



Danese Cattaneo. *Black Venus*. Mid-16th c.
Bronze. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Harriet Tubman, portrayed in a linocut by Elizabeth Catlett; women students making basket furniture at the Hampton Institute; Lucy Parsons; Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Audre Lorde; Phillis Wheatley; two women in Botswana seated around a gourd; Sojourner Truth; women in the Black Liberation Movement in England; Betye Saar's Aunt Sally HooDoo; a girlchild balancing a basin on her head in southern Africa.

My moving toward the study of the work—written and visual—of Black women has been a moving toward my own wholeness. My interest in this work is a deeply personal interest, because through these words and images I begin to capture part of who I am.

I should begin with my title—“Object into Subject.” What does it mean? We live in a society whose history is drenched in the philosophy and practice of racism, the oppression of Black and other Third World peoples. This is the point at which my definition begins: If you study racism—if you understand the history of the United States—you will find that under racism the person who is oppressed is turned into an object in the mind of the oppressor.

The white anti-racist southern writer Lillian Smith was among the first to offer a metaphysical and psychological explanation of racism as a personal and political American practice.¹ One essential to the maintenance of things as they are in this society, Smith—whose influences included Kierkegaard, Jung, Freud, and Sartre—traced the origins of racism, and its more apparent manifestation, segregation, to that place in the human mind she called “mythic”: that place where dreams, fantasies, and images begin; where they continue and take form as art, litera-

purpose is to create the form which will support the ideas moving out of the mythic mind. Reason is incapable of moral judgment, and therefore will support any idea or image, regardless of its moral basis.

When the mythic idea of whiteness, the obsession with skin color which is the irrational and immoral basis of racism, is given a construct from which the myth takes its form—i.e., the philosophy of white supremacy—the result is cultural or institutionalized racism, contained in the politics, literature, art, and religion of the dominant culture. An insane idea now exists within a reasonable reality, not an irrational dream.

Whatever we may feel about Smith’s analysis, or her sources for that matter, her treatment of American racism as something embedded in the white mind, regenerating itself within a psychological construct, is extremely important. She recognized early on the character of racism as in a sense “larger than life,” something which could not be removed by congressional legislation or Supreme Court decisions, unless these actions were the result of a completely radicalized mindset within the dominant culture. I think that the resurgence of white racism in this country today bears witness to her understanding.

Within the rationale reason lends to racism, Smith argued, is the practice of objectification, an absolute necessity in the racist effort to oppress. (I use the word “effort” because it is and has been so; one which has been carried on on every level of this society, against constant, historic opposition.) Through objectification—the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghostlike, given the status of Other—an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realization; and overarching all this, denied selfhood—which is after all the point of objectification. A group of human beings—a people—are denied their history, their language, their music. Their cultural values are

OBJECT INTO SUBJECT: SOME

In my room there is a postcard of a sculpture by the Venetian artist Danese Cattaneo, done in the mid-16th century—*Black Venus*. The full-length nude figure is bronze. In one hand she holds a hand-mirror in which she is looking at herself. On her head is a turban, around the edges of which her curls are visible. In her other hand she carries a cloth—or at least what appears to be a cloth. Who was she? A slave? Perhaps in the artist’s own household, or maybe that of his patron—one of the many Black women dragged from Africa to enter the service of white Europeans. I have no idea who she actually was: she was an object, then as now.

Around this image are other images of Black women: Bernadette Powell, who killed the man who beat her and is now in Bedford Hills; Fannie Lou Hamer; Billie Holiday; Elizabeth Freeman, who sued for her freedom and won it, in Massachusetts in the 19th century; Josephine Baker;

ture, politics, religion. The mythic mind is a source of psychic energy—it contributes the motion necessary for sustained thought. But the mythic mind needs a structure in which to function, so that its products will be understood. This structure is provided by reason. Reason, Smith argued, is merely a technic, an enabler; its sole

ignored. This history, this language, this music, these values exist in the subculture, but in the dominant culture only certain elements are chosen, recast, co-opted, and made available to the definition of these people. And these elements presented by the dominant culture tend to serve the purpose of objectification and, therefore, oppression.

The practice of objectification stands between all Black people and full human identity under the white supremacist system: racism re-



Francis Benjamin Johnston. Students Making Barrel Furniture at Hampton Institute. 1900.

quires that Black people be thought different from white; and this difference is usually translated as less than. This requirement has been stated in various ways throughout the history of America. Did you know, for example, that Thomas Jefferson held the popular view that the Black race was created when Black women mated with orangutans?² (I do not know where the original Black women were supposed to have come from.)

Last October on my local PBS station I watched the film *Birth of a Nation*, introduced by a rather hearty film buff as an American classic, the work of a "tragic poet." I had never seen the movie, nor had I read the book *The Clansman*, upon which it is based. I felt I "had to watch it." The first thing I noticed was that all the Black characters were portrayed by white actors in "black-face." Throughout the film the thing most evident to me was that this was a playing-out of a white American's image of Black people, crude and baroque to be sure, but not that far removed from *Gone with the Wind* (another American classic), or even from such white-inspired television programs as "The Jeffersons." If anything, the very coarse brutality of *Birth of a Nation* is closer to the history of the slavocracy than perhaps any other American film. I could see as I watched this film how white people were capable of committing both the acts of the slave period and the lynchings which flourished during Reconstruction and thereafter. D. W. Griffith's imaginings of Black women and men attempted to justify this history by replacing a people with the fantasies of his tragically racist mind. The very title gives his intention away.

