Visualizing Black Female Sexuality:

The appropriation of controlling imagery in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* by Mickalene Thomas and *The End of Uncle Tom* and *A Subtlety* by Kara Walker

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Introduction

Black female sexuality within the United States has typically been framed in relation to an 'absence'. Perhaps most famously, this issue has been articulated by black feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers in 1984, through her statement that "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, unseen, not doing, awaiting their verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them..."[1] It is hard not to come across a scholarly text that deals with the subject of black female sexuality in which these words are not featured. Despite being written over thirty years ago, the message of this quote still seems to resonate within black feminist discourse in the twenty-first century. Here, Spillers' criticizes the suppression of black female sexual subjectivity within African-American communities up until the late twentieth century, which was intrinsically linked to the extreme forms of sexual abuse black women were subjected to during and after the Slave Era. A 'politics of silence' was created by African-American women in the nineteenth century as a means of protecting themselves from the stereotypical tropes projected onto them by the dominant culture.[2] They sought to create a clear separation between themselves and the categorization of possessing a sexually deviant and lecherous nature, which was used as a justification for the widespread rape of enslaved women in the United States. A 'culture of dissemblance' thereby formed, which kept the innermost aspects of African-American women's sexual desires and pleasures hidden from the dominant society. Consequently, contemporary African-American women's relationship with sexuality has been characterized by a continued devaluation and denial of sexual expression. The widespread discussion of the history of sexual exploitation and stereotyping does provide an understanding for why African-American women have chosen to be silent about their sexuality; however, it lacks a deeper insight into the complexity of black female sexuality.[3]

Such enduring issues led me to wonder how working from within the visual realm, which continues to be considered troubling in its representation of black women, African-American women artists are choosing to visualize the subject of their sexuality. In particular the works of Mickalene Thomas (born 1971) and Kara Walker (born 1969) drew my attention and their distinct approaches of depicting the black female body. At first the only parallels I saw between their art practices was that both artists worked in a figurative style and were closely associated with the post-blackness art

[1] Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and in Colour: Essays on American Literature and American Culture* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 153.
[2] Jennifer C. Nash, "Theorizing Pleasure: New Directions in Black Feminist Studies," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 508, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23269198.
[3] Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures,* ed. by J. Alexander and C.T. Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 94.

movement. However, throughout the scope of my research each artist's use of a satirical appropriation of cultural clichés and stereotypes began to emerge. What became particularly interesting to me was Thomas and Walker's direct engagement with imagery and racial myths from which African-American women in previous centuries vehemently tried to separate themselves. This includes Walker's use of the persistent stereotypical tropes of the Jezebel, a sexually rampant seductress, and her counter-image embodied by the Mammy, the nurturing, asexual 'ideal' slave. Thomas, on the other hand, alludes to the ways in which black women were exoticized and eroticized in ethnographic photography and used as negative foils to heighten the idealization of white femininity within Western painting. What possibilities does the direct use of such damaging, 'controlling' images create? Moreover, how does the public receive their work? Such questions ultimately brought me to my research question, namely to what extent does the appropriation of clichés and stereotypes counter restrictive categorizations of black female sexuality within dominant US culture? In order to investigate this question I will pose three sub-questions that also frame each of the three chapters of my thesis. The first deals with the complexities connected with viewing Thomas' visualization of black female sexual agency and lesbian identity in *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* (2011). The second asks in what way continuing issues of violation and the meta-narrative of the Slave Era are addressed in Walker's merging of the Mammy with the Jezebel in *The End of Uncle Tom* and the Mammy and the Sphinx in *A Subtlety*. Lastly, the third question examines how a post-black satirical approach pushes the parameters of self-determined black female sexual identity through a strategic appropriation of stereotypes and clichés.

To effectively answer these questions I will primarily analyze secondary sources that focus on black feminist theory. In particular, I draw on differing arguments about what are, or are not, considered to be progressive representations of black female sexuality. The potentials of pornography for black female pleasure, as argued by black feminist theorist Jennifer C. Nash, the struggles faced by African-American lesbians written about by Evelynn M. Hammonds, and the limitations posed by chiefly 'uplifting' images of African-American culture discussed by Michele Wallace, have all been instructive to my research. Cultural theorist Derek Conrad Murray's writings on post-black satire and the 'queer feminist gaze' in Thomas' work have been significant in furthering my own argument for the first sub-question. A visual analysis will furthermore be undertaken, in which I compare Thomas' *Les Trois Femmes Noires* to Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* to Gustave Courbet's *Le Sommeil* (1866). My second sub-question will be framed through a visual analysis of *The End of Uncle Tom* and *A Subtlety* in relation to the characteristics ascribed to the stereotypical tropes of the Mammy and Jezebel.

Texts by black feminist theorist Amber Jamilla Musser and art historian Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, which investigate the implication of the viewer and the 'rememory' of slavery, help build the framework of my own analysis. As the use of satire in the works of contemporary African-American artists has so far only been explicitly addressed in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights,* I refer to this publication at length to answer my last sub-question. Additionally, writings on satire and irony within the literary realm inform this section. The notion of 'post-blackness' serves as a further theoretical approach in relation to my examination of each case study's engagement with satire and appropriation.

As previously mentioned, my thesis will be structured in three chapters. The first chapter deals with the way in which *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* break with the tradition of omitting the black female body from the Western art historical tradition. In reconceptualizing Manet and Courbet's paintings, which depict eroticized white female nudes, Thomas seeks to present images of black female sexual agency and empowerment. Not only nineteenth century French paintings are reimagined here, but also ethnographic photography and 1970s Blaxploitation films are alluded to. In this section I explore whether or not a viewer, who is unaware of the intellectual discourse and cultural sources referenced in these works, would necessarily interpret them in the way Thomas intended. The required contextual knowledge needed to fully understand the ironic nuances of either piece is not something every audience member possesses. In this case what would differentiate them from the original paintings made by Courbet and Manet in their rendering of the female form? Murray's concept of the 'queer feminist gaze' serves to compare the depiction of the models in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* with that of the highly criticized 'male gaze'. Moreover, I examine the potentiality of poet and writer Audre Lorde's notion of the 'erotic' to depict sexual pleasure and African-American lesbian sexuality in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* and the complexity of recognizably visualizing lesbian intimacy.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus to Walker's engagement with the Mammy figure. The asexuality of the Mammy becomes merged with the Jezebel's lecherous nature and the supposed excessiveness of black female sexuality. I analyze how a figure group from the installation of *The End of Uncle Tom,* showing three black female silhouettes suckling each other's breasts, collapses the oppositional poles black female sexuality is presented through the Mammy and the Jezebel. In addition, the countering of a single dictating narrative of the past and how this offers an alternative to viewing African-American women as 'eternal victims' is explored. The last section of this chapter examines continued issues of violation in the public art piece *A Subtlety* and its central work the 'Sugar Baby', an immense sugar sculpture featuring a nude Mammy positioned in the stance of the mythical

Sphinx. I analyze the contradiction between art critical expectations of the 'Sugar Baby' as a monument of autonomous sexual agency and the reality of visitors' inappropriate interactions with the exposed vagina and breasts of the Sugar Baby. I am particularly interested in the debate this installation sparked about the violation of the sexually suggestive black female figure within the public realm; issues that do not necessarily emerge within scholarly discourse on black female sexuality. Finally, the third chapter compares Thomas and Walker's distinct satirical approaches of appropriation. I explore the difference between what I argue is a 'stable' irony in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* and an 'unstable' irony in *The End of Uncle Tom* and *A Subtlety*. Moreover, how these different types of irony affect the public reception of the satirical elements of each respective artwork is investigated. As both artists are closely linked with the post-blackness art movement, the notion of post-blackness is addressed, particularly the ways in which its participants try to set themselves apart from the restrictions of race and an authoritarian, ideological view on 'blackness'. I conclude my thesis by summarizing my findings on the complexities of visualizing black female sexuality through the appropriation of cultural clichés and stereotypes in my selected case studies and thereby attempt to answer my research question.

