leaders Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael preached Black cultural nationalism as the path toward liberation. They challenged the notion that non-violence was the only viable path to progressive change. Many young activists began to rethink the traditional tactics and visions of the black freedom struggle. Inspired by Malcolm X's racial cultural rhetoric, activist began to call for racial solidarity and black pride, independent black leadership, and freedom from white authority.[65] These militant and self-defining ideologies became the base of the Black Arts Liberation movement.

2.2 The Black Arts Liberation Movement

The Black Arts movement (BAM) can be defined as a union of art and cultural politics. Unlike its cultural predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance which involved mostly of upper middle class Black artists, the BAM supported the middle class and low-income Black communities. The merger of culture and politics re-conceptualized the revolution on their own terms, breathing new life into the movement's goal for liberation. The assassinations of leaders Malcolm X and MLK was a wake-up call for Black Americans to organize their efforts in a distinct way. Their environment was changing and so too did their strategic tools for rebellion. Unlike the cultural movement of the 1920s, which dealt with the assimilation of Black people in public spaces under the conditions that white people permitted, participants of BAM wanted to break the cycle of covert oppression. The grassroots movement employed varied protests tactics creating a new platform for creative expression of their art and activism. The men and women of the BAM chose to achieve pride in Black cultural identity and enforce militant defense in the face of heighten racial oppression to fight against mounting injustices.

Although the exact origins of the cultural movement are contested, the closest thing to a declarative independence is the founding of the Harlem-based Black Arts Repertory Theater and school (BARTS) in 1965 by American writer, Amiri Baraka (previously known as LeRoi

---

[62] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* 2.
[63] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 2.
[64] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 3.
[65] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 4.

Jones).[66]Baraka, along with other black artists living in New York, were motivated following the assassination of Malcolm X a few months earlier. It was intended to serve as the fulfillment of Malcolm X's dream for a black cultural center in Harlem. It acted as the nexus between cultural identity, politics, and the arts. The center held sponsored classes in the arts, lectures in politics, philosophy, and history, as well as performances of poetry music and plays.[67] The center attracted a new generation of activists. People like Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, and others joined the cause of charting out a new black tradition. They were later joined by older black artists and intellectuals like Langston Hughes, Margaret walker, Elizabeth Catlett, Dudley Randall and more, to support and educate the new black radicalism as a chance to renew the social transformation that was ruptured by the Cold War.[68] It was also a time of institutional revitalization. They continued to build or reshape much of the institutional infrastructure that helped nurture the movement. Groups like Ebony magazine, Randall's Broadside Press, Negro Digest, Organization for Black American Culture (OBAC) supported the growth of BAM.[69] Despite the varied political leanings of the members, all supported black self-determination, community empowerment, and the development of black-run and black-oriented politicial and cultural institutions. A new sense of the movement was taking hold as people saw themselves part of a broader movement. The term "Black Arts" began to circulate, along with a new aesthetic.

Poet, essayist, and activist, Larry Neal saw the BAM as the cultural wing of black nationhood. He along with others, saw the arts as a platform to craft and spread ideals that would enable black people to envision and force change. He did not believe that arts alone were capable of liberating black people but their ability to provide vision made it a necessary component of social revolution.[70] In the 1969 *Ebony* manifesto, Neal proclaimed, "In short, a revolution without a culture would destroy the very thing that now unites us; the very thing we are trying to save along with our lives." He believed that art was a reflection of culture. It should show black realities, affirm black culture, speak to the black masses, and align itself with iteration struggles throughout the world.[71] There was a call for an aesthetic to act as a bold re-envisioning of life as art, dedicated to the advancement of black people. Neal encouraged artistic activists to shift from creating "protest" art—which he considered art that "screams and masturbates" for a white audience—to creating art that directly addressed black people. Art acted as a platform for change, so it needed to reflect the people, their lives and vision. The artistic engagement defined a new standard of beauty as black. From this mantra of self love emerged the slogan "Black is Beautiful!" To be free one had to love one's blackness. Black self-love was publicly expressed during this period with unprecedented loudness akin to James Brown's proclamation "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!" Or Nina Simone's "To be Young, Gifted and Black". There was an inseparability between ideology and aesthetic. Many revolutionaries thought that "ideology and style are the same thing." Blackness became a way of thinking. Neal was a strong proponent of this course for the movement. "Liberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in more

---

[66] James Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," in *A Companion to African American Literature* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), 302–14.
[67] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 307.
[68] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 306.
[69] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 306.
[70] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* 7.
[71] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 8.

positive terms. For without a change of vision, we are slaves to the oppressors' ideas and values—ideas and values that finally attack the very core of our existence. Therefore, we must see the world in terms of our own realities."[72] This bold stance challenged societal perception and spread awareness of the plight of minority communities. Along with this ideology, the mixing of media and genres was also a defining feature of BAM.

Collaborations between poets, musicians, theorists, dancers, painters, and photographers defined Black Arts. Organizations, institutions, and collectives created spaces where collaborative energy thrived. The 1967 Chicago mural *The Wall of Respect* (fig.1), was a fusion of

Figure 1. Artist collab, *The Wall of Respect,* 1967 (destroyed 1971) Chicago, IL

poetry, music, theater, dance, painting, and photography. It featured over 50 portraits of notable actors in black liberation across all disciplines from sports to music. It quickly became a community gathering spot inspiring poetry readings, musical performances, and political rallies.[73] This example highlighted another characteristic of the movement which was art as "functional." It prioritized a process involving the community of artists and audience over the fetishization of of production.[74] Art was more than just art. It was a tool of protest, a platform for education, and a vehicle of liberation.

The openness of collaboration and work did not always lead to openness in ideology. Art was sometimes used to express singular visions of blackness. Sexism and homophobia underlined Black nationalism which shaped the movement. Writers like Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, and Michele Wallace often articulated black women's indignation. They drew attention to the ironic oppression within the movement that minimized female artists' contributions and undermined the overall goals of black liberation. Internal conflicts were not

[72] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 8.
[73] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* 12.
[74] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 304.

just centered around sexism but also political affiliations which led to a split within the movement. Baraka embraced a more class-based politics "third world Marxism" while Madhubuti advanced a nationalist vision based on race with skepticism towards cross-racial alliances. Others like Stokely Carmichael tried to bridge the two positions, advocating for a Pan-Africanist Afrocentric Marxism.[75] These rifts in tandem with external factors such as the Reagan administration's abolishment of government funding for the arts led to the slow decline of the movement by the mid-1970s. While there was a noticeable decline of the radical community-based art and aesthetics associated with BAM, such art did not disappear but branched off into different avenues.[76]

The mid-1970s and early 80s saw the rise of prominent black women writers and artists. Notable writers like Shange, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison responded to the Black Arts and Black Power movements seeking to reject, reclaim or revise those movements for the empowerment and recognition of black women.[77] Artists expressed themselves in different ways. Some sought to stay within the boundaries of the movement while responding to feminist upsurge. Others posited a more critical feminist reading of BAM in which the problems are not solvable within the Black Arts tradition or community. While many honored a large part of the movement's ideology while extending the boundaries of the movement to include explicitly feminist interests and poetics.[78] While many did not outrightly identify as "feminists" (to avoid the white centric mainstream association) their art engaged with feminist/womanist attitudes, challenging the widespread Black Arts vision of a normative heterosexual and androcentric ideal of a liberated black nation. Artists like Shange and Walker proclaimed themselves daughters of BAM, while criticizing the lack of space for black women. Works like Walker's *the Color Purple* and Shange's *For the Colored Girls*…. upheld the spirit of BAM: a unified and internationalist black community in which people of all backgrounds come together in a sort of utopia, while simultaneously criticizing the contradictory sentiments emphasizing sexism and homophobia. Straddling the line between the Black Power and Women's liberation movements, black female artists exposed close resemblances in terms of tactics, traits, tendencies, and goals. The themes they explored in their art exemplified the constraints of societal norms, the multi-faceted discrimination they faced, and the everyday lives they led. The following chapter will dive deeper into their thematic artistry.

3. Chapter 2: Artistic themes Explored

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies forever and eaten alive. — Audre Lorde

What themes did Black female artists explore in their work that challenged and/or reinterpreted the social norms of the time? Why did they feel the need to do this? Well, as the civil rights movement pushed black cultural identity, women found their contribution to cultural formation overlooked by the male dominated voices who chose to not understand the significance of feminist

[75] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 310.
[76] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 311.
[77] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 311.
[78] Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement," 311.

perspectives in the arts. Simultaneously, the racism experienced from mainstream white feminists, further added to their marginalized voices. Black female artists did not see their own reality reflected in art. This mirrored the lack of attention paid to their struggles and needs in the broader push for liberation. As a result, there was a strong desire to explore the viability of partnering black and feminist aesthetics in the pursuit of true representation. Through literature, music, drama, and visual arts, many artists addressed themes relevant to their lives. In my analysis, I identified some key themes that the artists explored. They reinterpreted notions of sexuality, racism, sexism, Afro culture identity, female representation, notions of black beauty, gender roles and the morphism of supportive positions to active ones. These representations in their work morphed their art into a new type of action repertoire. They used a unique tool at their disposal, deployed it in a variety of ways, and in a variety of spaces to reach a wider audience. By inviting the viewer to look at their struggles through their eyes, they added another layer to the broader social movements challenging the way the movements' aims and goals were perceived.