The playwright and activist Lorraine Hansberry, in her essay "The New Paternalists," observed:

America long ago fell in love with an image. It is a sacred image, fashioned over centuries of time: this image of the unharried, unconcerned, glandulatory, simple, rhythmic, amoral, dark creature who was, above all else, a *miracle of sensuality*. It was cre-

nothing in Chicago actually changed.

If anything, the ending of *Raisin* is hopeful, not happy. And the hopefulness one feels derives not from any expectation of a white change-of-heart, but from the fact that Hansberry has tested her characters throughout the play and they have emerged as people of integrity, capable of facing reality and white racism. She was, I think, attempting to create Black characters who would disrupt white imagery of Black people. But many in her audience could only see these characters through their own screen of objectification.

It is objectification that gives the impression of sanity to the process of oppression. The centuries-old image of which Hansberry speaks, actually a collection of images, is necessary to maintain racism. To hate with no justification for hatred, to oppress with no reason for oppression, would be recognizably insane. Once an object is provided—an object endowed by the oppressor with characteristics that allow hatred, that allow oppression—then hatred and oppression of the object can be defended as logical. An insane idea has been made rational. Lillian Smith portrayed this basic insanity of segregation in the South she knew:

As I sit here writing, I can almost touch that little town, so close is the memory of it. There it lies, its main street lined with great oaks, heavy with matted moss that swings softly even now as I remember. A little white town rimmed with Negroes, making a deep shadow on the whiteness. There it lies, broken in two by one strange idea. Minds broken in two. Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split into a thousand pieces. That is segregation. I am remembering: a woman in a mental hospital walking four steps out, four steps in, unable to go any further because she has drawn an invisible line around her small world and is terrified to take one step beyond it. . . . A man in a Disturbed Ward assigning "places" to the other patients and violently insisting that each stay in his place.⁴

"Segregation," for Smith, described a phenome-

ning alongside men—when they were pregnant, when they were nursing. The Black woman was made into a sex object, yes, but Smith's use of the word "prostitute," even in quotes, suggests more choice than any slave woman ever had. It also denies or glosses over the use of rapism by white men against Black women as an instrument of terror, of oppression.

Black women have been doubly objectified—as Black, as women; under white supremacy, under patriarchy. It has been the task of Black woman artists to transform this objectification: to become the subject commenting on the meaning of the object, or to become the subject rejecting the object and revealing the real experience of being. In her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker ponders the degree of difficulty faced by a Black woman in the United States with artistic ambition: "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmothers' day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood."⁶

In her novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison makes the following observation about the seemingly destructive nature of her main character:

In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.⁷

Sula's tragedy, and the tragedy she represents, is "cruel enough to stop the blood." Because of her race, perhaps also because of her sex, she has been shut out from art and denied access to art forms. She is an intelligent, thinking woman, who ultimately has nowhere to go.

The objectification of Black women has taken

THOUGHTS ON THE WORK OF BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS BY MICHELLE CLIFF

ated, and it persists, to provide a personified pressure valve for fanciful longings in [white] American dreams, literature, and life. . . . I think, for example, of that reviewer writing in a Connecticut newspaper about *A Raisin in the Sun* . . . and marvelling, in the rush of a quite genuine enthusiasm, that the play proved again that there was a quaint loveliness in how our "dusky brethren" can come up with a song and hum their troubles away. It did not seem to disturb him one whit that there is no single allusion to that particular mythical gift in the entire play. He did not need it there; it was in his head.³

Just as this white reviewer could hear Black people humming as he watched Hansberry's play, others could declare it a play about insurance money, one which proved that all Black people really wanted was to live alongside whites. Many white people perceived the ending of *Raisin* as "happy," unaware perhaps of what it meant for a Black family to move into a white neighborhood in Chicago in the post-World War II years. Did any of these white people know of Hansberry's own childhood experience when her family moved into a white Chicago neighborhood? The response to this move was white violence: the eight-year-old Hansberry had a brick thrown through her bedroom window by the white mob. Her father, supported by the NAACP, took the case all the way to the Supreme Court and established a precedent for nondiscriminatory housing—but

non deeper than legal statute or town custom. She saw segregation as a form of dichotomizing within the white Western male tradition. She observed, for example, that white women are segregated from Black women and also objectified within the dominant culture:

Another split took place. . . . Somehow much in the white woman that [man] could not come to terms with, the schizophrenic split he had made in her nature—the sacred madonna and the bitch he had created of her—could now be projected, in part, onto another female: under slavery, he could keep his pure white "madonna" and have his dark tempestuous "prostitute." . . . Back of southern people's fear of giving up segregation is this fear of giving up the "dark woman" who has become a symbol which the men no longer wish to attach to their own women.⁵