Chapter 1:
An Intra-Cultural Dialogue of Clichés

A reoccurring theme within the writing of contemporary black feminist theorists has been the importance of self-definition as a means of dissecting the impact of race, gender, class and sexuality within the daily lives of African-American women.[4] In particular, the subject of black female sexuality, or more to say the absence which has historically defined it, has in the last thirty years taken center stage within this discourse. In the early 1980's Hortense Spillers was one of the first black feminist scholars to explicitly focus on the problems caused by the suppression of black female sexuality.[5] African-American women's invisibility within public discourse in the United States was particularly marked by a lack of space for eloquently expressing issues concerning their sexuality.[6] Defined by the dominant culture, rather than by themselves, the supposed characteristics of African-American women's sexuality were presented in binary opposition: either as exaggerated and lecherous, or as completely absent and asexual. Black feminist social theorist Patricia Hill-Collins claims that through asserting their own definition of self, African-American women are able to oppose this oppressive dialogue which systematically miscategorizes them.[7] However, within visual culture in what way are expressions of black female sexual agency depicted and, moreover, made immediately recognizable as such? By taking the writing of black feminist scholars and cultural critics as a theoretical framework, I analyze their arguments on sexual agency and lesbian identity in relation to Mickalene Thomas' *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* (2011).

The photographic and painted versions of *Les Trois Femmes Noires* (Figures 1 & 2) depict a restaging of French artist Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Figure 3), featuring - instead of his white male and female figures - three assertive-looking black women. However, *Les Trois Femmes Noires* draws on other conventions as well, such as costumes of female characters in 1970s Blaxploitation films and the stylized construction of fashion photography. The photograph *Courbet 3 (Sleep)*(Figure 4) reimagines French artist Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *Le Sommeil* (Figure 5), and here too the two white female nudes are replaced by two black women locked in an intimate embrace. In addition to referencing Courbet, this image appropriates ethnographic

[4] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Conspicuousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 114.
[5] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "The Body Politic: The Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 14.
[6] Spillers, *Black, White and in Colour*, 153.
[7] Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 10.

photography and the rich patterns found in the backdrops of twentieth-century African photography. In these two works Thomas appropriates specific cultural clichés traditionally dealing with the female body from popular culture and Western art history. She thereby creates an intra-cultural dialogue that is meant to critique the history of black female representation. However, if a viewer lacks the required knowledge of these cultural traditions and the connected intellectual discourse, or even of Thomas as an artist, would they still understand *Les Trois Femmes Noires* as sexually empowering, or rather as exoticizing the female figures? In Thomas' advancement of what Derek Conrad Murray refers to as a 'queer feminist gaze', how does this gaze differentiate from that of the widely criticized 'male gaze'? By examining Thomas' treatment of 'the gaze', I analyze how she seeks to make visible African-American lesbian identity in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)*, which intersects with the expression of black female sexual pleasure and desire. However, how recognizable must an artwork be in order to make explicit its representation of lesbian intimacy and not simply a close friendship?

Reimagining Le déjeuner sur l'herbe

Part of Thomas' artistic approach is reconfiguring the sexual fantasies often criticized by feminist art historians which are pursued through the supposedly objectified white female body by male artists. Her restaging of iconic European paintings by artists such as Manet and Courbet is a strategic move, as their work is widely seen as sexually provocative.[8] *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* famously caused a great controversy when it was first exhibited in Paris. The explicit, un-mythologized sexual suggestiveness of the main female nude was considered scandalous within French society of the nineteenth century. Perhaps most outrageous of all was that her gaze unashamedly met that of the viewer. Feminist art historians, such as Griselda Pollock, in the 1990s began to re-evaluate Manet's work based on the unequal gender binaries reflected in his portrayal of female figures. Within this context the assumed male viewer is always placed within an active role, whereas the female subject is presented as passive. This argument builds on Laura Mulvey's 1975 text "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" which addresses the concept of the 'male gaze' within cinematic practices. She criticizes this gaze for projecting sexual fantasies onto the female form; thereby becoming "simultaneously displayed and looked at."[9] Pollock claims that the female nude is made into an

[8] Charlotte Mullins, *Picturing People: The New State of the Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 92.
[9] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures (Language, Discourse, Soceity)* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 19.

available commodity which allows the viewer unrestricted rights of looking.[10] However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Manet's nude model does not offer a fully submissive figure, but rather resolutely meets the venturing gaze of the viewer. I would argue that this challenging look, in combination with the feminist critique of the sexualization of the white female figure, made the reimagination of *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* an attractive subject for Thomas. As stated by artist and cultural critic Lorraine O'Grady, black and white female sexuality can never be understood as fully separate from one other.[11] However, white female sexuality tends to dominate the general discourse on 'female sexuality'. Thomas' appropriation of a painting famously criticized for its objectification of the white female figure, which paradoxically also features a woman actively staring back, offered an ideal opportunity for reconstructing the image of the black female body in both a critical yet playful way.

Visibility becomes a key factor strategically employed by artists such as Thomas, Renée Cox, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems. As argued by Nicole F. Fleetwood, the performance of hypervisibility allows for these artists to engage with dominant representations of black women and create new, alternative codes of meaning.[12] In their work, they try to disassociate the black female body from alleged 'excessiveness'. According to Fleetwood, black women, in Europe and the United States, were constructed as "having/being too much" both physically and within their sexual nature, particularly in relation to white womanhood.[13] African-American women artists, such as Thomas, make use of exactly this dichotomy, which had traditionally problematized the black female body in visual culture and public discourse. The depiction of women of color further functions as a counteractive method against the idealization of chiefly the white female form set in place by Western art history.[14] Thomas' photographic and painterly body of work attempts to distance itself from a protectionist strategy, and instead deals with what Murray refers to as a "politics of black female pleasure."[15] Her approach aims to confirm black female sexual agency by making visible African-American women's experiences of drawing pleasure from the visibility of their own bodies.[16] Thomas partially tries to achieve this through a very conscious appropriation and restaging of

[10] Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 299.
[11] Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art/Identity/Action*, ed. by Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 152.
[12] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 105.
[13] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 29.
[14] Mullins, *Picturing People*, 10.
[15] Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity After Civil Rights* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2016), 142.
[16] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 139.

paintings by white male artists that featured white female models. Appropriation is often implemented as a strategic method by groups who experience oppression, by making use of the stereotypical labels projected onto them by the dominant culture as a way of challenging previously negatively charged meanings.[17] This practice has been widely adopted by a number of postmodern feminist artists as a counter-hegemonic approach to confront the history of female objectification within art.[18]

This calculated representational act, in which women create images of themselves, or other women, based on established masterworks, allows them to assert a claim over the representation of their bodies.[19] Following this argument, *Les Trois Femmes Noires* or *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* should then offer an unproblematic and obvious representation of black female sexual empowerment. However, the depiction of the black female body within the United States tends to be far more intricate than that of white female figures as a consequence of the long history of exploitation and miscategorization of black women during and after the Slave Era. Avoidance of the black female nude up until the mid-twentieth century in the United States, by both white and black artists, highlights how charged the image of the black female body was. Art historian Lisa Collins describes the black female body as "overburdened by historical tensions of race, gender, and sexuality."[20] The visible black female body was therefore always going to be troubling to the dominant culture.[21] This historical tension therefore arguably also infiltrates the viewing of the black female figures in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep).* In the United States, African-American women were too closely linked to the sexual abuses female slaves endured during the Slave Era that continued after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.[22] The protectionist method of silence, which marked theoretical and literary discussions of black female sexuality, caused African-American artists to cover-up the black female figure within their work. As claimed by curator Gill Saunders "nudity is the prime signifier of sexuality," [23] therefore the image of the black female nude would have elicited fears of affirming stereotypes of the sexual promiscuity of African-American women. Thomas tries to create a counternarrative to this troubling association with the black female body by providing a space for viewing representations of black female agency. Part of this approach includes the

[17] Helene A. Shugart, "Counterhegemonic Acts: Appropriation as a Feminist Strategy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no.2 (May 1997): 211.
[18] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 113.
[19] Derek Conrad Murray, "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," *American Art* 28, no.1 (Spring 2014): 11.
[20] Lisa Collins, "Economies of the Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*: *The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 100.
[21] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 6.
[22] Collins, "Economies of the Flesh," 102.
[23] Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 73.