The themes of sexuality, racism, sexism, Afro cultural identity, female representation, black beauty, and gender roles are masked by the bigger notion of a "willingness to choose." Many artists found themselves straddling the line between feminist ideology and black nationalism. While many artists recognized the reality of their intersectional identity, many "chose" not to support feminist perspectives. Societal pressures dictated that Afro-American women solely align with Black liberation. However, due to the endemic patriarchal orientation of the movement, which sidelined women into supportive roles, those who chose racial liberation over gender liberation were compelled to accept their own marginalization. Mainstream social movement rhetoric presented racial and gender oppression as mutually exclusive, despite many integrated features of both the feminist and black liberation movements as revealed in Lisa Collins's work. This created an environment in which aspects of black women's experiences were ignored or wrongfully merged with other identities. Author and BAM critic, Michele Wallace spoke to the pressure of choice that dominated most women's lives. "It seems that this country is not willing to accept the two together (being black and a woman). Somehow it discredits one or the other…It's almost as if you're being constantly forced to make that decision."[79] The external and internal pressure to align with gender or racial liberation transformed choice into an illusion and forced black women's identity into a box. This shaped the motivations behind the artists' decisions, influencing the choices they made in their artistic actions; whether to pick one aspect or go against societal expectations and speak to multi-faceted concepts. I will further discuss the various themes these artists explored in the context of how they positioned themselves as artists. Thus, the following chapter is divided into their respective disciplines: visual arts, music, and literature.

Visual Artists

Despite the prevailing mono-centric emphasis of some artists' work, others chose to speak to the true nature of their intersecting identity, like mixed media artist Dindga McCannon. In her oral history interview, McCannon felt that traditional roles needed to be challenged. "Yeah, well they need to be challenged, the idea of what a woman can do definitely needed to be challenged because we can do anything. But back then, no, you had a little box that you had to fit in and if you didn't fit into that box then society made trouble for you."[80] This quote portrays McCannon's need to transverse barriers to reflect women's reality in the face of societal pressures. Although she self-identified as an African artist, a lot of her work during the 70s demonstrated an Afrofemcentric agenda.[81] A lot of her work displayed nuanced aesthetics touching upon both

[79] Karen Boorstein, "Beyond Black Macho: An Interview With Michele Wallace," *Black American Literature Forum 18*, no. 4 (January 1, 1984): 163, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904294.
[80] Philip Glahn, "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon," *Bomb Magazine*, August 3, 2020, https://HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/ORAL-HISTORY-PROJECT/.
[81] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists,* 169.

feminist and black nationalistic ideals. Her works also reinterpreted gender roles, transforming supportive roles into active dominant figures, like her work *Revolutionary Sister (*1971) (fig.2.1). It showcases a woman reverently covered in the African colors, clad in military attire, hands unapologetically on her hips, with a spiked crown atop her head. It acted as a call to arms with a woman front and center. She rallies the viewer to support racial liberation while projecting her dominant femininity. She continues to blur the lines between gender, race, and sexuality in her erogenous painting, *Morning After (*1973) (fig.2.2). It displays two seemingly androgynous figures laying in sensual relaxation, offering a portrayal of gender fluidity and sexual freedom.

Figure 2.2 Dindga McCannon, *Morning After*, 1973 linocut

Figure 2.1 Dindga McCannon, *Revolutionary Sister*, 1974 assemblage

Morning After and *Revolutionary Sister* are true representations of interconnected themes. They present a merging of multiple concepts. She challenges viewers to perceive life beyond set social boundaries. Her pieces reinterpret strict notions of sexuality, set racial boundaries and demure ideals of femininity. McCannon's art never strictly expresses one notion or another but a culmination of multiple themes highlighting the intersectional aspect of life. While her work takes on a predominantly Afrocentric aesthetic, much of her work also reveals her womanist mindset. Her work dared to repudiate the subordination of her personal interests to those of either movement group; while at the same time, the movement's identities shaped her artistic choices.

Other artists challenged the perception of female representation in art. Women like painter and author, Faith Ringgold, continued to push the boundaries of social ideology surrounding the way women were represented in art. She felt the only way to rectify their absence and misrepresentation from history is to write it themselves. The clichés of women associated with representations in Western art, reinforced the expectations of women in society. Women throughout western artistic history have either been represented through a male voyeuristic gaze, malevolent or dangerous.[82] Many forward-thinking artists understood that those stereotypes needed to be challenged and revised in order to achieve social equality. Author and daughter of

[82] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists,* 147.

Ringgold, Michele Wallace, has constantly sought to link the dilemmas that black artists faced to the way black art is viewed and represented.

> *The problem today is one of representation. Since blacks had been systematically deprived of the continuity of their own African culture through slavery, racism, and segregation but also by assimilation, which denied them the knowledge of their history of struggle and memory of cultural practices…blacks had taken on the culture and values of whites in regard to sexuality and gender. This did more than make it inevitable that black men would be sexist or misogynistic; it also made inevitable black women's completely dysfunctional self-hatred.*[83]

Wallace makes a poignant statement that the system created by a white supremacist patriarchy is not solely maintained by whites alone. It is also maintained by all the rest of the black community who internalize and enforce the values of the regime. Wallace claimed that black people must be held accountable when they do not take a critical look at the revolutionary changed needed to change the system.[84] A crucial step in changing toxic perception, is to view how representation can distort and perpetuate misguided notions. Art critic, author and artist, Bell Hooks also describes the need for proper artistic representation in the black community. "Representation is a crucial location of struggle-for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind."[85] If black children grew up with art, they would learn the importance of it. If artistic institutions were truly inclusive, encouraging and cultivating the artistic culture throughout the black community, then the collective Black experience of art would be transformed.

Ringgold understood the need for greater representation, not only for African Americans but also for women. In her autobiography, she explained her motivation behind her gynocentric art. "I became a feminist because I wanted to help my daughters, other women and myself aspire to something more than just a place behind a good man."[86] She wanted to educate and inspire people to think outside of set expectations of what it means to be a woman, mirroring her aspirations for liberation. While many artists felt that either racial or gender issues should take precedence, Ringgold felt there was no distinction. She always felt that she "had two issues, the African Americans and the women."[87] Her art has often reflected the tug-of-war between black liberation and the politics of feminism. Her 1973 *Women's Liberation Talking Mask* (fig.3.1) is an example of her reshaped feminine aesthetic.

---

[83] Boorstein, "Beyond Black Macho: An Interview With Michele Wallace," 17.
[84] Bell Hooks, *Art on My Mind* (The New Press, 1995), 1-213.
[85] Hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 3.
[86] Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Bulfinch Press,1995), 1-285.
[87] PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America: Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion," July 15, 2011, video, 1:10:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhD-UydTgZw.

Figure 3.1 Faith Ringgold, *Women's Liberation Talking Mask* 1973 mixed media

The mixed-media assemblage brings light to her enthusiasm for African sourced material and highlights her awareness of the relevance of African aesthetic in the BAM. But on the other hand, the piece shows her support of women's right. The anatomical emphasis embodies African matriarch and goddess talismans, while the directional nose points to an open mouth, signaling a call to arms for women to make their voices heard.[88] Another piece that challenges the idea of what women and girls can do is her *Women on a Bridge* series (fig 3.2). It was her first story quilt she created in reaction to the publication refusal of her children's book *Tar Beach*. The series depicts girls doing invigorating and freeing activities like flying and dreaming. In an extensive interview, Ringgold speaks to the tenuous nature of women's liberation through this series. "It's a kind of freedom that women have been denied and will be denied if they are not on the case. It's not as if you get your freedom and then you have it forever, you have to stay on it because it can roll backwards as well…but I realized that women have this inner ability to feel freer than they actually are and they have to have it because you have to give yourself something."[89] Liberation is never a singular event; it is a long process that takes endurance and the willingness to continue. Ringgold knew the second women become complacent in their roles; they would not be invited for a "seat at the table" with men. It was the hinderances in life because of her gender that motivated her to make art that reached women on a personal level. Her artistry was meant to open people's eyes to different perceptions of women and what they are capable of.

[88] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists,* 151.
[89] PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America: Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion," 38:08.