Smith's observation is important: White and Black women were/are both objectified and split from one another. I feel that Smith oversimplified the split, however. For example, the sacred madonna, in order to maintain her status (and most often she was intent on maintaining her status), had to objectify the Black woman according to the white male imagination. The white woman on the slave plantation knew that white men used rape against Black women. She knew that Black women were for the most part fieldhands, work-

many forms: The Mammy, Mama—wetnurse, midwife, cook—usually large, usually dark, combining humility and capability. The temptress, sex-object, whore—sometimes mulatto (from the Latin for mule, i.e., a creature unable to reproduce herself)—misbegotten and tragic, the power of the master coursing through her powerless veins. These are but two examples which recur in white Western literature and art. And these have been repeated by white women as well as white men. There is, of course, "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*; and there is Julie, the woe-begone quadroon in Edna Ferber's *Showboat*. Another novel, *Imitation of Life* by Fanny Hurst, attempts to "deal with" both Mammy and mulatto.

By many accounts, Fanny Hurst was a well-intentioned liberal. Much has been made, for example, of the fact that she employed Zora Neale Hurston as her secretary in 1925. But some of that history suggests Hurst's insensitivity to Hurston's identity as a Black woman, not to mention a brilliant novelist and writer, among whose subjects was the self-definition of Black women. On one occasion Hurst, intent on integrating a restaurant in Vermont, prevailed upon Hurston to

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Drawing by Vivian E. Browne. Left to right: Mary McLeod Bethune, Harriet Tubman, Josephine Baker, Lucy Parsons, Ida B. Wells, Elizabeth Freeman.

accompany her—passing Hurston off as an “African princess.” Hurston remarked, “Who would have thought that a good meal could be so bitter.”⁸ In this incident Hurst, the would-be liberator, reveals herself as objectifier. This phenomenon occurred over and again during the Civil Rights Movement. It was most commonly expressed in the notion that unless Black people behaved in certain ways, allowing whites to oversee and control their access to liberation, that liberation would not be achieved. What is present is the need for whites to maintain power, and limit the access of Black people to that power, which, finally, is the power of self-definition.

Imitation of Life, published in 1933, concerns the relationship between two dyads: a white woman and her daughter and a Black woman and her daughter. Both pairs are essentially alone in the world. The Black woman, Delilah, is hired to run the house by the white woman, Miss B., who has been recently widowed. Delilah carries with her various recipes, and these prove to be the “salvation” of Miss B. and family. In a relatively short time, Miss B. is the proprietor of a chain of restaurants in which Delilah’s food is the main attraction, and which are recognized by a likeness of Delilah on the sign. When Miss B. hits on the idea of photographing Delilah as the advertising gimmick for the enterprise, she dresses Delilah as a chef. Delilah, faithful servant throughout the book, in this one instance asks her employer not to humiliate her but to allow her to wear her best clothes.

Miss B., however, prevails. Hurst describes the final result: “Breaking through a white background, as through a paper-covered hoop, there burst the chocolate-and-cream effulgence that was Delilah.”⁹ Here is Aunt Jemima; the female server of Sanka; even Mrs. Butterworth, whose color literally pours forth. Here is an instance of the brainchild of a Black woman, her recipe, her art form, passed through generations of Black women, co-opted and sold, with a caricature of the artist used to ensure its success.

In and around the main theme of the novel—the “success” of Miss B. as an “independent businesswoman”—is the subplot concerning Delilah’s light-skinned daughter, Peola—unable to be white, unwilling to be Black, in the course of her dilemma denying her mother. Peola moves west, works as a librarian, passes for white, and marries a white man. She has herself “sterilized,” eliminating any chance of “throwback.” Her husband is also mutilated, having lost part of a hand. Perhaps he is all she is entitled to. Delilah has the final say: “Black women who pass, pass into damnation.”

Taken together, Delilah and Peola represent what George Frederickson has characterized as “soft” and “hard” stereotypes.¹⁰ Bell Hooks also juxtaposes two stereotypes of Black women: Mammy and Sapphire.

It is not too difficult to imagine how whites came to create the black mammy figure.... She was first

and foremost asexual and consequently had to be fat (preferably obese); she also had to give the impression of not being clean so she was the wearer of a greasy dirty headrag; her too tight shoes from which emerged her large feet were further confirmation of her bestial cowlike quality. Her greatest virtue was of course her love for white folk which she willingly and passively served.... In a sense whites created in the mammy figure a black woman who embodied solely those characteristics they as colonizers wished to exploit.¹¹

As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful, in short all that the mammy was not. White men could justify their de-humanization and sexual exploitation of black women by arguing that they possessed inherent evil demonic qualities.... And white women could use the image of the evil sinful black woman to emphasize their own innocence and purity.¹²

To talk about the history of Black women in America, and of the various images I have mentioned, we must begin with the woman who was a slave. Who was she? How did she survive? How many of her did survive? What did she teach her children? What was her relationship to her husband? What were her options?