evocation of cultural clichés that purposefully allude to the problematic tradition of representing African-American women. Instead of separating her models from these conventions, Thomas directly engages with them. Murray argues that she thereby seeks to 'queer' the black female body in order to construct new meanings for the visualization of African-American women and their sexuality.[24]

In *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* created as both a photograph and painting, Thomas aims to evoke an image that exudes a strong feeling of black female subjectivity. Thomas replaced Manet's white male and female figures, with three assertive-looking African-American women. Intriguingly, the second woman found bathing in the background of Manet's painting is not featured in Thomas' adaptation. With an averted gaze and clasping onto her dress while bathing, she appears much more demure than the other brazenly nude woman. Perhaps it was this sense of vulnerability that led Thomas to exclude this figure in her restaging of the scene. Instead, her three models are placed striking regal poses, countering the gaze of the viewer through their own unflinching look. One of the women holds out a flower in her hand, which is meant to symbolize the women's sexual strength.[25] Especially in the photograph, details such as the colorful dresses, the exaggerated make-up, and oiled skin stand out. Their dresses recall the style of the 1960s and 70s, as they sit upon African-patterned cloths.

The three women are placed within a phantasmatic landscape. The background is created mainly through shadows and thereby draws the eye of the viewer even more to the women who cannot be overlooked. This is emphasized further through the sheer size of each version of *Les Trois Femmes Noires,* taking up the space of almost an entire exhibition wall (Figure 6). Thomas tries to advance different aspects of black female subjectivity by offering her models a space to assert themselves as a way to give them agency within the work.[26] For contemporary black cultural producers there has been an increasing move towards the intersections between subjectivity and visuality, which Fleetwood argues mediates the field of vision and the visible object, thereby creating new methods of operation.[27] Thomas uses visuality in order to create a statement in relation to the desirability of her subjects. In nineteenth and early twentieth century black feminist thought,

[24] Derek Conrad Murray, "Post-Black Art and the Resurrection of African American Satire," in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights*, ed. by Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 14.
[25] This is based on the Greek myth of the "Judgement of Paris" where a contest takes place between Aphrodite, Hera and Athena for a golden apple which is inscribed with "to the fairest." "Mickalene Thomas: Le dejeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires," Lehmann Maupin, accessed February 21, 2018, http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2010-03_the-museum-of-modern-art-new-york-ny.
[26] Olivia Lai, "Interview: American artist Mickalene Thomas on painting women of colour," *TimeOut*, November 29, 2016, https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/art/interview-american-artist-mickalene-thomas-on-painting-women-of-colour.
[27] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 15.

visibility of African-American women signified a troubling vulnerability, especially within the context of visual culture.[28] Visibility meant the threat of inflicted sexual and physical violence in both private and public spaces. In *Les Trois Femmes Noires*, Thomas places her models into this contested terrain in order to try and facilitate a space for recovery, which simultaneously also intends to provoke.

Each version of *Les Trois Femmes Noires* links to a distinct cultural convention, which consequently can create alternative interpretations. For instance, the painting in its collaged, disassembled/reassembled approach conjures not only the painting by Manet, but also among others the artistic style of Pablo Picasso. In referencing renowned Western artists, *Les Trois Femmes Noires* thus becomes situated within the Western art historical tradition of rendering the female form. Thomas strategically connects her work to these artists and the idealized femininity and beauty the figures in their paintings are associated with. Conversely, the photograph's stylized performative atmosphere evokes the staged character of fashion photography, which is usually categorized as part of popular culture rather than 'fine art'. The clothing and Afro hairstyle of the models furthermore act as a citation of the female characters featured in 1970s Blaxploitation films. These films have been criticized by black feminist scholars for their marginalization of African-American women that maintained an unequal gender hierarchy in order to further a macho male orientated image.[29] It should also be noted that photography has a long and troubling history of categorizing women of color within ethnographic and exotic terms.

Would the viewer therefore interpret *Les Trois Femmes Noires* differently if he or she did not know anything about the artist behind the displayed work? What to some might seem like an unmistakably clear representation of a liberated black female subjectivity is not necessarily true for an uninformed viewer. If he or she believed that, for instance, a white male artist had created the image, the scene could be interpreted as falling into the cultural tradition of exoticizing or fetishizing the black female figure. This is the difficultly underlying the visualization of black female sexuality; the way it is read relies heavily on a contextual understanding. Knowing that Thomas is an African-American woman artist makes her intention of creating an image depicting her vision of strong black female agency more easily recognizable. Lacking such an insight could create a reading of *Les Trois Femmes Noires* as 'othering' the featured models. Thomas, however, seems aware of this risk of misinterpretation. She makes a conscious decision to appropriate specific cultural conventions within her work that present a form of sexualizing or objectifying the female body, with the

[28] Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 30.
[29] John Robert Terry, "Toward the Gendering of Blaxploitation and Black Power," *Madison Historical Review* 9. no.5 (2012): 83. http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol9/iss1/5.

expectation that African-American viewers will grasp her intended satirical critique of these clichés. It is, however, important to keep in mind that there is never a full guarantee that Thomas' anticipation will necessarily hold true for every single viewer who is not aware of the specific cultural references she alludes to in her work.

The queer feminist gaze and visualizing black lesbian sexual identity

Thomas was not the first feminist artist to reimagine Manet's *Le Déjeuner*. In her 2001 self-portrait *Cousins at Pussy's Pond* (Figure 7) Renée Cox poses her own nude body alongside two muscular men in loincloths as subjects for her reconceptualization of this painting. It is interesting to note Thomas' choice to depict her models clothed, in comparison to Cox, who presents herself nude. Thomas does not usually shy away from representing nude black female figures in her work; it is therefore perplexing as to why she decided against this for *Les Trois Femmes Noires*. Nevertheless, each artist creates a rupture within the boundaries of normalized codes which placed white women within an idealized position and black women as their negative counterpart.[30] What adds a further layer of meaning to Thomas' *Les Trois Femmes Noires*, and makes it significant for my study, is her advancement of what Murray refers to as a 'queer feminist gaze'.[31] As previously mentioned in my analysis of feminist art historical critique, after the publication of Mulvey's text, notions of 'the gaze' have become strongly associated with the objectifying way men look at visual images of women through a fetishizing lens.[32] This raises the question as to what exactly is evoked with the 'queer feminist gaze' advanced in Thomas' work.

One of the issues of Mulvey's popularized concept of the 'male gaze' is that it says nothing about a 'female gaze', which Mulvey retrospectively describes in terms of a psychoanalytic split.[33] The female spectator thereby undergoes a masculinisation in the process of viewing women on-screen, thus identifying with the patriarchal gaze.[34] The concept of the female gaze was, however, subsequently taken up by a succession of feminist theorists who saw it as a strategic tool for interrupting the objectifying gaze directed at women.[35] It thus aims to create the possibility for

[30] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 110 – 111.
[31] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art,* 139.
[32] Anneke Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory," in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007), 492.
[33] Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing," in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, ed. by Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995), 24.
[34] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 37.
[35] Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers in Popular Culture* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), 28.

viewers to identify with a female perspective that is not intrinsically linked to that of the male.[36] Here too, whether this ambition is actually achievable depends on how the individual viewer interprets the work. Theoretical expectations do not always match with public reception, especially within the realm of visual culture. In terms of the queer feminist gaze, Lorraine Gamman and Caroline Evans argue there is not in fact an essentially 'lesbian gaze', similar to how there is not an overarching definition for the female gaze.[37] It does not simply become an inversion of the male gaze and is instead heavily dependent on cultural codes and sub-contexts. *The* black queer feminist gaze therefore does not exist, as black lesbian sexuality encompasses a multitude of identities and subject positioning.[38]