Figure 3.2 Faith Ringgold, *Women on a Bridge Series #1, Tar Beach* 1988 acrylic, quilted fabric, ink, thread

Ringgold also dove into more practical art, using posters and murals to create "art for the people." Her 1971 piece *Woman Freedom Now*, was her first political poster that endorsed feminism within the context of black liberation, a combination that was rarely seen due to the societal exclusivity of the two movements. The poster's color and geometric theme (Bakuba chevron from the Kongo) show the artist's solidarity with the Black power movement while its text salutes the women's movement. It is simultaneously a piece of art, and a political billboard meant to spread awareness. Lastly, as a means of bringing art into a public space, Ringgold employed the use of murals throughout her career. One of her most notable was the one she did for an even more disenfranchised group, women in prison. She wanted to show that women have an ability to adapt, cope and flourish despite their oppressive confines. Her appropriately titled piece, *For the Women's House* (1971) (fig.3.3), was done on the side of the Women's House of Detention on Riker's Island in New York. After speaking with several of the inmates, Ringgold wanted to create a mural that spoke to their desires, namely a life and all its possibilities outside of prison. Ringgold said she wanted a mural that represented "justice, freedom, a 'groovy' peace, a long road leading out of here, the rehabilitation of all prisoners, [and] all races of people holding hands."[90]

[90] PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America: Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion," 51:17.

Figure 3.3 Faith Ringgold, *For the Women's House* 1971 oil on canvas

The immense mural broadened women's images of themselves by showing women in roles that had not been traditionally theirs and displayed the universality of a painting that crosses the lines of age, race, and class.[91] These selected works are just a small glimpse into the range of artistic actions Ringgold used to draw attention to the versatile roles of women and their complicated status in society which hindered their potential. Much like Sojourner Truth and Shirley Chisholm, Ringgold believed that of her two "handicaps," she experienced more obstacles as a woman than as a black person. Her art and the themes she explored, especially female representation, reflected that belief and shared experience with others.

Bringing racism to the forefront of her art, mixed media artist, Betye Saar, pushed the envelope of how art represented black cultural identity. She was drawn to black memorabilia and began collecting trinkets, figurines and advertisements left over from the Jim Crow era. Most of the items Saar collected were produced in America, Asia, and Europe from the 1880s-1950s and presented a derogatory image of African Americans. Exaggerated racial features, not only helped "prove" African Americans were different but also inferior.[92] Saar recalls the reason why she got into found object art, "I started collecting derogatory objects of black people because I thought how sad it is that black people never had a chance to see each other except in derogatory images."[93] Saar not only collected these outdated relics but transformed them to reflect the true nature of black cultural identity and the impediments surrounding it. She deconstructed the ubiquitous African American stereotype of the Mammy archetype in her assemblage work *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) (fig.4). Utilizing the face of Aunt Jemima co-opted from the well-known pancake brand, it was imposed on a similar backdrop. Her big red lips, bulging eyes and overtly

[91] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, 152.
[92] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists,* 164.
[93] Betye Saar, "A Conversation with Betye Saar and Alison Saar," interview by Lauren Haynes, *Soul of a Nation Symposium*, March 12, 2018, video, 30:21, https://youtu.be/LvL9Es3Pp_I?si=Bu8ynJiqKt8C8aVW.

voluptuous figure are evidence of the demeaning exaggerated features that dominated these objects. Jemima is clad in a traditional bandana and apron upon which another smaller Mammy is featured holding a small crying baby. Obscuring the smaller Jemima is a large black fist in solidarity with black power. The portrayal of the crying baby is unconventional

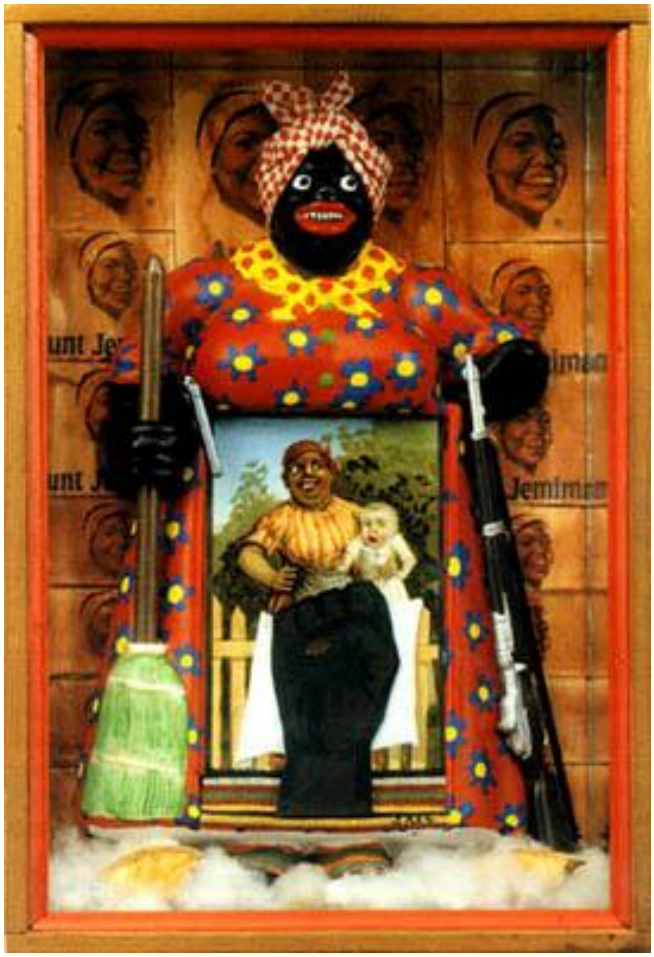

Figure 4 Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* 1972 mixed media

to the traditional view of Mammy as a caregiver to white children.[94] This disturbing representation is a nod to the rebellious nature of the figure. The final piece to note is the broom held in one hand showing her subservience and a rifle in the other showing her lethal energy. Art historians have deemed this piece "psychologically as well as politically explosive."[95] Saar herself wanted to transform her from a willing servant to a woman participating in her own liberation. In an interview panel, Saar spoke to the inspiration behind this provocative image.

It originally started out of the rage at the murder of MLK…I didn't have a hero, but I had a shero and that shero was Aunt Jemima. I wanted to make my shero a warrior and Jemima became that warrior.[96]

[94] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists,* 164.
[95] Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists,* 165.
[96] Saar, "A Conversation with Betye Saar and Alison Saar," 10:03.

She wanted to show that the benevolent figure was gone, and an angry fighting machine had taken her place. Her work challenged typical black female roles. Saar's reinterpretation of a detrimental caricature revealed a woman that was not to be laughed at but respected for her contributions. She reified Aunt Jemima from a complacent victim to a commanding presence ready to fight for her freedom reflecting the sentiment shared by many women during the movements era.

Musical

Dubbed the High Priestess of Soul, Nina Simone was the musical face of the black civil rights movement. She considered herself strictly aligned with black liberation. For Simone, the black struggle was more important. However, like any woman, she was not immune to the unreachable ideals set forth by dominant male voices of the movement. Her troubled relationships with men brought her face to face with their warped ideals of black beauty. In her autobiography, she said that because of men, much of her life was filled with insecurity and doubt. "I'd look in the mirror and see two faces, knowing that on the one hand I loved being black and being a woman, and that on the other, it was my color and sex which had fucked me up in the first place."[97] Her quote reveals the internal struggle many black women faced during the liberation movement. There was a constant battle to support a movement that was also molding them into symbolic figureheads. Some male writers and visual artists in BAM attempted to subvert white power by uplifting their own aesthetic vision. The male gaze of some Black Arts poets and photographers objectified black women as the embodiments of black beauty.[98] The act of putting them on a pedestal, rendered many black women "unworthy" to the cause when they did not meet a certain standard of nationalistic idealism. While Simone mainly focused on the plight of the African American people, she also needed to address the specific oppression women experienced. Merging multiple themes, Simone wrote a song that told of the complex stereotypes and residual effects slavery had on black women. In 1966, she wrote the song *Four Women*). In her autobiography, she reveals the general dissatisfaction felt with men in her life and how much women's self image is determined by others which inspired her to write the song.

> *The women in the song are black, but their skin tones range form light to dark and their ideas of beauty and their own importance are deeply influenced by that. All the song did was to tell what entered the minds of most black women in America when they thought about themselves; their complexions, their hair—straight, kinky, natural, which? —and what other women thought of them. Black women didn't know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn't control and until they had the confidence to define themselves, they'd be stuck in the same mess forever—that was the point the song made.*[99]

The song is a compelling character study that reveals the complicated dynamics between men and women. Like many black female artists at the time, Simone did not want to expose the gender rift because it would take away from black liberation. "It wasn't something I sang about a lot because the black struggle was my priority, but I knew if I tried, I could compose a love song to take the scab off the terrible sore to do with the relationship between black men and women."[100] The lyrics of the song provide thought provoking commentary on the residual effects of slavery, stereotyped roles, and the oppressive standards of Eurocentric beauty.