She could be lynched, beaten, tortured, mutilated, raped. She could have her children sold away from her. She was forbidden education. She was considered a beast of burden. She was subject to the white man’s power and the white woman’s powerlessness masking as whim. Her womb was a commodity of the slavemaster, and her childlessness, a liability of the slavemaster. She was not expected to love—but she did. She was not expected to run away—but she did. She was known to commit infanticide and induce abortion rather than have her child be a slave. She was known to commit acts of violence and rebellion—with magic, poison, force, even with spit. And she sometimes learned to read and write and sustain the art forms she had carried with her.

In 1960 Lorraine Hansberry was commissioned to write a play about slavery for national television. She wrote *The Drinking Gourd*, about a Black family and a white family under slavery. In it, as in *Raisin*, Hansberry attempted to contradict the myths about Black people and to recapture and recast history. Her play was never performed; it was judged “too controversial” by the network. Hansberry had described Lena Younger, her mother-figure in *Raisin*, as an “affirmation,” as

the black matriarch incarnate, the bulwark of the Negro family since slavery, the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she, who in the mind of the black poet scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create black diplomats and university professors. It is she, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, who drives the young on into the fire hoses. And one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery. Or goes out and buys a house in an all-white neighborhood where her children may possibly be killed by bricks thrown through the windows by a shrieking racist mob.¹³

With her mother-figure in *The Drinking Gourd*, Hansberry went further. Rissa, the slavemother, does what the Black mother-figure in white American mythology has never done: She, in effect, kills a white man (the “good” white man), and gives his guns to her children, after her son has been blinded for learning to read. The play ends as Rissa and her band of revolutionaries escape into the woods.

We know that Black women—mothers and nonmothers—have been intrinsic to the activism of Black history. There is the following story, for example, quoted by Angela Davis:

She didn’t work in the field. She worked at a loom. She worked so long and so often that once she went to sleep at the loom. Her master’s boy saw her and told his mother. His mother told him to take a whip and wear her out. He took a stick and went out to beat her awake. He beat my mother till she woke up. When she woke up, she took a pole out of the loom and beat him nearly to death with it. He hollered, “Don’t beat me no more, and I won’t let ‘em whip you.”

She said, “I’m going to kill you. These black titties sucked you, and then you come out here to beat me.” And when she left him, he wasn’t able to walk.

And that was the last I seen of her until after freedom. She went out and got an old cow that she used to milk—Dolly, she called it. She rode away from the plantation because she knew they would kill her if she stayed.¹⁴



Drawing by Vivian E. Browne.

This story tells of a Black woman in the act of freeing herself. A selfish need for freedom, and a recognition that freedom is their right, is something usually denied to Black women historically, even when they are recognized as liberators of their race. But Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Sojourner Truth—and the many women whose names we do not know—all felt a personal desire for freedom, which came from a feeling of self-esteem, self-worth, and they translated this into a political commitment that their people also be free. Harriet Tubman said:

I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now I was free. Dere was such a glory ober eberything, de sun came like gold trou de trees, and ober de fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.

I had crossed de line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but dere was no one to welcome me to de land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in de ole cabin quarter, wid de ole folks, and my brudders and sisters. But to dis solemn resolution I came; I was free, and dey should be free also; I would make a home for dem in de North, and de Lord helping me, I would bring dem all dere.¹⁵

The artist, like the liberator, must begin with herself.

Edmonia Lewis (1843–1900?) is the first woman of color we know whose work as a visual artist was recognized by the dominant culture. During her life as a sculptor she was confronted with the objectification of herself as Black and female.

While her work was not ignored, it was given a secondary place of importance by most critics. Lewis was seen as a "wonder," a work of art in herself—a curiosity. The following excerpt from an abolitionist newspaper describes the artist and her marble group *Forever Free* (1867):

No one... could look upon this piece of sculpture without profound emotion. The noble figure of the man, his very muscles seeming to swell with gratitude; the expression of the right now to protect, with which he throws his arms around his kneeling wife; the "Praise de Lord" hovering on their lips; the broken chain—all so instinct with life, telling in the very poetry of stone the story of the last ten years. And when it is remembered who created this group, an added interest is given to it.... Will anyone believe it was the small hand of a girl that wrought the marble and kindled the light within it?—a girl of dusky hue, mixed Indian and African, who not more than eight years ago sat down on the steps of City Hall to eat the dry crackers with which alone her empty purse allowed her to satisfy her hunger; but as she sat and thought... of her homeless state, something caught her eye, the hunger of the stomach ceased, but the hunger of the soul began. That quiet statue of the good old Franklin... kindled the latent genius which was enshrined within her, as her own group was in marble, till her chisel brought it out. For weeks she haunted that spot and the State House, where she could see Washington and Webster. She asked questions, and found that such things were first made in clay. She got a lump of hard mud, shaped her some sticks,

have won it and placed somewhere "out there."

It is commonly believed that the slaves were freed by white Northerners. But as W. E. B. Du Bois observed: "In proportion to population, more Negroes than whites fought in the Civil War. These people, withdrawn from the support of the Confederacy, with the threat of the withdrawal of millions more, made the opposition of the slaveholder useless, unless they themselves freed and armed their own slaves."¹⁷ The journey out of slavery was one in which Black people played a dominant role. It is this that Lewis is commemorating in her work. She had earlier commemorated the slave-woman in her piece *Freedwoman on First Hearing of Her Liberty* (which has been lost to us).