The issue with applying theories on the female gaze to my own study is that they do not take into consideration the look of black women. The visualized white women who are primarily the focus of such discourse are not necessarily figures with which the black female gaze would identify. Thomas argues that "our sexuality is also defined by a woman's gaze, of how we see ourselves in others."[39] Therefore, Thomas creates portraits that aim not to primarily fixate on aspects of masculine perversion, but rather create images of black women which are identifiable for the black female gaze of her target audience.[40] The individual viewer might look at the depicted women in a multitude of different ways: as sexualized, empowered, desirable, or within fetishistic, masculinist terms. However, Murray argues that contemporary black female artists appear to be less concerned with the matrix of the viewer and the viewed.[41] In Thomas' case, she is especially motivated by "the pleasure of the visual," the satisfaction gained in looking at the black female figure.[42] With the direct gaze of her models she seeks to create a simultaneous looking and actively being looked back at. Murray further suggests that Thomas utilizes the "power of the look," based on a black feminist desiring lens, as a means of creating an "active/female representational space."[43] This space serves as a mode of reconstructing the black female subject through a deconstruction of previous patriarchal imagery. He thus claims that Thomas in her advancement of a (queer) feminist gaze opens up a space for an empowered female looking, by both her models and African-American female viewers. However, one must keep in mind that her models, such as in *Les Trois Femmes*

[36] Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory," 493
[37] Evans and Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited," 36.
[38] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W) Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*: *The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 305.
[39] Lai, "Interview."
[40] Murray, "Afro-Kitsch," 121.
[41] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 15.
[42] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 15.
[43] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 128.

Noires, are under Thomas' instruction and placed in specific poses by her. Therefore, by pushing her own gaze, can the distinct agency of her subjects in fact truly be shown as asserted by Murray? The agency is apparent, but it originates with Thomas who staged the details in the scene.

What however remains significant to this study is that Thomas enables the recognition of a desiring black feminist gaze that has otherwise been excluded from public discourse. African-American women artists such as Cox, Weems or Simpson, although undeniably groundbreaking figures, chiefly address hetero-normative aspects of black female sexuality within their criticisms of racial and gender discriminations.[44] Through her work Thomas provides a platform for the possibility of articulating a desiring lesbian gaze in the representation of her black female subjects, although this is by no means always self-evident.[45] Lesbian sexual orientations have been marginalized and suppressed by heterosexism within African-American communities and dominating conservative ideologies within North American culture. Similarly, black feminist scholarship has been mainly framed within heterosexual terms despite the growing presence of lesbian and bisexual theorists.[46] Evelynn Hammonds argues that the 'politics of silence' made it acceptable for conservative African-American communities to ostracize black lesbians as "proverbial traitors to the race" due to their expression of a 'deviant sexuality'.[47] This idea of such a deviant sexuality from which such communities wanted to completely separate themselves derives from early white Western categorizations of black women as hyperlibidinous. Therefore, any expression of sexuality which could be seen as an affirmation of such stereotyping came under heavy scrutiny. This caused a widespread closeting of black lesbian sexuality out of fear of losing ties with their community. However, it is especially the work of black lesbian feminist theorists which has made important contributions in generating more complex understandings of black female sexuality.[48] Matters of sexual desire, agency, and engagement with pleasure, otherwise missing from black feminist discourse, are openly discussed here.

In the 1970s, poet and writer Audre Lorde was already asserting her lesbian sexuality and also Hammonds in the 1990s was openly writing about her African-American lesbian identity. However, one must take into consideration that rendering black lesbian intimacy visually presents a more complicated challenge than in written or verbal form. Namely, how does an artist make lesbian sexuality apparent? The connection between the three women in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* for

[44] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 32.
[45] Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 130.
[46] Joan Morgan, "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure," *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015): 37. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915.
[47] Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy," 101.
[48] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 125.

example remains ambiguous as one does not necessarily know their sexual orientation. It could be taken as a scene of platonic friendship. It is, moreover, not a given that Thomas sought to evoke more than a sense of each model's empowered subjectivity. How obvious must an artwork therefore be in order to be recognizable as depicting a lesbian relationship? Thomas' black and white polaroid *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* serves as an interesting example in exploring this question. Here, Thomas presents a recasting of Gustave Courbet's painting *Le Sommeil,* which depicts two nude white women blissfully sleeping in each other's arms, using two black women as models instead. The bed on which the entangled women lie, in addition to the wall behind them, are covered with African-patterned cloths creating contrasts to images made by African photographer Seydou Keïta. Artist and curator Deborah Willis argues that the context of this work is unmistakably clear, representing "what it means to sleep after a beautiful sex act."[49] The intimacy of the sleeping embrace between the two women does seem to imply this; viewers must, however, use their imagination to guess what exactly happened previous to the captured moment. It is this enticement of sexual fantasies that is also evoked in *Le Sommeil*, where the titillation lies particularly with imagining the events leading up to the final image. The broken pearl necklace and hair pins scattered on the bed act as a further indication of the lust that took place between the two women. Many would say the women, in both Thomas and Courbet's works, must be lesbian lovers. However, this interpretation is based on assumptions, as neither the title nor the artworks provide a direct confirmation of this.

The gaze of the viewer feels much more intrusive in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* than in *Les Trois Femmes Noires*. There is no direct gaze to counter that of the viewer, and similar to *Le Sommeil* there is a strong feeling of looking in on a private moment. However, Courbet's painting falls into the long Western art historical tradition of depicting eroticized white female nudes. The bed upon which the women lie in combination with the luxurious décor surrounding them connotes visions of Titian's reclining *Venus of Urbino* (Figure 8). On the other hand, Thomas' choice of reconceptualizing the scene using black and white photography links to a more troubling history. It conjures associations with nineteenth and twentieth century ethnographic photography, which was used as a means for categorizing women of color as racially and sexually subordinate. Also the works *Courbet 2 (Melody: Centered)* (Figure 9), and *Courbet 4 (Marie: Centered)* (Figure 10), strongly connect to such photography, especially in relation to two images of an African-American slave woman called Delia. She is shown facing the camera with her breasts exposed. Unlike Thomas' fully nude models, her dress is visible around her waist, hinting that she had to partially undress for the photographer (Figure 11). During this time black women were also featured within pornographic pictures which

[49] Deborah Willis quoted in Corydon Ireland, "Art, Turned on its Ear," *The Harvard Gazette*, February 4, 2014, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2014/02/art-turned-on-its-ear/.

furthered a fiction of sexual accessibility. In these images women of color were often depicted nude or partially undressed and were closely associated with prostitution.[50] However, Willis argues that it is problematic to write them all off as forcefully imposed.[51] It dismisses the fact that some of the featured women actively took part in the creation of such photographs. *Courbet 3 (Sleep)*'s engagement with clichés of the female nude and ethnographic photography creates an intra-cultural dialogue, which thereby seeks to criticize historic representations of the female body. Willis claims that the self-referential work produced by contemporary black photographers, such as Thomas, thus calls into question "whether the image of the black woman is a construction of the viewed of the viewer."[52] She refers here primarily to self-portraiture which is perhaps more straight-forward within this context. Thomas does not usually portray herself, but rather other women of color. The image is therefore less a construction by the viewed models, than an agency advanced by Thomas as an artist.

