

# 18.

## Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture

From the outset, the Black Popular Culture conference exceeded my wildest expectations. During the three days of the conference, I was stunned, awed, and amazed by the output of such a fascinating array of minds. But perhaps the most surprising and welcome gift of all was Manning Marable's discussion of the political content of the conference poster, which juxtaposed images of now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and University of Oklahoma Professor Anita Hill. Because the poster had initially been viewed as problematic by the staff of the Studio Museum in Harlem, it had not been displayed during the first evening of the conference, which was held there.

From the earliest planning stages, it had always been my hope that the conference poster would refer to recent popular cultural events. But there was no way I could have anticipated such a mass cultural event as the Hill-Thomas hearings. For weeks, images of Thomas and Hill flooded our newspapers, magazines, and television screens. Moreover, for many feminists, myself included, the Hill-Thomas confrontation became a watershed event for its conjunction of issues of politics, race, and gender.

When Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas, Supreme Court judge nominee and former head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, of sexual harassment, Thomas responded by accusing the United States Senate and the press of engaging in the high-tech lynching of an uppity black. The newsprint, news magazine, and video representations of the faces of

either Hill or Thomas, or both in combination, rapidly came to signify a complicated nexus of the histories of slavery, lynching, sexual harassment and sexual abuse, the Supreme Court and Senate, black conservatism and black politics in general, and African American culture in the public imagination.

Hill and Thomas are conservatives, and as such, the hearings featured a long line of their conservative supporters, demonstrating the resourcefulness and strength of middle-class blacks on the Right.<sup>1</sup> Because both Hill and Thomas are from poor, rural backgrounds, are dark-skinned, and have obviously black facial features, there were no grounds upon which to accuse either of being less than authentically black. Yet their graphic and highly publicized argument with one another immediately caused a crisis of interpretation in the black community; the threat of a woman who had broken the unwritten law of gender was seen as more of a problem than Thomas's right-wing politics on the Supreme Court. Hill was automatically interpreted by an alarming number of black women as scheming and conniving for no other reason than that she was a black middle-class woman with an education and a career and because she had complained of sexual harassment on the job.

It was my suggestion to the designer of the poster, Bethany Johns, that we juxtapose newspaper images of Hill and Thomas in the poster because of the way in which their confrontation had come to represent multiple issues having to do with the hybridity of black popular culture. Featuring the two of them together was meant to pose symbolically the various contested narratives of black culture/popular culture/U.S. mass culture the conference was designed to explore: the debates of black feminist discourses versus black male authority in black struggles, black republicanism and conservatism versus blacks on the Left, black nationalism versus black popular culture, black crossover appeal in mass culture versus black-centered popular culture. Also, I was fascinated by the automatic volatility of situations in which race collides with gender in visual representation.

I would suggest that some of the anger the Hill-Thomas hearings aroused had to do with many viewers feeling overwhelmed by the visualizations of TV. Although the most sensitive matters discussed were not visualized—such as the pubic hair on the Coke can—the threat that they might be was perhaps looming, given the presence of the medium of television. To picture Hill and Thomas in our conference poster would indeed be a picture that would invoke a thousand (million?) words.

In fact, since the conference I've been imagining the image in the context of Barbara Kruger's work, which has never featured a black image. The

text would read, “Mommy and Daddy are fighting” — speaking to another set of psychological tensions provoked in the black community (perhaps the very thing the Studio Museum was uneasy about) in response to Anita Hill’s charge of sexual harassment. According to the official version in black political thought, black males and females are not supposed to disagree, even, or perhaps, especially in the context of the family. This is partly why the myth of the Huxtable family in *The Cosby Show* has so much power for black television audiences. The psychoanalytic paradigm in which the family romance describes the struggle within the family for sexual identity is supposed to have little or no relevance in a black context, and yet the very denial of it gives it an added explosive power.

That the juxtaposition of Hill and Thomas in the poster proved to be a problem reveals something about the problem of visibility in African American culture. I would like to propose that vision, visuality, and visibility are part of a problematic in African American discourse, and that problematic has much to do with related issues of gender, sexuality, postmodernism, and popular culture. The problem takes many forms — from the resistance to using Hill and Thomas as an image for a black popular culture conference to the problem of a white-dominated art world that does not usually conceptualize blacks as visual producers.