In an interview with the Lorain County News, Lewis spoke of her childhood:

My mother was a wild Indian and was born in Albany, of copper color and with straight black hair. There she made and sold moccasins. My father, who was a Negro, and a gentleman's servant, saw her and married her.... Mother often left home and wandered with her people, whose habits she could not forget, and thus we were brought up in the same wild manner. Until I was twelve years old, I led this wandering life, fishing and swimming... and making moccasins.¹⁸

Alice Walker speaks about looking "high—and low" for the artistic antecedents of Black women; she speaks specifically of her own mother's gar-

this style and with this material are evident: the curly hair of the male figure and the broken chain are the only signs that these are people of color.

Of her sculpture *Hagar* (1875), Lewis said: "I have a strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered."²⁰ Again, we have to look beyond the actual figure to the story Lewis is illustrating to find the political/historical statement in her work. Hagar was an Egyptian, a woman of color, the slave of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Hagar was "given" to Abraham by Sarah so that he might have an heir; and she was the mother of his first-born son, Ishmael. Then Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. The book of Genesis continues the story:

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the lad and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named.... So Abraham rose early in the morning... and sent [Hagar] away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.²¹

It is quite impossible to read this story and not think of the Black woman under slavery, raped

Left to right: Lillian Smith, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Phillis Wheatley.

and, her heart divided between art and the terrible need for freedom... she wrought out... an admirable bust of [Col. Robert Gould Shaw, white Bostonian commander of a company of Black troops organized due to pressure from Frederick Douglass].¹⁶

When this article was written Lewis was a well-known sculptor living in Rome, with a degree in liberal arts from Oberlin College. She had studied sculpture with Edward Brackett, a prominent neoclassical artist. She was not particularly interested in creating likenesses of Franklin, Washington, or Webster—her interest in these pieces would have been purely technical, not inspirational. The only "leader" of white America she ever depicted was Abraham Lincoln. All her other subjects were drawn from her history as the daughter of a Black man and a Chippewa woman, and her consciousness of racism.

Just as the author patronizes the artist, so does he minimize the political statement of her work. For instance, he uses the word "gratitude" rather than "pride," or "triumph," in his comments on the male figure; he focuses on the arm which embraces the woman, rather than on the hand which is raised, the broken chain dangling from the wrist. He cites the struggle of the last "ten" years with typical white solipsism. In addition, his "Praise de Lord" does not allow us knowledge of the politics of Black Americans, to which religion has been historically intrinsic. Rather, it can be read in such a way that the triumph is taken from the hands of those who

den—how this was the place of her mother's creative expression, the background against which Walker's own work proceeded: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden I found my own."¹⁹ This statement makes me think of Lewis's mother, her independence and her craft. The fact that she trained her daughter in her art form. That she taught her strength.

Lewis's sculpture, because she chose primarily to depict subjects directly related to her own and her people's experience, has a certain power. Where her pieces lose power is in the style she adopted and the material she used: the neoclassical style, with its emphatic focus on Greek idealization, and the pristine whiteness of the marble, which supports the narrowness of the style—so that a black face must appear white and be carved according to principles of beauty which are white, "fine" features as perfection. The 19th century was the century of jubilee, of a women's movement, and of a revolutionary movement in Europe. But these moral reactions need to be understood against the immorality which dominated that century: the "white man's burden," the political/religious/economic affirmation of the supremacy of the white race. The neoclassical style arose quite naturally from all this, based as it was on the imitation of fifth-century Athens, a slave-owning, gynephobic society, but one popularly regarded as high-minded and democratic. In Lewis's *Forever Free* the limitations placed on a Black and Indian artist working in

by the white master, serving the white master's wife, bearing a child by the white master, and bearing the responsibility for that child—with no power over her own fate, or that of her child. Lewis's choice of Hagar as a symbol for Black slave-women also fits into the Black tradition in America, one immersed in the stories of the Bible (often the Bible was the only access slaves had to the written word), and characterized by the translation of these stories according to Black history.

In reading this account from Genesis, I am also thrown back to Lillian Smith's description of the split between Black and white women. It is Sarah who is made responsible for the banishment of Hagar. Her husband and his god remain blameless, even noble.

After approximately ten years of recognition, Edmonia Lewis "disappeared." This sort of falling out of fame is usually seen as tragic, but I wonder what happened to her? Was her disappearance by choice? Or did she disappear because she was a Black woman artist who was no longer in vogue, because she was no longer seen as "exotic"?

In contrast to Lewis's white marble sculptures, Elizabeth Catlett's figures are done in brown wood or terra cotta, or another material which suggests the color of her subjects, or at least that her subjects are people of color. No white Western features replace the characteristics of Black and other Third World people. But Catlett is a contemporary artist, one who rela-



tively early in her career left this country and moved to a country of colored people—Mexico.