Part of Thomas' claiming agency in her depictions of the black female body is her engagement with 'the erotic'. Lorde was one of the first African-American writers to insist on women embracing the notion of the erotic as a means of exploring sexual pleasure and agency. [53] She claims that harnessing a gendered erotic has the potential for overturning women's previously existing notions of self. Based on this concept, Hammonds argues that such an open acceptance provides the opportunity for reclaiming the "despised black female body" from the dominant culture.[54] This potential of eroticism as voiced by Lorde and Hammonds, is integrated into contemporary black feminist theorizations on sex-positivity.[55] It should be noted that Lorde believed it to be vital that the erotic should be kept completely separate from the pornographic, seeing it as having become misnamed by men. However, according to Nash, black anti-pornography feminism advances a type of 'sexual conservatism' that limits examinations of black female sexual pleasure.[56] Thomas' body of work is itself partly inspired by pornographic imagery, utilizing them in order to create a criticism of the way the black female characters are fetishized. She also makes use of aspects of the erotic as asserted by Lorde, to serve as a source of power in her art. Although perhaps less referential to 1960s or 1970s pornography as some of Thomas' other works, in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* the two nude black female bodies are eroticized. Of course, many of Courbet's paintings are

[50] Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 3
[51] Willis and Williams, *The Black Female Body*, 48.
[52] Willis and Williams, *The Black Female Body*, 176.
[53] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.
[54] Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy," 102.
[55] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 15.
[56] Jennifer C. Nash, "Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism," *Social Text* 26, no. 4 (2008): 52. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2008-010.

arguably also pornographic in their sexually explicit content, catering specifically to a fetishizing male gaze. The only real argument for the exact difference between such paintings and pornography is that the former is considered 'high' art whereas the other is seen as a form of 'low' art. With the two sleeping women in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)*, Thomas aims to visualize the intimacy of black lesbian sexuality which is heightened through the eroticized nude bodies of her models. As argued by Women Studies professor L. H. Stallings, such an erotic space can construct "Black female subjectivities cognizant of autonomous sexual desires."[57] In *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* Thomas does not shy away from capturing the pleasures derived from sex or lesbian intimacy, and toys with the concept of the voyeuristic gaze and sexual fantasy.[58] The erotic elements of this image do not necessarily have to be only understood within a sexual context but, according to Lorde, is more attached to the sensations aroused by experiences.[59] It is something that should be shared by all women and celebrated. The two women in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* are erotic in their experience of a true enjoyment of each other's bodies. It creates a space for the possibility of a black lesbian sexuality to be expressed in visual culture that focuses on the enjoyment and celebration of female desire and pleasure.

Visualizing black female sexuality poses a variety of challenges which written or verbal practices do not necessarily face. How do such images differ from those created by white male artists? How does one make lesbian sexuality recognizable? Is it guaranteed that viewers will understand the intentions of the artist's rendering of sexually empowered female figures? These are all questions that remain important to take into consideration when analyzing *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)*. Representing black female sexuality in the visual realm remains complex despite the immense progress made in the United States within the last thirty year. That there is not one overarching way of depicting the subject of African-American women's sexuality became especially clear through the varying arguments presented by different black feminist theorists. Some, such as Nash, see the potential of pornography, whereas Hill-Collins and Lorde on the other hand were vehemently against it, yet nevertheless argued for embracing the erotic. With her work, Thomas seeks to create a counter-narrative to previous understandings of black female sexuality primarily as an absence and creating a space for the desiring black female gaze. Black feminist theory provided the necessary context for understanding the wider socio-cultural ramifications that this deemphasization of sexuality has had for African-American women. By distancing herself from protectionist methods of representation, Thomas takes on the intricacy

[57] L. H. Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Myth and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2007), 1.
[58] Deborah Willis, "Contemporary Photography: [Re] Presenting Art History," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art Volume V: The Twentieth Century, Part 2: The Rise of the Black Artists* ed. by David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Belknap Press, 2014), 203.
[59] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 56.

involved in visualizing aspects of black female sexuality that were previously not openly discussed. Due to the long and troubling history of misrepresenting the black female body in Western painting and photography, the possibility that some might see her work within exoticizing or even fetishistic terms cannot be completely disregarded. Thomas' aims and art critical expectations do not always match the interpretations of individual viewers once an artwork is placed within the public realm. Thomas indicates an awareness of this in her appropriation and merging of specific cultural conventions within *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* and plays with the public's associations of such conventions. What, however, became apparent throughout the scope of this chapter is that visualizing sexual agency and lesbian identity, as is attempted in these two works, is by no means straightforward. It cannot be assumed that each viewer will understand the incorporated visual cues of each image. Due to the specificity of the intra-cultural dialogue taking place within the two chosen case studies, it is unlikely that those who lack this contextual insight would interpret the presented black female figures in the same way as, say, an art critic or historian. An "unmistakably clear" representation of lesbian intimacy between the two women in *Corbet 3 (Sleep),* as stated by Deborah Willis, might not be as self-evident to other viewers. There are therefore multiple ways of seeing these two works that remains highly subjective and adds to the complexity of the represented content.

Chapter 2:
Appropriating the Mammy

In her book *Bodies in Dissent*, Daphne Brooks claims that "Black women's bodies continue to bear the gross insult and burden of spectacular (representational) exploitation in transatlantic culture...Yet there are ways to read for the viability of black women making use of their own materiality within narratives in which they are the subjects."[60] By subverting the visibility of their bodies in North American popular culture, African-American women artists utilize their own images in order to facilitate, what bell hooks refers to as, "counter-hegemonic images of blackness."[61] As already discussed in the previous chapter, Thomas tries to achieve this primarily by creating photographs and paintings that attempt to represent an empowered depiction of black female sexual agency. Despite the complexities that arise once her work is placed within a public setting, Thomas makes the motivation behind her work very clear: to create art that will inspire African-American women. However, even with the tremendous progress the discourse on black female sexuality has experienced within the last thirty years, black feminist theorists argue that the persistence of racial and sexual stereotyping continues to infiltrate this space. Kara Walker's controversial appropriation and merging of stereotypes therefore presents a compelling study for the intricacies involved in the articulation and visualization of black female sexuality in contemporary art. Her engagement with negative imagery that directly refers to the history of explicit sexual violence towards African-American women, paired with public responses to the explicit content of her work, sharply brings into focus the complex nature of visualizing the notion of an autonomous sexual agency. As argued by Fleetwood "the visible black body is always already troubling to the dominant visual field."[62] The correlation between racial and sexual markings and the visible black female body thus often problematize a fully autonomous, empowered reading of a represented image of black female sexuality once it is placed within the public realm.

What Walker's explicit appropriation of stereotypes enables is a head-on confrontation with the complex space which black female sexuality inhabits within North American culture. In the works *The End of Uncle Tom* and *A Subtlety*, the myths of the supposed lascivious nature of black women is given a figurative shape, which has sparked widespread debate amongst artists, scholars and general viewers. As the Mammy and Jezebel are still very much embedded in present-day discussions on

[60] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850 – 1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.
[61] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 96.
[62] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 6.

black female sexuality, Walker's ambiguous use of these figures provides an intriguing insight into the potentials of appropriating such imagery. The Mammy is perhaps one of best-known stereotypical archetypes in North American popular culture, having become immortalized through the faces of Aunt Jemima and Hattie McDaniel's performance in *Gone with the Wind.* This figure was created in the nineteenth century and represents a romanticization of Southern plantation life. She was a domestic slave and is remembered especially for her utter devotion and nurturing love for her white charges, often at the cost of having little time for her own children. She was the embodiment of the 'ideal slave'.[63] Michele Wallace describes the Mammy as an asexual nurturer, her body always being depicted as overweight and exaggerated in its features.[64] Conversely, the image of the Jezebel is that of the sexually aggressive whore, which presented black female sexuality as deviant. Her image served as justification for the wide-spread sexual assaults on slave women. In this chapter I analyze how continuing issues of violation and the meta-narrative of the Slave Era are addressed in Walker's merging of the Mammy with the stereotype of the Jezebel in her 1995 installation *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven,* and also with the mythical figure of the Sphinx in *A Subtlety.* A detail from *The End of Uncle Tom* of three female silhouettes will serve as one of the case studies (Figure 12). Here, I examine the ways this figure group, each of which is suckling the breast of the other, creates an alternative perspective on black female sexual pleasure during the Slave Era than that found in the dominant narrative of slavery. The progressive potential of the debates sparked by Walker's 2014 public art piece *A Subtlety* will be explored in my study of the 'Sugar Baby,' which was the center piece of this installation (Figures 13 & 14). The Sugar Baby was a sugar sculpture of monumental size that featured a nude Mammy figure positioned in the typical pose of the Sphinx. The often lewd public reactions by especially white visitors to the exposed ten-foot vagina, buttocks and breasts of the immense sculpture sharply brings into view the complexities of placing a sexualized representation of a black woman within the public realm.