---

[97] Nina Simone and Stephen F. Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (Da Capo Press, 1991), 1-181.

[98] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 154.

[99] Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 117.

[100] Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 117.

https://open.spotify.com/track/7urjzeGBtfHdwWmfYJjdAp?si=UygJeJQwQsyqP35bvLUvEA

My skin is black, my arms are long
My hair is woolly, my back is strong
Strong enough to take the pain, inflicted again and again
What do they call me? My name is Aunt Sarah

My skin is yellow, my hair is long
Between two worlds I do belong
But my father was rich and white
He forced my mother late one night
And what do they call me?
My name is Saffronia, my name is Saffronia

My skin is tan, my hair fine
My hips invite you, my mouth like wine
Whose little girl am I? Anyone who has money to buy
What do they call me? My name is Sweet Thing
My name is Sweet Thing

My skin is brown, my manner is tough
I'll kill the first mother I see, my life has been rough
I'm awfully bitter these days, because my parents were slaves
What do they call me? My name is Peaches![101]

Drawing parallels with the four young girls who were murdered in the 16th street Baptist Church bombing in 1963, the song is a character study of four distinct women. In 4-5 lines per verse, she gave the background and disposition of each woman. Aunt Sarah is the maternal figure, embodying the strong and nurturing aspects. Saffronia is the tragic mulatto, who faces discrimination and prejudice due to her lighter skin. Sweet Thing is the sexualized object, who is subjected to objectification and exploitation. Finally, we are introduced to Peaches, the angry and militant figure, who is the voice of resistance against oppression.

A true musical orator, Simone strung the dynamic lives of these women together. Her song created a tapestry of lives shaped not only by the impact of racial history but present societal stereotypes and ideology. Her song reflects racist legacies and ideas of beauty presented in constructed archetypes that shaped a lot of the views surrounding black women. The matriarch, the jezebel, and the sapphire (or angry black woman) all projected over exaggerated imagery that was detrimental to black women. Simone's song became a relatable reference speaking to other black women who have suffered at the toxic representation surrounding what it means to be a "true" black woman.

Literary

A "Jill of all trades," poet, playwright, dancer, artist, author, and activist Ntozake Shange, also spoke to the importance of proper representation for black women. She used a variety of expressive forms to create a realistic space in which women could portray their real perspectives. Shange believed in creating a language all her own that spoke to women specifically. Her

[101] Simone, Nina. *Four Women*. Wild is the Wild album. Philips Records, Hal Mooney, 1966. https://open.spotify.com/track/7urjzeGBtfHdwWmfYJjdAp?si=UygJeJQwQsyqP35bvLUvEA.

versatility in the arts allowed her to channel a range of emotions that revealed the Black female psyche. The habit of diminishment or neglect to acknowledge Black female artistry had forced women to work within the established androcentric Black aesthetic but Shange believed it was not enough. In a 1979 interview, Shange thought that black women needed to establish an aesthetic that reflected the realities of their experiences.

The same rhetoric that is used to establish the Black Aesthetic, we must use to establish a women's aesthetic, which is to say that those parts of reality that are ours, those things about our bodies, the cycles of our lives that have been ignored for centuries in all castes and classes of our people, are to be dealt with now.[102].

Women have particular relationships to the world and people need the linguistic tools to address those experiences. Simply put, Shange believed there was no 'one size fits all' in terms of language or art to express a woman's viewpoint.

One has to speak about things inherently female. And that is my persona. A woman. And she is going to talk the way she understands. Why must I use metaphors because men understand them? This is analogous to what women have been doing all along. Using male-identified symbols and myths to talk about ourselves. That's ridiculous…. if men don't understand it, then they should get more serious about the subject and learn something about women.[103]

Shange, like many of the artists at the time, felt there was no unified Black aesthetic. The BAM put forth rhetoric that helped uplift the Black *male* race. While there were shared aspects of black nationalism for women, it left out nuances that spoke to women's experiences and struggles specifically. Black female artists working of BAM, felt that they needed to challenge and reinterpret the movement's artistic criteria to contribute to liberation in their own way. Shange felt the world revolved around men and there was no real room for women. She started writing because she wanted to hear a voice that resembled her own. One of her most innovative works was a choreopoem she developed and wrote called *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* which began as a poem in 1974 and later expanded to several poems which evolved into a performative piece. A choreopoem is a "theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, dance, and music. It combines these elements distinctively Afro-American heritage to arouse an emotional response in the reader or viewer."[104] The choreopoem is comprised of a series of monologues that expresses the lives of seven Black women who come together to discuss their ambitions, fears, joys, pain, and losses. There is a sense of cohesive narration as the women talk about lost virginity, rape, pregnancy, abortion, and motherhood. Through movement, music and touch, Shange allows the women to comfort each other on their journey through physical and psychological abuse. At the end, they emerge triumphant with independence and self-knowledge.[105] Shange believed that Black people needed their own tools and resources to express themselves and create the lives they wanted for themselves. Passion to give disenfranchised Black women an expressive outlet to write their own history, fueled her work and shaped the Black Art rhetoric. The elaborate poems she wrote detailed the experiences of many Black women in America but also transcended race and gender boundaries to comment on the bigger realm of human existence.

---

[102] Henry Blackwell, "An Interview With Ntozake Shange," *Black American Literature Forum* 13, no. 4 (January 1, 1979): 134-138, https://doi.org/10.2307/3041478.
[103] Blackwell, "An Interview With Ntozake Shange," 136.
[104] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s," 87.
[105] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s," 88.

Relentless political activist and author, Angela Davis was (and still is) a figurehead of radical Black feminism. Her advocacy drew attention to social issues like racism, economic justice, prison reform, poverty, women's liberation (particularly for women of color), black liberation, welfare reform, reproductive freedom, sexual violence, health, childcare, public education, apartheid, peace, and disarmament.[106] Through the power of the pen, she has spoken out for the disenfranchised, demanded change for oppressive systems and rejected androcentric biases. During the late 1960s while working endlessly organizing rallies and opening the L.A. chapter of SNCC (Students for Non-Violence Committee), Davis recalls the widespread chauvinism.

I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists—namely to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness.[107]

Male voices reigned supreme in establishing the notion of Black nationhood, culture, and aesthetic. Men like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Stokely Carmichael, Don Lee and Addison Gayle, used their art, poetry, and music to define the Black Arts Movements militant message. They often used masculine imagery like "the pen, the gun, the penis and the microphone" to create a Black male identity.[108] But this created an androcentric environment which made Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. Women's beliefs, roles and femininity were questioned and answered by everyone except Black women. Davis felt the weight of this atmosphere. She experienced men viewing Black women as a threat to their manhood—especially women, like Davis, who took initiative and worked to become leaders in their own right.

> *Whenever we women were involved in something important, they (men) began to talk about 'women taking over the organization'—calling it a matriarchal coup d'etait. All the myths about Black women surfaced: we were too 'domineering,' we were trying to control everything, including the men—which meant by extension that we wanted to rob them of their manhood. By playing such a leading role in the organization, some of them insisted, we were aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men weak and unable to hold their own…the brothers opposing us leaned heavily on the male supremacist trends which were winding their way through he movement…it had been a voice of the Johnson administration and Daniel Moynihan, who in 1966 had rekindled the theory of the slavery-induced Black matriarch, maintaining that the dominant role of Black women within the family and, by extension, within the community was one of the central causes of the depressed sate of the Black community.*[109]

This ideology was the dominant force behind the Black Arts/Civil movements. Masculine driven characteristics were reinforced by societal misconceptions of the time like the Moynihan report. The 78-page document was published in 1965 to explain the conditions surrounding Negro families in black ghettos. The document determined the problems that ran rampant throughout black communities like crime, delinquency, poverty and so forth were due to Negro family pathology—namely the role of matriarch.[110] The report was a clear illustration of error, manipulation, and misconceptions of the white male perspective. It consecrated the myth with Washington's stamp of approval giving the false content validity. Yet there were no real voices to refute the toxic ideology. Feminist writings were lacking in black female voices. That is why the

---

[106] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire : An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (The New Press, 1995), 1-569

[107] Angela Yvonne Davis, *Angela Davis-an Autobiography* (International Publishers, 1988)1-400.

[108] Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 178.

[109] Davis, *Angela Davis-an Autobiography*, 181.

[110] Henderson, "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s, 34.

work of brilliant voices are important in rewriting the narrative. Notable works like Davis's, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," is a vital example of black feminist discourse which helped redefine stereotypes surrounding black women. It unveiled androcentric biases in American history by revealing a lack of scholarly material focused on the contributions of black women.[111] Davis expresses her shock and rage at the reinforcement of clichés presented in scholarly literature.