Yet her piece *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1969), when we make allowances over



Edmonia Lewis. *Hagar in the Wilderness*. 1896. Marble. 4'4" high. Frederick Douglass Institute, Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.

time and across space, is not that far removed in political intent from Lewis's *Hagar*. In form the differences are enormous: *Hagar*'s hands are clasped in front of her, in resignation, in supplication—in the wilderness she has to turn to Abraham's god to save the life of her son. The female figure of *Homage* has one arm raised in a powerful and defiant fist. The similarity between the two pieces is that both, I think, represent part of the history of Black women, particularly Black motherhood, in America. The midsection of the *Homage* figure is an open space, which I take as Catlett's statement of the historical white denial of Black women's right to motherhood in any self-defining way, and of the theft of the children of Black women, and of what these children represent—whether through the laws of the slavocracy or those of postindustrial America.

Catlett uses the theme of Black women and children often in her work, depicting over and again the heroism required of Black women sim-

ply to survive. In her lithographs, engravings, and linocuts, Catlett seeks to tell the history of Black women, breaking away from the objectification of the dominant culture. We might, for example, look at her wood engraving of Harriet Tubman (1975), in contrast to Judy Chicago's Sojourner Truth plate in the *Dinner Party*.²² Catlett's Harriet dominates the foreground; one powerful arm points forward, the other holds a rifle. She is tall and she is strong and she is Black. In the background are the men and women she leads. What is interesting to me is the expression on Tubman's face—she is fiercely determined. This expression is repeated in the group she leads. There is no passivity here, no resignation, no impotent tears, no "humming." Rather, this is a portrait of the activity of a people in conflict with their oppression.

Catlett has stated that art should be obviously political, available to the people who are its subject. We have no such clear statement from Lewis, but we must wonder for whom her work was done, finally; and whether she stopped working as she did because of a distance between her art and her subjects.

Harriet Powers (1837-1911) was a quilt-maker (only two of her quilts are known to survive). She worked in appliquéd, a method of needlework devised by the Fon of Dahomey, brought to this country on slave ships.²³ Betye Saar is a collector; an artist who constructs images with various objects, mementos, photographs, bits and pieces picked up here and there and saved; things used in another context, by other hands. Both Powers and Saar endow their work with a belief in the spiritual nature of the ordinary. Powers's quilts, constructed from the scraps saved by a poor Black woman, convey a real portrait of one Black woman's religion and politics. Marie Jeane Adams states: "The more one examines the style and content of Harriet Powers's work, the more one sees that it projects a grand spiritual vision that breaks out of the confines of folk art."²⁴

The employment of once-used objects by these artists is one aspect of their work which needs further thought. In the history of white Western art there is an obsession with the purity of materials. And also with their value. For one example: In the art of 15th-century Italy, and even earlier, the color ultramarine was often used to depict the most important figure or feature in a painting or fresco. This choice was made with the knowledge that the color was created by crushing lapis lazuli, the most expensive source of pigment after gold.²⁵ And this choice extended to the very meaning of the work produced. In the art of Powers and Saar, the sources of the artist's materials are also important, but the choice is more deeply personal. We might ask: How much does the power of a work of art consist in the material which makes up that work? What is the difference between a work of art made with things specifically employed in that work and never before, and one which uses only things used before? Is one more useful than the other? More magical than the other?

We know of Harriet Powers's work partly because of a white woman—Jennie Smith, herself an artist—who left an 18-page monograph on the artist. She recorded the following in 1891, when Powers finally agreed to sell her a quilt:

I found the owner, a negro woman, who lived in the country on a little farm whereon she and her husband made a respectable living. . . . Last year I sent word that I would buy it if she still wanted to dispose of it. She arrived one afternoon in front of my door. . . . with the precious burden. . . . encased in a clean crocus sack.

She offered it for ten dollars, but I told her I only

had five to give. After going out consulting with her husband she returned and said, "Owin' to de hardness of de times, my old man 'lows I'd better teck hit." Not being a new woman she obeyed.

After giving me a full description of each scene with great earnestness, she departed but has been back several times to visit the darling offspring of her brain.²⁶

Powers's second quilt—now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts—was commissioned in 1898 by the wives of professors at Atlanta University. This quilt, known as the second Bible quilt, consists of five columns, each divided into three frames. All the frames deal with the theme of God's vengeance and redemption, illustrated through Biblical images and representations of cataclysmic events in 18th- and 19th-century America.

This...much-exhibited quilt portrays fifteen scenes. Ten are drawn from familiar Bible stories which concern the threat of God's judgment inextricably fused with His mercy and man's redemption, among which are the Fall, Moses in the wilderness, Job's trials, Jonah and the whale, the Baptism of Christ and the Crucifixion. . . . Four others depict astronomical or meteorological events, only one of which, an extremely cold spell in 1895 in the eastern United States, occurred in Mrs. Powers' adult life. Given Mrs. Powers' intensely religious outlook, she interpreted these events in the celestial atmosphere as messages from God to mankind about punishment, apocalypse, and salvation.²⁷

The one frame which does not fit into this categorization is the one which, as Marie Jeane Adams observes, is the key to the quilt. Powers left a description in her own words of all the scenes in the quilt; of this particular frame, she said:

Rich people who were taught nothing of God. Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia. They told their parents to stop the clock at one and tomorrow it would strike one and so it did. This was the signal that they had entered everlasting punishment. The independent hog which ran 500 miles from Ga. to Va. Her name was Betts.²⁸

The frame has a clock in the center, stars and a moon scattered around, two human figures. At the bottom is the independent hog named Betts, the largest figure of the quilt. Metallic thread outlines the clockface and creates a tiara around the head of the white woman Kate Bell. Betts is made from gray cloth, but she is placed over a



Harriet Powers. *Bible Quilt (Detail)*. 1895. Cotton fabric. 68" x 105". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

swatch of orange so that her figure unmistakably stands out.