Creating an image of black female pleasure in the antebellum South

Walker goes straight to the source of the troubling history the African-American women's misrepresentation in North American culture. She works with sexually explicit themes that can thereby confront viewers with the stereotypes still associated with black female sexuality today. Walker's female figures do not depict a narrative of sexual liberation per se, but instead draws attention to the complexities involved in viewing black female sexuality. The avoidance of imagery

[63] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1987), 58.
[64] Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 139.

which has the potential to re-inscribe stereotypical tropes that previous generations of African-Americans have tried hard to suppress is not a tradition Walker adheres to. Wallace argues that as a result of the visual sphere being largely seen as a punitive space in its representation of African-Americans within the United States, it has caused a preoccupation with the creation of chiefly 'positive' images that primarily aim to 'uplift the race'.[65] The goals of cultural producers, particularly during the Black Power Movement in 1960s, thereby became primarily about reversing already in place stereotypes. Wallace warns against the limitations this fixated focus could cause African-American culture and its inevitable failure to hinder the racial preconceptions it attempted to refute.[66] These limitations are further echoed by Jennifer C. Nash, who in her discussion of 'racialized pornography', argues for the pleasures that can be drawn from enacting racial fictions. It can consequently produce an 'aggressive counter-reading' which emphasizes the performance of race.[67] She claims that these kinds of deliberate acts provide an opportunity of 'doing' black feminist visual cultural studies differently, by moving away from a narrative fixated on 'overexposure'.[68] Nash thereby reflects present-day black feminist theorists' aims of reframing public discourse concerning African-American women's engagement with sexuality, desire and pleasure.[69] Author Joan Morgan, however, claims that "getting to black feminist pleasure is tricky business" as black feminist thought from previous centuries has avoided directly addressing black female sexuality.[70] Much energy was instead invested into disputing sexual stereotypes; however this placed the 'damaged' sexuality of African-American women into the public spotlight. Within visual culture autonomous forms of sexual agency are often linked to those images which do not allude to overt violation or exploitation.[71]

A trio of women, who have received a considerable amount of scholarly attention, from Walker's installation *The End of Uncle Tom*, prove an interesting example within this context. Here, three almost identical female figures are shown suckling each other, while a forgotten baby on the lap of one of the women attempts to reach for her breast. Each woman wears a handkerchief around her head, in the style closely linked to one of the signifiers of the Mammy figure. The body of

[65] The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s is especially criticized for this, in which it strove to create a Black aesthetic specifically for an African-American audience. This was however largely focused on a masculine perspective and often excluded the issues faced by African-American women. Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*, 1.
[66] Wallace*, Invisibility Blues*, 1.
[67] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 3.
[68] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 3,5
[69] Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 36.
[70] Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 36.
[71] Amber Jamilla Musser, "Queering Sugar: Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 156. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/686756.

the Mammy is usually featured as obese and exaggerated through the large size of her breast and buttocks. Such characteristics placed her in opposition to dominant standards of beauty, rendering her as 'undesirable'. The Mammy was un-gendered through a masculinisation based on the strength of her body. She was denied femininity and made asexual in order to refute claims of the extreme sexual violation slave women were exposed to on the plantations. The Mammy was meant to proliferate nostalgia for the plantation era and that "all was well" in the antebellum South.[72] Women's and Gender Studies professor Deborah Gray White argues that the trope of the Mammy acts as the inverse of the stereotype of the Jezebel, and that the two can consequently never be fully separated.[73] The Jezebel provided justification for the widespread sexual assaults on black female slaves as white men were supposedly seduced by her, thereby deflecting the blame back onto African-American women. Author Jewelle Gomez describes the Jezebel as a "sexually aggressive wet nurse."[74] Whereas the Mammy was denied any expression of sexuality, the Jezebel was the embodiment of the bestial sexuality ascribed to African-American people by white dominant culture. The Jezebel was associated with an insatiable, deviant sexuality which moves between the boundaries of hetero- and homosexuality.[75] In nineteenth century European pseudo-scientific thought the fabricated fiction that black women's clitorises were supposedly overdeveloped was already linked to lesbian sexuality. Sexual excessiveness is taken to an extreme in the Jezebel figure and as argued by bell hooks this "pornographic fantasy of the black female as wild savage" is still very much present in mass media and popular culture today.[76]

In the segment from *The End of Uncle Tom*, Walker appears to distort the labelled asexuality of the Mammy, while fusing her with the hypersexuality of the Jezebel. The three nursing women fit the description of Gomez's "sexually aggressive wet nurses," in a way nurturing each other while also deriving sexual pleasure from this act. The forgotten baby is arguably the Mammy's own neglected children who she essentially gives up in order to fully care for those of her white Master. The three women are presented as enjoying pleasures without the obtrusive presence of any male figure, instead indulging in a so-called deviant lesbian sexual behaviour, further emphasized through the presence of the third woman.[77] Nash argues that ecstasy, which refers to the possibilities of female pleasures within a white-male dominated representational economy, can be used as a

[72] Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*, 139.
[73] Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?,* 60.
[74] Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Though*, 82.
[75] Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Though*, 83.
[76] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 65.
[77] Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, "The "Rememory" of Slavery...," in *Trauma and Visuability in Modernity* ed. by Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006), 167.

method for capturing forms of racial-sexual pleasure.[78] She claims it creates a corrective to the consideration of black female sexuality within primary oppositional poles. Nash's theory of ecstasy can also be applied to the image of the three suckling women, who break with the asexuality of the Mammy while also drawing attention to the possibility of slave women engaging in pleasurable sexual acts with one another. The likelihood of lesbian liaisons is not one commonly, if ever, addressed in discussions of black female slave narratives within the antebellum South. And it is precisely this 'cleansing' of history that primarily focuses on aspects of victimhood that Walker is trying to expose. There are many memories missing that Walker is trying to create a 're-memory' of.[79] Although this scene could of course be read as a continuation of the history of images of hypersexual black women, I would argue that Walker willingly shows a queer sexual act as a way of trying to force into view the fictive parameters of what makes up stereotypical representations of black female sexuality. The viewer is faced with a scene in which black female pleasure is shown as a possibility during the Slave period; however, it of course remains debatable how the work is in fact perceived. Are the three women seen as acting out sexual agency or being acted upon? By traversing the taboos of black female sexuality in the antebellum South, Walker opens up the discourse on black female pleasure in a distinct way by placing the three suckling women into a scene which explicitly present an act of deviant sexuality. It conjures an image in which black female pleasure could have in fact been a possibility within the antebellum South.

The role of the public and questions of violation

What makes the visual effect of Walker's work so compelling within the context of black female sexuality is her involvement of the viewer within her presented scenes, in order to confront them with his or her own racial preconceptions and sexual fantasies. Art historian Anne M. Wagner asserts that Walker's silhouettes re-animate categorizations of sexual degeneracy in order to demonstrate that these images continue to remain present within the North American cultural consciousness.[80] The persistence of such stereotypes is thereby meant to become explicit by making the viewer complicit in the depicted scenes. Their shadow is cast onto the wall, resulting in them finding themselves amongst the ensemble of black silhouettes. Walker argues that this "confronts them [the

[78] Nash, *Black Body in Ecstasy*, 2.
[79] Dubois Shaw, "The "Rememory" of Slavery...," 170.
[80] Anne M. Wagner, "Kara Walker: "The Black-White Relation,"" in *Narratives of a Negress: Kara Walker* ed. by Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Paaterson, Mark Reinhardt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 100.

spectator] on their own, our own, ways of viewing."[81] She thereby tries to force her audience into reflecting upon their positioning in relation to the scenes of graphic sexual activity and violence. How they react becomes highly dependent on their race, gender and sexuality.[82] Walker thereby visualizes sensitive subjects of life in the antebellum South and brings these narratives back into a present-day context.[83] She creates a form of viewing which turns the racial gaze onto the spectator, thereby advancing an oppositional reading of slavery and race. Walker tries to subvert the gaze of the viewer in order to spur a self-acknowledgement of ever-present racial fantasies, which are projected into the black spaces of the silhouettes. However, based on the wide-ranging responses to her work, it is clear that this contextual information is not necessarily known, or accepted by all. It is precisely this varied reception to the controversial nature of Walker's work which generates discussions concerning continuing issues on the representation of black female sexuality that are crucial to acknowledge within public discourse. This is perhaps most explicitly seen in Walker's 'Sugar Baby' sculpture. The public installation brought into focus themes in relation to varied public engagement with a representation of a sexualized black female figure and the conflict between art critical expectations and the reality of visitor reactions.