They have given credence to grossly distorted categories through which the black woman continues to be perceived…she has been labeled 'aggressive' or 'matriarchal' by white scholars and 'castrating female by [some] blacks. Many have sought to remedy this situation…but we are still confronted with these reified images of ourselves. And for now, we must still assume the responsibility of shattering them.[112]

It is through the artistic expression of these women that other groups of people—white/black men and white women—were made aware of their bias, misconceptions, and exclusion. Only through awareness can others extricate themselves from the destructive myths that reinforce the misrepresentation of black women.

One of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, self-described black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet, Audre Lorde also speaks to the representation of women, drawing parallels with narratives of power and oppression. Speaking in prose as a young child to communicate, Lorde always used poetry to express herself and confront injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Much like Nina Simone, Lorde always felt that she was more restricted as a black person than as a woman, but a lot of her work aligned with concepts that also addressed women's subjugation. In a 1979 interview, Lorde described her views on women which differed from some of the dominant feminine portrayals of the time.

Women ARE robust and total. My power lies very squarely in all the ingredients of Audre Lorde. I am woman, I am black, and I am me…there is no contradiction between softness, surrendering, asserting, bearing, guiding, or directing. Women possess all these attributes. We do not need to exclude any piece of ourselves or our power in order to affirm someone else's view.[113]

Lorde believed in the true representation of women and that should not be sacrificed to fit into someone else's construct. She believed in a connection between power and spirituality which shaped her work and activism to challenge societal definitions. One of her most famous poems, *The Black Unicorn* 1978, presents a forceful and complex exploration of identity limitations and potential.

The black unicorn is greedy.
The black unicorn is impatient.
The black unicorn was mistaken
for a shadow or symbol
and taken
through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury.
It is not on her lap where the horn rests

---

[111] Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire : An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, 199.
[112] Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire : An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, 200.
[113] Audre Lorde, "Audre Lorde Interview," interview by Judy Simmons, *WBAI Late-Night show*, 1979, audio, 2:06:29, https://youtube.com/watch?v=d_-XhFKn-f0&si=gpeQD35L4OYv9-y2

but deep in her moonpit
growing.
The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free.[114]

Through the metaphor of a black unicorn, Lorde paints a defiant and assertive force that challenges societal expectations and seeks liberation. The unicorn rejects both the role of "shadow" or "symbol" and other limitations imposed by oppression. The poem's intense imagery and symbolism reflects the sense of urgency and frustration black women in America were experiencing while navigating oppressive systems. The black unicorn also represents a radical force, embodying resilience and determination, mirroring those who refuse to be defined or constrained by societal norms.

What themes did these black female artists explore in the art that challenged and reinterpreted social norms? The creative vision of these bold artists expressed the need for the issues of Black women to be heard. Their art addressed the themes of sexuality, strict gender roles, morphism of supportive to dominant presence, racism, female representation, ideas of beauty, Afro cultural identity, and sexism. These artists wielded their art as a tool of resistance, speaking out against the forms of oppression they experienced with race, gender, social, economic, and cultural. In the words of Tilly, they used the tools they had at their disposal, art, and made claims against the ones holding the power against them. As Shange pointed out, black female artists did not have their own distinct aesthetic to rely on, so they disputed and reshaped the dominant ideologies of the Black Arts movement to educate others about their lived experiences. The works of these Black women acted as social commentary while serving as cultural reflections in a climate fueled by white Western ideologies and Black male chauvinism. The topics explored in their works challenged misguided notions of black female identity and reinterpreted their roles and value. Larry Neal said that the artist and political activist is one. They are what shape a future reality and that together, they work towards the liberation of black people.[115] That is exactly what these women did. Through the various artistic forms of literature, music, performance, and visual art, they conveyed important messages of change. Change in their community that could only come through political and social means. Their artistic 'call to arms' bound them by a shared interest, spread awareness to others and inspired people to act against discrimination, oppression, and exclusion to create a new vision of the Black community.

4. Chapter 3: Exclusion and Resistance in Artistic and Public Spaces

When somebody says you can't do something, do more of it! That's how you get it done instead of stopping, which is what they want you to do. — Faith Ringgold, 1970

How did Black female artists navigate exclusionary artistic and public spaces in America during the 1960s and 80s? While artistic liberation movements put a spotlight on artists and their work,

[114] Lorde, Interview, 22:46.
[115] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* TDR 12, no. 4 (January 1, 1968): 29–39, https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377.

it also exposed the exclusion of artistic and public spaces. Museums, galleries, art institutions and performance spaces came under attack for the under-representation and discriminatory practices. Black female artists had to fight to get their works shown, distributed, or even published. And all these artists had to defend the content of their work. It was either too political, too feminine, their subjects too black or a mixture of all these elements. Exclusion comes in many different forms, but the result is affirming the superiority of one cultural group over another. Either through exclusion of equal participation in society or by inclusion to a minimal degree, forcing those oppressed individuals to give up their identity or cultural practices. Faith Ringgold made a poignant statement that reflected the sentiment of many artists, "When there is a group for blacks and a group for women, where do I go?"[116] Black female artists embraced their gender and race. They directed their artistic activism to force discriminatory institutions to face the people and art they were excluding. Through exclusion, they found innovative ways of making their voices heard. They sought alternative spaces, used unconventional tactics, and used their art to reclaim spaces and challenged notions of gender, race, sexuality, and history.

4.1 Exclusion in Artistic and Public spaces

In the 1960s, activism from the artistic liberation movements carried over into to institutional spaces. At that time, museums and galleries dominated the visual art world. Scholar Bridget Cooks rightly stated, "museums sit at the intersection of power and the history of cultural forms."[117] They acted as gate keepers to artistic success contrary to what they claimed themselves to be, which was a 'neutral' space for artistic expression. Museums like the Whitney in New York had mission statements that reflected commitments to diversity and inclusion, but there is a "very weak association" between a collection's mission and diversity.[118] The founding of many prominent museums like the Whitney, happened in the early-mid 20th century. Many were established metropolitan areas in predominantly upper middle class white neighborhoods which shaped the exhibitions they curated. Museums were meant as public neutral spaces to display history and aesthetic creations. But in reality, they held the power in shaping history and cultural narratives depending on whose voices they included or excluded. Museums shaped an exclusionary art world by displaying a certain artistic aesthetic, catering to a particular demographic. Their aesthetic also shaped art education marginalizing those who did not abide by specific criteria inadvertently shaping a future generation of artists, art professionals and museum goers that represented a fraction of the overall population.

Many artists spoke out against the exclusivity and under-representation of art institutions that was misshaping artistic culture. In her extensive interview, Ringgold spoke to the exclusivity of museums and galleries back in the 1960s.

---

[116] Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 115.

[117] Tiffany Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 30, no. 3 (2021): 795–826, https://heinonline.org/HOL/PDFsearchable?handle=hein.journals/scid30&collection=journals§ion=33&id=833&print=section§ioncount=1&ext=.pdf&nocover=&display=0.

[118] Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum," 806.

Museums were public institutions in many ways; all committed to the public good…However one could not find art by African Americans in any of these museums…And there should be. There is a designated culture. There is a designated history. So, there should be the art to go with it.[119]

The purpose of museums and galleries is to educate the masses. People should be exposed to creativity that embraces the culture and history of a society. When these institutions excluded work by artists like Ringgold, Betye Saar, Dindga McCannon, Lois Mailou Jones, Kay Brown, and many others, they left out their unique experiences and perspectives. The way these women experienced life was and still is pertinent to the larger context of African American history. Purposeful omission of certain demographics' stories was a way to shape a narrative conducive to a certain ideal of American society at the time. During the 1960s, the Whitney Museum was one of the most notable art institutes in New York. It put on show called "30 Americans" but not a single African American was in the show. A lot of artists in the community were angry about the lack of representation. Ringgold frustrated with the lack of response to the injustice thought, "it was the sixties, everyone was protesting something, so why not them?" If no one else was going to stand up for their right to be included as fellow American artists, then they were going to have to fight for themselves. Ringgold mobilized fellow artists with a promise of action. She fervently pointed out the reality of their situation.

Some people looked at each other and said 'well, we don't want to make the museum angry with us,' and I said 'They wont' be angry with you. They don't even know you're here! They are leaving you out! So what difference does it make?! Let's go! Let's do it! [120]

The initial mentality to not 'rock the boat' has been instilled in the black community for generations. Non-confrontation was a means of self-preservation during a volatile time. But Ringgold, along with other artists, felt that keeping oneself small does not keep you safe, it just makes you insignificant. In 1987, artist and curator Howardena Pindell spoke to the racist foreground of museum exclusivity, "The art world will state that all white exhibitions, year after year, are not a reflection of racism. The lie or denial is cloaked in phrases such as 'artistic choice' or 'artistic quality' when the pattern reveals a different intent."[121] Pindell revealed that although artistic institutions claimed inclusive and objective practices focused solely on the art, their ulterior motivations that shaped the accessibility of the art world.