In the context of mass culture, the image of the black is larger than life. Historically, the body and the face of the black have posed no obstacle whatsoever to an unrelenting and generally contemptuous objectification. And yet, until recently, there has been no position within or outside American visual culture from which one could conceptualize the African American as a subject. The prominence of black directors in film finally threatens to change that picture. But the difficulty of the project for black film has to do precisely with the history of a mostly invisible black visuality.

In 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin wrote an essay titled “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?”<sup>2</sup> thus founding, in one extraordinary stroke, the discourse (dare I call it a movement?) of feminist art history. Of course, we are immediately suspicious of this simplistic narrative. There were, in fact, a lot of other struggles going on, including the political struggles among women and blacks; and within those struggles, there were a lot of art historians and critics, and, most of all, there were a lot of artists. Such moments as Nochlin’s article are anchored in multiple historical conjunctions and cultural formations. For instance, Lucy Lippard, who was and continues to be a major agent for feminist activism in the art world, was also writing art criticism at the same time. But what really fascinates me about the Nochlin article, to which I expect to return again and again in the work I

am doing on visibility in African American culture, is the profoundly positive and constructive effect of what many unbelievers then perceived as a negative gesture.

Indeed, I have already seen the fruits of my own negative gesture in naming this paper “Why Are There No Great Black Artists?” In her review of the conference, Daniela Salvioni remarked that she couldn’t figure out why I would want to entitle my closing remarks “Why Are There No *Famous* Black Artists?” (mistakenly getting the title of my closing remarks wrong),<sup>3</sup> especially given the recent surge of black visual artists in the mainstream art world—among others, Adrian Piper, David Hammons, Cheri Samba, and Renee Green—at a time when the art world appears to be committed to recasting, extending, and developing the networks and principles by which it has always defined its parameters.”<sup>4</sup>

Salvioni’s article appears in an issue of *Parkett* devoted to David Hammons and Mike Kelly. That Hammons, who is black, recently won a MacArthur and was included in the exhibition “Dislocations” at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) is perhaps what Salvioni means by suggesting that the art world is demonstrating a new commitment to extending its parameters. But Kirk Varnedoe, director of painting and sculpture at MoMA still feels the works of female and/or black artists are of insufficient quality. The principal engineer of the “High & Low” exhibition at the MoMA, he managed to refer extensively to American popular culture without ever mentioning or invoking the image of blacks, much less referring to blacks as visual producers.

And do we need to be reminded of the records of the Guggenheim, the Whitney, even Dia, and the figures Howardena Pindell compiled in “Art (World) & Racism,” in regard to exhibiting and collecting the works of black artists?<sup>5</sup>

Even a short list of names—Piper, Hammons, Martin Puryear, Jean-Michel Basquiat—appears to Salvioni to be redefining the parameters of white world acceptance, although it would be futile to attempt a list of white male artists (who continue to epitomize what constitutes the center) that wouldn’t cover several pages. Indeed, Salvioni’s substitution of “famous” for “great” in her recapitulation of my talk’s title is a telling mistake. “Famous” suggests the judgments and trends of the moment—which have always been promiscuous in their instrumentalization of black artists—whereas “great” usually refers to everlasting cultural processes as they have been codified in art history and museums for centuries. Fame may or may not lead to greatness. If you’re black, and you’re not a musician (music is the one area in which blacks are allowed “greatness”), it almost certainly will not.

When the article by Nochlin first came out, I, too, was among the unbelievers, one of those who were profoundly suspicious of the negativity of Nochlin's proposition. I was nineteen years old and a student at the City College of New York. I was taking art history courses and already occasionally writing art criticism. Under the influence of my mother—who was an artist involved with the Art Workers Coalition, Art Strike, and an organization she founded called *wsabal* (Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation)—I was participating in the art world Left as a black feminist activist. At the time, it never occurred to me even to think about being an art historian. I was going to be an art critic, a black Lucy Lippard who could affect the here and the now as I saw it, the situation in the streets. But first, I had to get through these art history courses.

These were my identities: feminist, black, art critic, writer, left activist. Although I insisted at the time that all these things were connected, they were not—not in or through me and not in the world. And because of that, I couldn't deal with those art history courses. It has taken me decades to understand how difficult it would have been to do what I was trying to do then—become an art critic.