In 2014, in collaboration with the New York City public art organization Creative Time, Walker created her first temporary public art piece. The full title of this installation is: *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the Unpaid and Overworked Artisans Who Have Refined Our Sweet Tastes from the Cane Fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the Demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Planet.* The lengthiness of the installation's name is typical for Walker's work, in which text plays an important part in her presented narratives. Walker hereby created a monument of remembrance of the exploitative labor that upheld the sugar market. The venue offered to her was the Domino Sugar Factory, located on the East River in Brooklyn, New York. The striking visual effect of the factory, augmented through its immense size and molasses covered surfaces, which still dripped from the ceilings and pooled on the floor, was not the only thing that attracted Walker to this project. It offered the opportunity to also address the slave labor that had been required to sustain the sugar trade. Walker was especially inspired by Sidney W. Mintz's 1985 book Sweetness and Power, in which he discusses the intersections of sugar, power, slavery and oppression. From Mintz's text Walker also learned of sugar sculptures, also known as 'subtleties'. These were created exclusively for the consumption of the Northern European

[81] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Black Face Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 83.
[82] Mark Reinhardt, "The Art of Racial Profiling," in *Narratives of a Negress: Kara Walker* ed. by Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Paaterson, Mark Reinhardt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 121.
[83] Miriam Basilio, "Identity Politics," in *Drawing from the Modern: 1975 – 2005* ed. by Jodi Hauptman and Jordan Kantor (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 46.

aristocracy and were symbolic of luxurious excess and power.[84] Based on this research Walker came up with the idea for the Sugar Baby. Under Walker's instruction this colossal sugar sculpture took the shape of a nude thirty-five foot tall, seventy-five foot long image of a black woman which embodied a fusion of two figures: the Mammy and the Sphinx. The Sphinx is featured in both Egyptian and Greek mythology and has the head of a woman and the body of a lion. Walker's Sugar Baby lies in the stretched stance of the Sphinx, her voluminous breasts, protruding buttocks and vulva on full view. Walker's controversial choice to place a ten-foot long vagina into a public space provoked important discussions in relation to issues of unequal accessibility of sexual agency for black women, in relation to the inappropriate public responses to the work.

Similar to the three suckling women, the Sugar Baby wore a handkerchief wrapped around her head which invokes the trope of the Mammy. Here too, the oppositional sexual roles black slave women were placed into are brought into view, merging once again the asexual Mammy and the hypersexualized Jezebel. Her left hand was positioned into the 'fig gesture' which has multiple meanings depending on the cultural context. It, however, generally tends to refer either to the female sexual organ, or signal the profane slur: 'fuck you'.[85] It creates an interesting detail that hints at what the Sugar Baby's stance towards the large number of visitors that came to the installation and their interactions with her was meant to symbolize. *A Subtlety* offered an ideal space for visitors to take 'selfies' with the Sugar Baby, which provided visual proof of the visitors own presence within the installation. What especially drew public attention and widespread criticism was the behaviour of many of the visitors. It presented an explicit example of nonblack visitors' inability to understand the feelings of grief and mourning *A Subtlety* elicited for many people due to the history of exploitation it addressed.[86] For many of the African-American visitors the sight of the nude and exaggerated physical attributes of the Sugar Baby closely linked with the painful histories of the forced overexposure of black women's bodies. Blogger Stephanye Watts, for instance, wrote how upon viewing the Sugar Baby that "the exposed vulva conjured up emotions about the hypersexualization of black women throughout America's early years."[87] In the nineteenth century pseudo-scientific research of African women's genitalia received a considerable amount of attention. In major essays, such as J.J Virey's *Dictionary of Medical Sciences* (1819), the sexual nature of African

[84] Israel, *The Big Picture*, 160.
[85] Israel, *The Big Picture*, 162.
[86] Margo Natalie Crawford, *The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 175.
[87] Stephanye Watts, "The Audacity of No Chill: Kara Walker in the Instagram Capital," *Gawker*, April 6, 2014, http://gawker.com/the-audacity-of-no-chill-kara-walker-in-the-instagram-1585944103.

women was connected to the "voluptuousness" of their sexual organs and buttocks.[88] They saw the enlargement of the labial flap, also known as the 'Hottentot Apron,' as a sign of affirming European preconceptions of the lasciviousness and 'primitive' sexuality of these women. Merging the Mammy with the Sphinx, whose body is that of a lion, arguably hints at this ascription of black women's sexuality as animalistic, for the Sphinx was literally half-animal. The reduction of black women to their sexual organs is especially explicit in the figure of Sarah Bartmann, a Khoikhoi woman who was taken from South Africa and toured throughout Europe as the 'Hottentot Venus'. Her genitalia was studied during her life and after her death dissected and kept in a jar as an anatomical anomaly in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris well into the late twentieth century. The sexual parts of black female bodies were presented as inherently different to those of white European women, which was seen as sufficient to categorize African women as the lowest, primitive race. Moreover, due to supposed excessiveness of their physical attributes they were also closely associated with nineteenth century prostitution.[89]

As a result, placing the vagina of a black woman of such an immense size into a public art piece generates concerns towards the danger of allowing a renewed violation to take place, especially when taking the troubling history of the exposure of black women's sexual organs into consideration. Already in artist Judy Chicago's pioneering 1974 feminist work *The Dinner Party,* amongst her representation of vaginas on the other thirty-eight plates, that of black women was the only one omitted. Instead, she depicted an image of women's rights activist Sojourner Truth raising a fist alongside two African masks. Black feminist scholars, such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall, argue that not only does this differentiate black womanhood from white womanhood, but also fails to capture black women's sexual vulnerability, which is marked by the visibility of her vagina.[90] The Sugar Baby's back is arched in a way that bears her buttocks and vagina even more, creating a sort of sexually suggestiveness which many visitors of the Domino Factory took as an invitation to peer upon her physical attributes. They posted the selfies they took with the Sugar Baby almost immediately on social media pretending to pinch her nipples, lick or touch her vulva, or slap her buttocks (Figures 15-16). Watts, who herself was in a state of mourning when visiting the space, was interrupted in her grief by hearing other visitors yell things such as "Sugar Tits" or "Hey, did you get a picture of the lips? Those sweet lips!"[91] Also poet Nicholas Powers described feelings of acute rage to such white

[88] Sander Gilman, "The Hottentot and Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* ed. by Deborah Willis and Carla Williams (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 17.
[89] Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 155.
[90] Guy-Sheftall "The Body Politic," 30.
[91] Watts, "The Audacity of No Chill."

audience responses which seemed to make a spectacle out of African-American pain.[92] It is precisely these varied reactions that are able to delineate the ambiguous space such a sexual representation of the black female figure occupies once it is presented to the public.

What adds an additional layer of meaning to this piece is that before the official opening of *A Subtlety* to the public, there were numerous art critics who previewed the sculpture and celebrated the Sugar Baby as a triumphant sign of black female sexuality. Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies professor Amber J. Musser argues that journalists such as Blake Gopnik and Roberta Smith drew parallels between the mythical figure of the Sphinx and black female sexuality in order to highlight the possibility of sexual autonomy a fusion of the two offered.[93] The Sphinx is seen as an omniscient and powerful being, so when paired with the Mammy, Gopnik claimed that the "underdog may have at last become the unbeatable overcat."[94] To him, the Sugar Baby represented black womanhood which refused to be beaten into submission. The idealistic message underlying these articles suggests that subjectivity, agency and autonomy are all necessary for possessing a 'strong' sexuality, which is defined by consent. [95] Musser, however, claims that this seems to wilfully ignore the fact that such autonomy is not equally accessible to everyone. The Sugar Baby reflects a specific history that black women have been robbed of the possibility of consent since the start of the Slave Era. It is not as easy to claim that the Sugar Baby becomes a monument of reclaimed black female sexuality, as it is impossible to say under whose authority the Sugar Baby actually is. The lewd behaviour of the white visitors makes this all the more clear, demonstrating a continued vulnerability of the black female figure within public spaces of the United States. Moreover, art critics did not take into consideration the public's reaction to this piece once it had opened: the visitors acted out a form of sexual violence upon the body of the sculpture that makes explicit continued issues of vulnerability and consent. A new narrative formed which deviated from previous celebration of the Sugar Baby's strong message of black female agency. Thereby, the original interpretation of art critics becomes reversed; revealing issues of vulnerability that still lurk beneath the surface of cultural production in the United States.