Beyond lack of representation in physical spaces, a certain artistic aesthetic had dominated the art world of the 1960s. The statement "art is for anyone" was a contradictory statement. Most people who could afford the time and education to be "deeply concerned" with art and thus the power to dictate its cultural value were mostly wealthy white people.[122] This demographic mostly made-up curators, directors, gallery owners, collectors, and critics who determined whether art was "good". Institutional art of the time was based in a Eurocentric aesthetic often exhibiting abstract qualities. This created a culture of "museum quality" art, which

---

[119] Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 112.
[120] PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America': Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion." 21:59.
[121] Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum," 796.
[122] Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum," 803.

became synonymous with increased demand and market value.[123] In 1963, Ringgold applied to the Spectrum gallery, a collaborative studio where different artistic ideas and viewpoints could come together to express their shared vision of the world. She was not accepted at first because her work was deemed too political. Unlike the prominent aesthetic of abstract art, her art portrayed themes that spoke to racial tensions in America.

In the 60s EVERYTHING was political, but the art. Art was more abstract… 'there's to be no messages' I would hear people say. And I would be like, what do yo mean no messages?! I got nothing but messages! I became an artist so that I could tell my story…Everybody was saying something about the state of society at that time. Music, writings, dance…they were all saying something about the racial struggles that were taking place in America, but not the art.[124]

Multi-media artist, Dindga McCannon also shared a similar opinion about the purpose of art. "The personal is not somebody else's history but is part of a larger history."[125] Like Ringgold and McCannon, many artists felt that the purpose of art was to send a message. Systematic exclusion through under-representation, aesthetics and education tried to omit their voices from the art world. Their art was saying something specific about about the struggles that were taking place in America which produced a counter narrative to that in the art world. However, despite the barriers, they felt their experiences needed to be told. It was their duty to connect with others who had similar experiences and educate those ignorant to the nuances of a diverse society as a means to reclaim their own narrative.

Beyond lack of representation, and exclusive aesthetic, institutions presented additional barriers to entry by catering to people with knowledge of art history, which is acquired through higher education. Artistic exclusion and educational discrimination go hand in hand. Black students and other minorities have systematically been excluded from higher education and early exposure to the arts. McCannon reflects upon her time in art school as a constant battle.

> *One of the problems back then as a student of art when you went into a classroom situation, there would be a lot of arguments about, 'Why are our figures black? What do you mean why are my people black? What color are they supposed to be?' the artwork of most cultures reflects the people in that culture. I didn't want to have to fight for the right to portray myself. So I decided not to go further in the college.*[126]

Like many black female artists at that time, she had to make a choice between formal education or being true to herself and her art. Shortly after this realization, McCannon left the university and attended the Art Students League where she could learn from other black artists and make the art she wanted to make. Instead of conforming to the dominant white Eurocentric aesthetic, McCannon felt that art should reflect her experience and how it fits in the larger context of life. She often pondered why does 'everyone' (white) else get to do the art they want, and she must conform to someone else's idea of what her narrative should be? McCannon, like other artists of

---

[123] Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum," 803.
[124] PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America': Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion," 21:24.
[125] Glahn, "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon," 48.
[126] Glahn, "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon," 45.

the movement, received their artistic training outside of established institutional frameworks. Their work became shaped by the communities they turned to which conversely shaped those communities as well. Instead of these artists being thrown to the fringes of artistic society 'unwilling' to conform to narrow institutions, it is the institutions that should adapt and portray art that reflects the whole idea of American culture and history. Nina Simone also recalled her first rejection as an aspiring young musician from Curtis Art Institute and the bitter lesson she learned about race and equality.

When Curtis turned me down, I was changed forever…I knew prejudice existed, but I never thought it could have such a direct effect on my future. Nobody told me that no matter what I did in life, the color of my skin would always make a difference.[127]

At an early age, Simone was confronted with the reality that her future was not easily her own. Her experiences then began to form the future actions she would take, shaping the music that would become inspiration to others trying to navigate unfair exclusion.

Exclusion was also felt in the publishing and distribution realms. It was no coincidence that the homogenous nature of the publishing world matched the homogeneity of published authors and their works. The gate keepers of the literary community made deliberate decisions to marginalize writers of color from mainstream circulation. Insurmountable barriers such as projected racial stereotypes, limited subject material and financial funding, left black female authors to turn to self-publishing and distribution within their own communities. McCannon, who was also an acclaimed children's author, noted her struggle.

Later, I was fighting to find books for my daughter that had black images. I solved that by getting published. But it wasn't easy. I was told 'black people don't read' which the publishers believed and because of that they had no marketing or distribution plans for the books. I purchased most of my books and had no problem selling them.[128]

The racial stereotypes justified the discriminatory practices of the publishing world. Systemic racism perpetrated the notion of illiteracy throughout the black community. A notion that was left unverified and became truth in the eyes of many, creating yet another barrier to literary affluence in mainstream literature. Distinguished poet, Sonia Sanchez spoke to the solidarity that sprang up in the community as a result of the exclusion within the publishing community.

Many of us chose Dudley Randall because he was opening up a black press at the time. We thought it would be very important to begin our own institution and support our own institution…Many of us turned our royalties back into that company so they could then continue to publish and survive.[129]

This internalized circulation was the only means for a lot of writers to get published. But form the exclusion sprang opportunity and solidarity. Artists supported black owned businesses and black owned businesses supported artists. It was a reciprocal relationship that many thrived on as a means of survival but also a social, economic, and political stance.

---

[127] Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 45.
[128] Glahn, "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon," 18.
[129] Sanchez and Kelly, "Discipline and Craft: An Interview With Sonia Sanchez," 681.

Simone recalled the challenges within and outside of the black community when it came to the distribution of some of her music. After releasing her song *Four Women*, it was banned from several black radio stations due to it 'damaging' the relationship between black men and women.

When 'Four Women' was released in 1966, some black radio stations banned DJs form paying it because they said it 'insulted' black women…I wasn't surprised. The song told a truth that many people in the U.S.—especially black men—simply weren't ready to acknowledge at that time.[130]

It revealed a toxic dynamic that many within the black community were experiencing but not acknowledging for fear of taking away from the bigger racial struggle going on in America. This was the put forth my dominant male voices throughout the movements. Black women did not voice their domestic problems to avoid creating a rift within their own community. As a result, many black women did not wish to step out of their supportive roles for fear of being ostracized. Simone also remembered the hinderances in pushing distribution for her famous protest song Mississippi Goddam in 1964.

I realized there was no turning back…we released it as a single and it sold well, except in the south, where we had trouble with distribution The excuse was profanity—but the real reason was obvious enough…A dealer in South Carolina sent a whole crate of copies back to our office with each one snapped in half. I laughed because it meant we were getting through.[131]

Written in the aftermath of the racially motivated murders of Emmett Till and Medgar Evers in Mississippi and the 16th street church bombing of Alabama, her song was a biting commentary on the racial injustice swallowing America and the growing determination to be part of the Civil Rights movement. Naturally, it sold well everywhere but the south where distribution on was slow if not stagnant. The lack of distribution was an attempt to silence a voice of drawing attention to the realities of what was happening. However, barriers did not deter black female artists from getting their message out. Exclusion only spurred their innovation leading to adaptive resistant tactics in the pursuit of liberation.

4.2 Alternative Artistic spaces & Resistant Strategies

Since Black female artists were struggling to gain access to artistic spaces, they turned instead to designing alternative inclusive spaces that allowed them to support and encourage each other. These 'counterinstitutions' were created out of necessity to reclaim cultural spaces. Women-only exhibitions, collectives, educational programs, and various sites throughout local communities (homes, businesses, colleges) acted as creative incubators. These collaborative environments allowed Black female artists to articulate their lived experiences, explore racial and gender oppression, and subvert cultural representation. However, simply creating their own spaces

[130] Simone and Cleary, I *Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 117.
[131] Simone and Cleary, I *Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 90.

wasn't enough. Self-segregation was not the answer to changing the exclusionary practices of mainstream institutions. Action needed to be taken in the form of resistant and artistic tactics such as sit-ins, themed demonstrations, collaborative publications, and musical compositions that shed light on the rampant inequality that defined America.

Exclusion from the mainstream art world made artists turn to their communities for support. McCannon recalls the use of alternative spaces and how this also shaped the type of art she made.

It's like there was one vision of American art and then there were all the other people who lived in America. We did not count when it came to being a participant in those galleries. That's why we had to grow our own audience…My thing was community-based because of the lack of being able to get into these places. People would open up galleries in their homes…We really live din our own world…our focus was selling Black art to Black people and how you reach them. Our exhibiting world consisted of places like the New Muse, colleges, office buildings, the Weusi gallery, and the maybe hundreds of little galleries mostly run by women form their homes.[132]

McCannon tied in elements of black arts ideology of making "practical art" that speaks to the community. Instead of art focusing more on who you know, who made it and monetary worth, art within the black community was mor about serving a purpose. Black female artists transformed their art to reach everyday people in the community. By making art something accessible, relatable, and tangible, they allowed a wider audience to connect with the broader messages portrayed. This grassroots utilization built a strong base of confidence and pride within their own community.