For me, the purpose of this conference was to nurture critical practice among African American intellectuals. As an African American intellectual, I know how difficult it has been and continues to be to engage in critical cultural practices. The purpose of this conference was to move the center of African American cultural discourse beyond literary criticism into other politically significant precincts such as popular culture. In the process of planning this conference, I anticipated the black visual art, art criticism, and artists would be neglected (even though the conference would be given by fine art institutions). And so, I named my talk "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?" to address this lack and to specifically challenge the wisdom of excluding regimes of visibility from discussions of black popular culture.

Now, as I said, I was one of the unbelievers in response to Nochlin's article. What the hell did she mean there were no great women artists? For starters, my mother was a great woman artist and, moreover, there were lots of other great women artists I knew about. That there were more great men than great women had to do with how women had been unfairly disadvantaged historically. It was wrong, I thought, to rub salt in the wounds. But, as I was to subsequently discover over a period of twenty years, Nochlin was engaging in an institutional critique. She was addressing the problem of the institutionalization of rock-solid (as solid as the statue of Teddy Roosevelt with his Indian and his African in front of the Museum of Natural History) social, cultural, and economic boundaries around Western conceptions of genius,

individual talent, art, creativity, the artist, the master, culture. Nochlin's article was about women letting go of an old, defeatist, masochistic, soul-killing paradigm.

Her article shared a parallel conceptual framework with other initiatives taking place around gender issues across a variety of discourses in the social sciences, the humanities, and the other arts. This moment founded a new kind of feminist scholarship and criticism and, indeed, a new "kind of woman." Feminist scholars went from chasing windmills to modeling the kinds of foundations of thought upon which alternative institutions and alternative critical practices are built.

Now the problem with all of this, as we all know, was that it proved to be a very white middle-class affair; and even for those who were white and middle class, this feminist scholarship was and is still experienced as alienating and too abstract (although, if you return to Nochlin's article, it is devastatingly clear). A lot of people had a problem with the careerism of those who followed in the footsteps of such innovators of feminist criticism as Nochlin. But the most radical elements of that very institutionalization have not managed to graduate from their rather tenuous foothold on the margins of the art world and the academic establishment.

But I wish to retrieve a moment from Nochlin's article for further use. Throughout, as Nochlin grapples with the historical problem of the woman artist and, even more importantly, the visual problem of the representation of women in art, she adds to her formulation again and again the words, "and black artists, too."

Of course, the key problem among feminist theorists of color in our debates around identity and "otherness" has been this notion of "and blacks, too." The insight of the most recent generation of feminists of color has been that blacks (or black women or women of color or black men) cannot be tacked onto formulations about gender without engaging in a form of conceptual violence. In no theoretically useful way whatsoever are blacks *like* women.

However, what Nochlin writes about the inaccessibility of the institutionalization and construction of greatness is absolutely and frighteningly true for black artists, too. Indeed, black artists in the U.S. context have been subject to an even more absolute and devastating restriction upon their right to genius, individual talent, and Matthew Arnold's celebrated "sweetness and light."

One of the major focuses of Nochlin's article is the status of the female body in the proliferation of the nude in Western art. As is well known, the white woman is objectified with great frequency and loving and lavish at-

tention. But as Judith Wilson discussed at the conference, black nudes are virtually nonexistent in the work of black artists of the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century, they continue to be rare. Black artists were, no doubt, responding to the extraordinary contempt and loathing surrounding the black body in European and American eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought and visual culture. The question of the black nude is, then, one of the subjects for which the formulation “and blacks, too” would be totally inappropriate.

The problem here has to do with the always volatile combination of race, gender, and sexuality. Whereas the sensuous white female nude, painstakingly objectified for the pleasure of the white male spectator, is not only a commonplace but, indeed, a cliché of white Western imagery in fine art, the black female nude is disproportionately rare, especially in the conceptualizations of black artists.<sup>6</sup> White artists rarely depicted black nudes because of their lack of faith in black humanity, and black artists, in their turn, did the same, perhaps in response to the stereotypical emphasis on an allegedly animalistic hypersexuality.