This quilt represents a great spiritual vision, but it also represents a great political vision; as

white folks. I take Betts to be a metaphor for this experience. Angela Davis has quoted Frederick Law Olmstead's description of a slave crew in Mississippi returning from the fields:

a confidence in their ability to struggle for themselves, their families and their people.³⁰

Black women were not dehumanized under slavery; they were dehumanized in white minds. I return again and again in my own mind to the adjective "independent," which Powers uses to describe Betts, a "chasseur on the march."

It is not that far a distance from Lewis's *Hagar*, to Catlett's *Homage*, to Powers's *Betts*, to Betye Saar's *Aunt Jemima*. Saar's construction, entitled *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, is perhaps the most obvious illustration of what I mean by the title of this essay: "Object into Subject." Here is the most popularized image of the Mammy—in the center of the piece she is a cookie jar, the source of nourishment for others; behind her are faces cut from the pancake mix. In front of the central figure is another image of Mammy, holding a white baby. And there is a broom alongside the central figure. But she also holds a pistol and a rifle; and the skirt of Mammy with the white baby forms an unmistakable Black fist. Saar's message is clear: Aunt Jemima will free herself.

In an interview in *Black Art*, Saar described the components she uses in her work:

They are all found objects or discarded objects, so they have to be remnants. They are connected with another sensitivity so it has to be a memory of belonging to another object, or at least having another function.³¹

Aunt Jemima has been created by another sensitivity than that of the artist who has made this portrait. *Aunt Jemima* has a memory of belonging to someone else, of being at the service of someone else. She exists against an image, which exists in another mind. The cookie jar is a remnant of another life: most likely she "lived" on the kitchen counter of a white family, maybe Saar found her discarded on a white elephant table, or at a garage sale. She has appeared to me in my travels, usually turning up in rural antique stores or church basements, labeled "collectible." The picture of Mammy with the white baby reminds me first of old magazine advertisements, usually, as I recall, for soap or cereal or other necessities of the servant role. And I additionally recall the many films of the '40s and '50s about white middle-class America, in which a large Black woman who worked in the kitchen was always present but only occasionally given a line to speak. She was played by Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, or Ethel Waters—and she was usually characterized by her loyalty to the white family for whom she worked. She also appeared on television: "Beulah" was a program in which she was featured. She was kind, honest, a good cook, always with a song to hum her troubles away; and as usual, devoted to those white folks.

All but three of the elements in Saar's construction are traditional to *Aunt Jemima*; the two guns and the fist are not. Saar, by including these unfamiliar aspects has changed the function of the figure she is representing. She has combined the myth with the reality of Black women's historic opposition to their oppression.

This representation of *Aunt Jemima* is startling. All of us who have grown up with the mythical figure of *Aunt Jemima* and her equally mythical attributes—whether or not we recognized they were mythic—have been affected. We may not have known her, but aren't we somehow convinced that somewhere she exists, or at least has existed? The last thing we would expect would be that she would carry a gun, or raise a hand. As a child in Jamaica I was taught that the women who worked for us were to be respected and



Betye Saar. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. 1972. Mixed media. 11 3/4" x 8" x 2 1/2". Courtesy Monique Knowlton Gallery.

well as hope, it represents rage. It is a safe guess that Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia were a son and daughter of the slavocracy. They stand surrounded by scenes representing the punishment meted out to those who are arrogant and self-serving, and the redemption promised those who are righteous. In this particular frame it is their sin of pride which has damned them; and Powers is clear in her belief that their damnation is well-earned. In contrast is the dominating figure of Betts, who in an act of self-liberation goes free. Her 500-mile flight from Georgia to Virginia is, as Adams points out, a reference to one route traveled by runaway slaves. And Betts is undeniably female—her teats hang down from her gray-cloth body. I think of Dolly—the cow in the anecdote cited above—being ridden away by a Black woman. And I think of the white idea of Black women as beasts of burden, "mules," farm animals; of the image of Harriet Tubman being forced to draw a wagon for the entertainment of

[I saw] forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of a bluish check stuff; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing like chausseurs on the march.²⁹

It would be very simple to romanticize this group of women. But, as Davis says, it is not slavery and the slave system that have made them strong; it is the experience of their labor and their knowledge of themselves as producers and creators. She quotes Marx: "labor is the living, shaping fire; it represents the impermanence of things, their temporality." Davis makes a brilliant connection here:

...perhaps these women had learned to extract from the oppressive circumstances of their lives the strength they needed to resist the daily dehumanization of slavery. Their awareness of their endless capacity for hard work may have imparted to them

obeyed, and yet I remember my 12-year-old light-skinned self exercising what I felt was my authority over these women, and being quite taken aback when one of the women threatened to beat me—and my mother backed her up. Just as I was shocked to find that another houseworker had tied up my cousins and shut them on the verandah because they were interfering with her work.