The 1960s and 1970s was a time for collectives and coalitions to lend artists needed support. Groups like Where We At (WWA), the Weusi collective, Spiral, Spectrum, Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), Art Worker's Coalition, Women Art) focused on opening artistic representation in museums and galleries. Where We At emerged as a reaction to the Whitney Museum's exclusionary shows and in 1971 *Where We At Black Women Artists* was curated by McCannon and Ringgold in a local gallery. The exhibit showcased the artists' close ties to the grassroots community, it also gave artists the opportunity to demonstrate their originality, high artistic skills, and interpretations of the relevant themes of the Black Arts movement.[133] The success from the show gave artists the momentum to form the official collective shortly after. They met in each others' homes, took turns watching each others children's so they could work on their art and discussed important matters. They tackled institutional exclusion, art-related themes, community, and educational outreach programs and worked to form archival preservation of the artists's work.[134] McCannon speaks to her motivation to help form WWA.

---

[132] Glahn, "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon," 39/126.
[133] Kay Brown, "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The Founding of 'Where We At,'" *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art 2011*, no. 29 (November 1, 2011): 118–27, https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-1496399.
[134] Brown, "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The Founding of 'Where We At," 121.

I *noticed that the first hill to get over was the fact that I'm a black woman in the arts. My early days people didn't take it seriously…But I did and several other people did, which is how 'Where We At' came to be, because in numbers there's strength.*[135]

Both the art world and the black community were not set up to support and allow women to do anything other than run the home. Collectives like WWA and WSABAL recognized the complex needs of black women and provided support so they could be creative and speak their truths. While some artists transformed alternative spaces, others like Ringgold used a mixture of traditional and modern repertoires of action to demand attention in exclusionary spaces. In 1970, Faith Ringgold was asked to join fellow artists and activists in an ad hoc women's group to protest the small percentage of women in past Whitney annuals.[136] Their goal was fifty percent women representation, with half of that being women of color: a notion originally put forth by Ringgold's daughter Michele Wallace. They transformed the physical space, using the corridors and galleries of the Whitney as their protest stage. They hid raw and boiled eggs with "50%" written on them throughout the museum, the formed picket lines outside, they printed fake tickets to demonstrate inside the museum and once inside blew police whistles to grab the audience's attention which worked. Many were sympathetic to the cause and eager to view their protest.[137] Their unique mixture of old and new tactics sparked a women's artists' movement in New York setting the discourse around women's art and culture.

Artists like Ringgold and Simone transformed their artistic work in innovative ways to serve particular needs in their lives. During the height of the Civil Rights movement, the Mississippi Goddam became a staple of the Civil Rights movement. Simone continued to use the song to reflect current events bringing attention to the growing unrest across the country. After the mass protest that broke out in Selma, Alabama in '65 she changed the second line to "Selma made me lose my rest". A year later after the riots in Watts, L.A California, she changed the line to "Watts made me lose my rest". And in 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Simone during a live performance in Long Island, made that line "Memphis made me lose my rest." She also encouraged the crowd to join her in musical solidarity. She said "If you know my songs at all, for God sakes join me! The time is now. You know the king is dad. The king of love is dead. I ain't 'bout to be non-violent honey." The crowd roared in approval and participated.[138] Like many other artists, Simone used her artistry to rally others to the broader cause. Her unique voice and intoxicating stage presence turned her musical abilities into a tool of activism, making the most out of exclusionary spaces and inspiring others to do the same. Ringgold also adapted her work. Combing several elements of her art, Ringgold created her famous story quilts in the 1980s. She began writing on her autobiography on her in retaliation to refusals of publication. Her own publisher told her that her story was not something people wanted to read. It did not have the same elements other stories about African American women had at the time. There was no real struggle, rape, or torture. Ringgold recalls how she navigated the rejection.

---

[135] Glahn, "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon," 34.
[136] Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 178.
[137] Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 180.
[138] Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 114.

I was very annoyed that somebody would try to tell me what my story is. Then I thought, 'I know what I'll do, I'll write it on my art.' So that's when I started making quilts and writing my story on my quilts. When the art got out there, my story was out there. Without editing, without an agent, without a publisher.[139]

It was this innovative pivot that later got her first children's book, *Tar Beach*, published ink 1991 after one of the story quilts was photographed and seen by a publisher. Specific repertoires like those exhibited by black female artists navigated exclusionary spaces and practices in unique ways. They utilized alternative means such as communal spaces, participatory elements, community engagement, formed supportive networks to alleviate social barriers, and altered their own artistic work to adapt to reach audiences. Their artistic activism set a standard, opening new avenues for future activists and minority artists.

5. Chapter 4: Conclusion

In conclusion, how did Black American female artists position themselves within the second wave of feminism and the black civil rights movement in the US during 1960-1980 through their art, and why did they do so? Artists like Faith Ringgold, Dindga McCannon & Betye Saar, Nina Simone, Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde embraced the ideological spirit of the Feminist and Black Art Liberation movements and reshaped it to define themselves as Black people, as women, and as artists. Due to internal and external marginalization, these artists felt the need to set themselves apart in order to have their voices and contributions recognized. The chauvinism they experience with the Black Arts liberation movement, objectified and sidelined them to supportive roles while the racism felt within mainstream white feminism, alienated their values and experiences. These Black female artists did not allow their voices to sink into the background. They felt that it was their duty to reflect the times and situation they were living in. They used their art as a platform to address the realities of their everyday lives. They also used their art as a tool in overcoming exclusionary obstacles. They navigated internal, artistic, and public exclusion by employing modern and traditional repertoires of action. Their messages and actions, left an indelible mark on art, gender and racial rights, and social activism.

What specific themes did the artists explore in their work that challenged or reinterpreted the social norms of Black women in America during the 1960s-80s? Their art took on new meaning It was not a mere visual delight but a window into their lived experiences. No one was able to capture the complexities of their identity, struggles and experiences which resulted in a lack of representation not only in art but also social, economic, and political spheres. Black female artists needed to spread awareness to combat damaging stereotypes, misleading interpretations and set roles which diminished them as black women. Their art explored topics of sexuality, gender roles, morphism of supportive to active presence, racism, Afro cultural identity, sexism, and female representation. Much like their intersecting identity, discrimination and experience, these artists' art blurred the line between themes often combing them all at once to paint a complete picture of their message. The innovative ways they expressed their truths forced viewers to confront stories counter to dominant narratives. Sharing their thoughts and feelings about the state of society, promoted awareness and connection. Despite the varying views amongst Black female artists over which oppression (sexuality, racism, gender) deserved more attention, most of their art explored a mixture of thematic elements because that reflected the reality of their engagement with society at the time. Although their art stepped outside the

[139] PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America': Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion," 43:00.

artistic boundaries put forth by both the feminist and black arts movements, they were unapologetic because they understood the reason why their voices and visibility to the nation was important to empowering people of color. To refer to the Combahee River Collective, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."

Lastly, these women needed spaces to display their art and share their messages. So, how did they navigate exclusionary artistic and public spaces in America during this time? To overcome barriers like under-representation in artistic spaces, racial stereotypes that justified discriminatory practices, lack of financial funding, refusal of publication or distribution, confined aesthetic boundaries and accessible education, these artistic activists used innovative ways. They reclaimed spaces within their community and transformed them into alternative areas. They utilized private spaces as galleries, established supportive networks for childcare and studio space as well as altering spaces into artistic sites e.g. murals, street performances. They also used a mixture of traditional and modern tactics to occupy exclusive spaces. The Whitney Museum protests used traditional forms like picket lines, sit-in demonstrations and petitions in tandem with tailored specific actions like leaving eggs, feminine sanitary items, whistle blowing and covert infiltration. These effectively grabbed audience attention and created engagement with women's art. To fill the gap in education, they created their own educational art programs which engaged with the community and allowed artists creative freedom. The black arts community also circumvented publishing and distribution obstacles by cultivating their own entrepreneurial environment. Black -owned businesses like publishing houses, record labels and other local businesses, encouraged artists to produce and share their work. The specific protest tactics used by these artists along with engagement of alternative spaces, shaped their art and message, connection people and leaving a lasting impact.