“There are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cezanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are black American equivalents for the same,” Nochlin wrote.<sup>7</sup> The question most characteristic of hegemonic discourse — if you are just as good, where is your Beethoven, your Bach, your Titian, your Rembrandt? — is also the characteristic question in a black context. According to Paul Gilroy, long before “scientific racism gained its intellectual grip,” Hegel “denied blacks the ability to appreciate the necessary mystery involved in the creation of truly symbolic art.”<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly enough, however, the “Why are there no great black artists” mindset (and I mean in regard to visual artists) has not really been formally challenged by critical practices. And herein, I am expanding the category of visual art to include a much greater array of the visual work in a technological society: advertising, as well as commercial photography, design, architecture, fashion, film, and tv, in addition to the more elevated forms of fine art — painting, sculpture, and conceptual art. There has not been nearly the focus on reconceptualizing aesthetic criteria that there has been on refuting scientific rationalizations of racism. Basically, this means what we’ve tried to do is tie down one of two fists (science and aesthetics) in a combination punch. It should come as no surprise that racism succeeds again and again in freeing the other fist.

For those who can’t fathom the relationship between the judgments and practices of the art world and the art market, I am here to tell you that

the relationship of this formation in corporate capitalism, which has global manifestations, is that of two peas in a pod. Coming back for a moment to the issue of the institutionalization of visual regimes, I see “Why are there no great black artists?” as a crucial question. It is key, first of all, to providing the support to artists — in so-called black communities, outside of black communities, and around the world — that they need to continue their very critical work of disproving the lie of black invisibility, on the one hand, and lack of vision, on the other. I do not mean this self-indulgently. This is not merely about entertainment or pleasure, although these concerns are crucial as well.

From what I heard said at times about the visual arts during the conference, I think many black intellectuals don’t know who black artists are. I sensed a contempt for the visual art institutions in which the conference was held, especially the Studio Museum, where the audience was forced to share the space with current exhibitions. This was so because the Studio Museum is a black institution; unlike Dia, it doesn’t have enough money to have a separate auditorium. Quite a lot of black visual artists were present at the conference; I recognized Camille Billops, Mel Edwards, Lorraine O’Grady, Renee Green, Faith Ringgold, and Seitu Jones, to name a few. Black artists can be very quiet. I learned a new respect for the quiet ones; it is precisely the ones who are most quiet that we need to pay attention to.

These people — black visual artists — make things and make visions. Their job, their goal is to re-envision vision. What have they ever done to deserve our contempt? I think we need to begin to understand how regimes of visuality enforce racism, how they literally hold it in place.

In black communities and in white communities and in all the colored communities in between, I am interested in the potential for a revolution in vision. The relationship of the problem of visuality (who produces and reproduces vision) to popular culture and material culture and, ultimately, history is vital. We are in danger of getting wasted by ghosts, by what the black film historian Thomas Cripps calls “black shadows on the silver screen,”<sup>9</sup> by effusions and visual traces that haunt us because we refuse to study them, to look them in the eye. Many of us who come out of a black analytical tradition are in a world of darkness in regard to these matters.

Parallel to the visual void in black discourse, and intersecting with it, is the gap around the psychoanalytic. Besides Frantz Fanon, another African American interpreter of Freud and the psychoanalytic is Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*. We need to look for others. This gap brings us to the verge of another crisis, a crisis of mind. As we all know, the mind, even the black mind, is not made up of just literacy and intellect. It has not finished its work

or fulfilled itself even if it can sing like Mahalia Jackson or dance like John Bubbles. It goes on fucking us up and throwing us back, and it must be listened to. For me, the crucial aspect of African American nihilism that can be concretely addressed is that which we might identify as psychoanalytically derived, if such a dimension were conceivable in a black context.

Take, for instance, the very compelling scenario that unfolded at the conference, in which Houston Baker provocatively began his presentation by stating that he was not gay. Ostensibly he was responding to Henry Louis Gates's remarks about viewing *Looking for Langston*, remarks in which Gates suggested that he and Baker experienced homoerotic pleasure.

More to the point for me, when Baker, who could be described as the dean of African American literary criticism, announced that he was not gay, it was as if the entire conference reformulated itself around him. In emotional terms, I would describe it as the moment the father said he was not gay, which every son in the room had to challenge. His remarks caused an extraordinary amount of consternation. The debate that ensued between him and young male members of the audience proceeded to completely pre-occupy this panel, which was ostensibly about gender *and* sexuality and, as such, would have ordinarily been expected to focus on matters having to do with black women as well.