So while we may know the image is an image, the expectations of Black women behaving according to this image persist. As far as I can tell, Harriet Tubman carried both a carbine and a pistol. And she threatened to shoot any slave who decided to turn back on the journey north. Just as Lorraine Hansberry's slavemother armed her children and set out with them—after leaving a white man to die.

1. For Lillian Smith's definition of racism, see "The Mob and the Ghost" and "Words That Chain Us and Words That Set Us Free," in *The Winner Names the Age*, ed. Michelle Cliff (New York: Norton, 1978).
2. Erlene Stetson, "Studying Slavery," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, & Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1981).
3. Lorraine Hansberry, quoted in *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 206.
4. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton, 1949), p. 31.
5. Smith, *Winner*, p. 204.
6. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Working It Out*, ed. Sara Ruddick & Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 94.
7. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 105.
8. Quoted by Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 24.
9. Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1933), p. 105.
10. Although Frederickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind* deals primarily with stereotypes of Black men, with some alterations his categories apply to stereotypes of Black women.
11. Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston: South End, 1981), p. 84.
12. Ibid., p. 85.
13. Hansberry, *Winner*, p. 210.
14. Angela Davis, "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* (1971), p. 13.
15. Quoted by Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: Moses of Her People* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel, 1974, rpt.), pp. 30-32.
16. Quoted by Phebe A. Hanaford, *Daughters of America* (Augusta, Me: True, n.d.), pp. 296-97.
17. Quoted by Sara Bennett & Joan Gibbs, "Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community," in *Top Ranking*, ed. Bennett & Gibbs (Brooklyn: February 3rd Press, 1980), pp. 14-15.
18. Quoted by Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage* (New York: Paddington, 1974), p. 159.
19. Walker, "Gardens," p. 101.
20. Tufts, *Heritage*, p. 163.
21. Genesis, 21: 9-14.
22. For a brilliant analysis of the Sojourner Truth plate in Chicago's Dinner Party, see Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own," in *But Some of Us are Brave*.
23. This detail, and most of the information about Powers and her quilt, comes from Marie Jeane Adams, "The Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilts," *Black Art*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 12-28.
24. Ibid., p. 16.
25. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 9 ff.
26. Quoted by Mirra Bank, *Anonymous Was a Woman* (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), p. 118.
27. Adams, "Powers," p. 14.
28. Mrs. Powers's description of the quilt appears in both Adams and Bank.
29. Davis, "Black Woman's Role," p. 11.
30. Ibid.
31. Betye Saar, "Interview with Houston Conwill," *Black Art*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 9.

is it true what they say about colored pussy?

by hattie gossett

hey
is it really true what they say about colored pussy?
come on now
dont be trying to act like you dont know what i am talking about
you have heard those stories about colored pussy so stop pretending you
havent
you have heard how black and latina pussies are hot and uncontrollable
and i know you know the one about asian pussies and how they go from
side to side instead of up and down
and everybody knows about squaw pussies and how once a whiteman got
him some of that he wasnt never no more good
now at first i thought the logical answer to these stories is that they are
ignorant racist myths
but then i thought: what about all the weird colored stories about
colored pussy?
cuz you know colored pussies werent always treated with the highest
regard we deserve in the various colored worlds prior to our
discovery by the european talentscout/explorers
and we still arent
so now why is it that colored pussies have had to suffer so much oppression
and bad press from so many divergent sources?
is it cuz we really are evil and nasty and queer looking and smelly and
ugly like they say?
or
is it cuz we possess some secret strength which we take for granted but
which is a terrible threat to the various forces which are trying
to suppress us?
i mean just look at what black pussies have been subjected to alone
starting with ancient feudal rape and polygamy and clitoridectomy
and forced child marriages and continuing right on through colonial
industrial neocolonial rape and forced sterilization and
experimental surgery
and when i put all that stuff about black pussies together with the
stories i hear from other colored pussies about what they have had
to go through i am even more convinced
we must have some secret powers!
this must be why so many people have spent so much time vilifying
abusing hating and fearing colored pussy
and you know that usually the ones who be doing all this vilifying
abusing hating and fearing of colored pussy are the main ones who
just cant leave colored pussy alone dont you
they make all kinds of laws and restrictions to apartheid-ize colored
pussy and then as soon as the sun goes down guess who is seen
sneaking out back to the cabins?
and guess who cant do without colored pussy in their kitchens and fields
and factories and offices?
then theres the people who use colored pussy as a badge of certification
to ensure entre into certain circles
finally when i think about what would happen if all the colored pussies
went on strike even for a day
look out!
[especially if the together white pussies staged a same day sympathy
strike]
the pimps say colored pussy is an untapped goldmine
well they got it wrong
colored pussies aint goldmines untapped
colored pussies are yet un-named energies whose power for lighting up
the world is beyond all known measure

hattie gossett work herstory: babysitter paid companion secy cleaning person still seeking insightful and venturesome publisher for her collection presenting sister noblues & the original wild & free wimmins jazz & blues desert caravan & fish fry.