Their art and activism not only shaped and contributed to the feminist and black arts liberation movements of the 1960s-80s, but they also challenged notions of gender, race, sexuality, civil resistance, and art, creating room for alternative perceptions. Black female artists contributions, though short lived and minimally recognized, had tremendous impact on the American social, economic, and political landscape that can be felt to this day. Their legacy is not only present in art but modern activism. Movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Black girl magic all draw parallels with the work of these bold women. They paved the way for other minority artists, especially women of color. They drew attention to and helped opened artistic institutional exclusivity culture. Many groups, collectives and organizations created during this time, created greater accessibility in the arts through educational programs, increased viewership—reaching people of varying backgrounds, and aesthetic versatility. Their identities, art and activism are crucial for social and academic knowledge expansion. Further study of their art and actions would provide better insight into complex social dynamics and the shift of present-day social movement actions.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Blackwell, Henry. "An Interview With Ntozake Shange." *Black American Literature Forum 13*, no. 4 (January 1, 1979): 134-138, https://doi.org/10.2307/3041478.

Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Angela Davis--an Autobiography*, International Publishers, 1988.

Glahn, Philip. "An Oral History Project with Dindga McCannon." *Bomb Magazine*, August 3, 2020. https://HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/ORAL-HISTORY-PROJECT/.

-Dindga McCannon is an inspirational creative being. Her work spans decades, taking on many forms to fit the needs of a particular narrative or audience. Her work includes painting, drawing, and collage, in fibers and prints, writing and illustration, patterned abstraction and popular figuration, archival documentation and historical fiction. She was a founding member of the artist collectives "Where We At". Her work is a complex tapestry that reflects the nuanced history and representation of African American experiences.

Lorde, Audre. "Audre Lorde Interview," interview by Judy Simmons, *WBAI Late-Night show*, 1979, audio, 2:06:29, https://youtube.com/watch?v=d_-XhFKn-f0&si=gpeQD35L4OYv9-y2.

PBS Documentary, "Makers: Women Who Make America: Faith Ringgold: Challenging the Art World & Demanding Inclusion," Uploaded by Life Stories, July 15, 2011, 1 hour,10 min.,11. sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhD-UydTgZw.

-In one of her last interviews before her passing, artist Faith Ringgold reflects fondly on her childhood in Harlem despite being born during the Great Depression, and on the impact of her mother who was a fashion designer. Ringgold discusses her connection to children from being an art teacher, recalls her first break as a young artist, details demonstrations at the Whitney Museum, her involvement in the beginning of the Women's Art Movement and describes some of her most iconic work.

Ringgold, Faith. *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, Bulfinch Press, 1995.

Sanchez, Sonia, and Susan Kelly. "Discipline and Craft: An Interview With Sonia Sanchez." *African American Review* 34, no. 4 (January 1, 2000): 679-687. https://doi.org/10.2307/2901425 .

Saar, Betye. "A Conversation with Betye Saar and Alison Saar," interview by Lauren Haynes, *Soul of a Nation,* March 12, 2018, video, 30 min., 21sec. https://youtu.be/LvL9Es3Pp_I?si=Bu8ynJiqKt8C8aVW.

-A conversation with Betye Saar about her life, work and legacy with her daughter.

Simone, Nina, and Stephen F. Cleary. *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, Da Capo Press, 1992.

-This autobiography is an intimate telling of race relations in America. Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon, Nina Simone recounts her many lives and loves all held together by her complex relationship with music.

Simone, Nina. *Four Women*. Wild is the Wild album. Philips Records, Hal Mooney, 1966. https://open.spotify.com/track/7urjzeGBtfHdwWmfYJjdAp?si=UygJeJQwQsyqP35bvLUvEA.

Secondary

Baxandall, Rosalyn. "Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists." *Feminist Studies 27*, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 225-245. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178460.

Bello, Barbara Giovanna, and Letizia Mancini. "Talking About Intersectionality. Interview With Kimberlé W. Crenshaw." *SOCIOLOGIA DEL DIRITTO*, no. 2 (October 1, 2016): 11–21. https://doi.org/10.3280/sd2016-002002 .

"Black Women's Conference- an Interview With Elizabeth Catlett," March 1981, 21 min., 25 sec., https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1913231/m1/ .

Blackwell, Henry. "An Interview With Ntozake Shange." *Black American Literature Forum 13*, no. 4 (January 1, 1979): 134-138. https://doi.org/10.2307/3041478.

Boorstein, Karen. "Beyond Black Macho: An Interview With Michele Wallace." *Black American Literature Forum 18*, no. 4 (January 1, 1984): 163-167. https://doi.org/10.2307/2904294.

Brown, Kay. "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The Founding of 'Where We At.'" *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2011, no. 29 (November 1, 2011): 118–27. https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-1496399.

Chapman, Erin D. "A Historiography of Black Feminist Activism." *History Compass 17*, no. 7 (June 6, 2019). 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12576.

Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs 38,* no. 4 (May 3, 2013): 785–810. https://doi.org/10.1086/669608.

Collins, Lisa Gail. "Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the United States." *Signs 31,* no. 3 (March 1, 2006): 717–52. https://doi.org/10.1086/498991.

Collins, Lisa Gail, and Margo Natalie Crawford. *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement.* Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé."The Urgency of Intersectionality." TED Talk, October 2016. Video, 18 min., 39 sec. https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

Della Porta, Donatella. "Repertoires of Contention." *In The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, no.2 (2023): 1-3. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm178.pub2.

Doherty, Brian, and Graeme Hayes. "Tactics." *In The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements,* no.2 (2023): 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm210.pub2.

Eagles, Charles W. "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era." *The Journal of Southern History 66*, no. 4 (November 1, 2000): 815-848. https://doi.org/10.2307/2588012 .

Faire, Lucy, and Simon Gunn, *Research Methods for History.* Edinburgh University Press eBooks, 2016.

Farrington, Lisa E., *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists.* Oxford University Press, 2005.

Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, *Words of Fire : An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought.* The New Press, 1995.

Henderson, Abney. "Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s." University of South Florida, 2014. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6432&context=etd.

Hooks, Bell, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics.* The New Press, 1995.

Jarrett, Gene Andrew. "The Black Arts Movement and Its Scholars." *American Quarterly 57*, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 1243–51. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2006.0010.

Keane, Katarina. "New Directions in Civil Rights Historiography." *History Reviews of New Books 44*, no. 1 (December 15, 2015): 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1080/03612759.2016.1084809.

Li, Tiffany. "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum." *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal 30,* no. 3 (2021): 795–826. https://heinonline.org/HOL/PDFsearchable?handle=hein.journals/scid30&collection=journals§ion=33&id=833&print=section§ioncount=1&ext=.pdf&nocover=&display=0.

Lorber, Judith. "'Night to His Day': The Social Construction of Gender." *In Paradoxes of Gender,* 13–36. Yale University Press, 1994. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bhkntg.5.

McMillon, Kim Cheryl. "The Women of the Black Arts Movement and the Rise of the Ancestors." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies 11*, no. 6 (April 1, 2018): 175–185. https://jpanafrican.org/docs/vol11no6/final-Kim-21-McMillon.pdf.

The Third Rail Issue 9. "Michele Wallace Interview." Interview by Mary Lodu, 1988. http://thirdrailquarterly.org/issue-9/.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review TDR 12*, no. 4 (January 1, 1968): 29–39. https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377.

Newman, Louise M. "Talking About a Revolution: New Approaches to Writing the History of Second-Wave Feminism." *Journal of Women's History 23*, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 219–228. https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2011.0014.

Pena, Mary. "Black Public Art: On the Socially Engaged Work of Black Women Artist-Activists." *Open Cultural Studies 3,* no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 604–614. https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0053.

Price, Melanye T. "Dreaming Blackness: Black Nationalism and African American Public Opinion." *Choice Reviews Online 47,* no. 08 (April 1, 2010): 19-30. https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.47-4708.

Salmond, John A. "'The Long and Short of It': Some Reflections on the Recent Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement." *Australasian Journal of American Studies 32,* no. 1 (July 2013): 53–61. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43863826.

Sell, Mike. "Don't Forget the Triple Front!: Some Historical and Representational Dimensions of the Black Arts Movement in Academia." *African American Review 42* (September 22, 2008): 623-641. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/40301258.pdf.

Smethurst, James. "The Black Arts Movement." *In A Companion to African American Literature*, 302–14. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010.

Springer, Kimberly. "Third Wave Black Feminism?" *Signs 27,* no. 4 (June 1, 2002): 1059–82. https://doi.org/10.1086/339636.

The Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977," n.d. https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf.

Thompson, Becky. "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies 28*, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 336-360. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178747.

Tilly, Charles. "Nineteenth-century Origins of Our Twentieth-century Collective Action Repertoire." CRSO Working paper #224, University of Michigan, 1981. https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/51016/244.pdf?sequence=1.

Tilly, Charles, and Sidney G. Tarrow. *Contentious Politics.* Oxford University Press, 2015.

Wintz, Cary D. *Black Writers Interpret the Harlem Renaissance.* Routledge eBooks, 2020.