One of the goals of this conference was to achieve a gender balance in which the black feminist voice would be at least as strong as the male voice, but that didn't quite come off. Usefully, Lisa Kennedy suggested the discussion had gotten bogged down in Oedipal reenactments and that such reenactments were characteristic in African American cultural discourse.<sup>10</sup> Paul Gilroy went on to rebuke African American theorists for their presumably wrongheaded preoccupation with the family paradigm. But I don't think we have a chance of comprehending our own irrationality outside of the framework of the family romance.

One more thing. There is by now too vast an array of compelling narratives in which African American music is the founding discourse of the African American experience. Indeed, African music is the founding discourse of the diaspora, and that is probably as it should be. But, for my part, I am at war with music, to the extent that it completely defines the parameters of intellectual discourse in the African American community. For me, the self-limiting paradigm is not the family but musical production.

The morning of the final day of the conference, Gene, my husband, flicked on the television just in time to hear the words of a Cable News Network commentator announcing Kimberly Bergalis's death: "Kimberly Bergalis, who gave AIDS a human face." This seemed to me an extraordinary visual

formulation: a white middle-class woman infected with HIV by her dentist. And, of course, it implied that all the faces of people of color and gays with AIDS are not human.

Throughout this conference, the specter of AIDS and the threat it poses to all constructive intellectual activity on the Left haunted us. Despite the emotions this problem arouses, I think we owe it to ourselves to analyze the visual constructions of AIDS that render our visions both invisible and impossible. Mourning the dead, while deeply necessary (and I do mean to suggest that the hoopla over Baker's announcement was a kind of mourning), doesn't rid us of the necessity for analyzing the past, doing something to shape the present, and anticipating the future.

I would like especially to thank Phil Mariani for the initial idea of giving this conference at Dia and for her absolutely crucial contribution, as co-organizer, to its execution. I've always suspected that she was a heroic individual, but this conference proved it beyond a doubt. I would like to thank David Sternbach, Brian Wallis, Maud Lavin, Cornel West, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and Lisa Kennedy for their encouragement and support and for their help in the formulation of black popular culture as a discourse. Most of all, I would like to thank Coco Fusco who first introduced me to Ada Gay Griffin, Isaac Julien, and black film circles in general, and who recommended me for inclusion in the 1988 Birmingham Film Festival where I first met Stuart Hall. And, finally, I would like to thank Gina Dent, who made this volume possible.

Originally published in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991; reprint, New York: New Press, 2000), 333–346.

## Notes

1. Since the revision of this essay, Toni Morrison's excellent collection *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* has appeared and provides a provocative and informative addendum to our discussion of Anita Hill. This volume accounts, in part, for the shift in our conception of Anita Hill as conservative, a shift which is also confirmed by her recent organization of and participation in a conference entitled *Race, Gender and Power in America*, held at Georgetown University Law Center, October 16, 1992. Other engaging work on these topics includes bell hooks's "A Feminist Challenge: Must We Call Every Woman Sister," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*; *The Black Scholar's Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks Out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Thomas vs. Hill*; and the depiction of Anita Hill by black artist Willie Birch in his recent exhibition in SoHo, New York.
2. Linda Nochlin, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews* 69 (January

- 1971); reprinted in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 145–178.
3. Daniela Salvioni, “Black Popular Culture,” *Parkett* 31 (1992): 136–139, emphasis added.
  4. *Ibid.*, 139.
  5. Howardena Pindell, “Art (World) & Racism,” *Third Text* (spring-summer 1988): 157–190.
  6. See Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” *Afterimage* 20, no. 1 (1992): 14, 15, 19.
  7. Nochlin, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?,” 150.
  8. Paul Gilroy, “Art of Darkness: Black Art and the Problems of Belonging to England,” *Third Text* 10 (1990): 47.
  9. Thomas Cripps, *Black Shadows on the Silver Screen*. Documentary, 55 min. 1976. Produced by Post Newsweek Stations. Distributed by Lucerne Media.
  10. This refers to unpublished remarks.