Art and cultural critics are usually aware of the motivation behind an artwork which is meant to further an empowered image of black female sexuality, and consequently interpret the piece based on this contextual understanding. However, as soon as the work is placed into a public context

[92] Nicholas Powers, "Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit," *The Indypendent*, June 30, 2014, https://indypendent.org/2014/06/why-i-yelled-at-the-kara-walker-exhibit/.
[93] Musser, "Queering Sugar," 155.
[94] Blake Gopnik, "Rarely One for Sugarcoating: Kara Walker creates a Confection at the Domino Refinery," *New York Times*, April 25, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/arts/design/kara-walker-creates-a-confection-at-the-domino-refinery.html.
[95] Musser, "Queering Sugar," 156.

there is no guarantee that each individual viewer will have the background knowledge required to fully grasp what the image of the depicted woman is intended to evoke. As already discussed in relation to Mickalene Thomas' work, layers of meaning are added to the depicted black female figure as soon as it is placed into a space filled with visitors who come with their own personal experiences and biases. Art experts tend to know the sociological and cultural implications of works produced by artists such as Walker and accordingly interpret them based on their own theoretical framework. However, the wider public often lacks this context that would allow them to view the Sugar Baby within such critical terms. As observed with *A Subtlety,* this ignorance is made evident through certain visitor reactions. Many did not grasp the more serious underlying themes of racism, slavery, and rape of the installation, but instead saw the Sugar Baby simply as a sexually suggestively positioned black woman whose breasts and labia are on view. Continued issues of violation thereby might not register with some, whereas others could have also still been governed by a racist ideology. Within the discourse of black female sexuality it becomes essential to remain aware of this intricacy in order not to fall into the trap of color-blindness that tends to be more restrictive than progressive. Musser argues that such color-blindness functions to mask white guilt.[96] White art critics derive pleasure from viewing images of the empowered black female form because they see it as creating a straightforward corrective to the history of racial injustice within the United States. This, however, pointedly ignores the fact that there remains an unequal balance concerning the accessibility of fully autonomous sexual agency. Moreover, it overlooks the intricacy involved in visualizing a fully liberated black female sexual agency in which issues such as vulnerability or exploitation no longer arise.

In a later statement Walker revealed that she was aware of the effect that her Sugar Baby sculpture would have, and essentially set out to lure her visitors into acting out the obscene behaviour featured in her silhouette installations. The countless number of photographs posted on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook, demonstrates that people did indeed behave in the way she expected they would. In her silhouettes Walker also tries to play with the sexual fantasies of her viewers by situating them, whether they want to or not, into the narrative of the piece through shadow play. With the three suckling female figures the visitor becomes a witness to the women's act of mutual pleasuring. However, as they are displayed within a museum and gallery setting, in an installation that looks like a gothic novel, it creates a distance from the viewer's own day-to-day reality. Moreover, the black paper from which they are cut does not show details apart from the outline of their bodies. There is of course the moment when a viewer recognizes his or her own shadow amongst the cut-outs of the figures. However, their shadow does not act upon the trio

[96] Musser, "Queering Sugar," 158.

of women, merely watches. In *A Subtlety,* on the other hand, the visitors made an active choice to take pictures with the Sugar Baby and moreover, decided exactly how they would interact with her body. The material she was made from allowed visitors to actually reach out and touch her, not only to feel the sensation of sugar beneath their hands, but also because of the lack of barriers that separated them from the sculpture. It was even encouraged to touch the Sugar Baby on the way out of the installation space. She was not exhibited flattened against an exhibition wall, but was placed within the middle of the room. Visitors did not seem to feel the same restraint usually felt within a gallery or museum within the factory space.

The sexually suggestive poses struck within the photographs, which involved the buttocks, vagina and breasts of the Sugar Baby highlights how reality can, and consistently does, clash with initial expectations of art- and culture-based critics. There continue to remain very strong undercurrents of violation based on inappropriate visitor behaviour and a learned ignorance concerning consent.[97] As argued by *Artnet News* writer Cait Munro, art projects such as *The Subtlety* are therefore so essential in that they are able to explore contemporary perceptions of race, gender and sexuality, which are topics often thought of as being "no longer a problem."[98] In this one space some visitors experienced grief while others mocked and laughed, showing the complex intersections of public perception. This is what Walker's appropriation of sexual stereotypes is really able to bring into view. She works with continued racial myths and fantasies which confronts viewers with the sensitive and complex nature of these issues. Despite tremendous achievements in regards to more open discussions of black female sexuality within theoretical and public discourse, Walker shows that there are still historical injuries that have not yet fully healed and therefore should not be overlooked.[99] It is precisely the controversial nature and ambivalence of Walker's work that, depending on how it is read, is able to - not only bring to light the constructed nature of racial stereotypes through a satirical exaggeration, but also confront us with continued issues of unequal accessibility to sexual agency that is not at risk of renewed violation.

A Subtlety and *The End of Uncle Tom* embody imagery of distorted blackness and perverse whiteness which creates a cutting satire of the violent legacy of the Slave Era.[100] Walker's distinct appropriation of the Mammy figure in these two works provides an opportunity for raising important questions concerning the discourse on 'right' or 'wrong' representations of black female

[97] Musser, "Queering Sugar," 159.
[98] Cait Munro, "Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx Spawns Offensive Instagram Photos: This is Why We Cant Have Nice Things," *Artnet News*, May 30, 2014, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/kara-walkers-sugar-sphinx-spawns-offensive-instagram-photos-29989.
[99] Musser, "Queering Sugar," 164.
[100] Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 105.

sexuality. For instance, what possibilities are offered by such a direct engagement with, and exaggeration of, the label of deviant sexuality? How can the visualization of sexual pleasure during the Slave Era in the three suckling silhouettes, or the display of the ten-foot vagina of the Sugar Baby, create a space for a more in-depth discourse on black female sexuality? On the one hand, the merging of the Mammy's image with that of the Jezebel and that of the Sphinx is able to draw attention to the constructed nature of the stereotypes they represent. Depending on how each work is read, it might make visible the stereotypical tropes and miscategorizations that still infiltrate the cultural imagination of the United States. On the other hand, there is an ambiguity to Walker's satirical approach. Unlike artists such as Betye Saar or Renée Cox, who rework the Mammy stereotype as a method of confronting white supremacist ideology, the subject of criticism in Walker's appropriation of the Mammy remains vague.[101] Is she creating a commentary on the historic debasement of African-American women's sexuality, or is she naively reaffirming such imagery? This ambiguity has resulted in her being accused of displaying repressive visions of blackness which cater to the desires of the mainstream white art market.[102] However, in acting out stereotypes of lecherousness and excessiveness, the three suckling silhouettes and the Sugar Baby are nevertheless able to give a figurative shape to sensitive subjects that otherwise go unspoken within contemporary North American discourse.[103]

The exclusiveness of autonomous expressions of sexual agency without risks of violation becomes a main point of focus in the issues that underlie the sculpture of the Sugar Baby. Racially ignorant expectations of the Sugar Baby as a monument of black female sexual liberation projected onto her by art critics did not hold true once access was given to the general public. I agree with Musser's statement that the Sugar Baby complicates current scholarly discourse by visualizing "the difficulty of representing black female sexuality outside of a framework of violation."[104] The past infiltrating the present became apparent once the public was given access to *A Subtlety*, showing a renewed violation of the mute, unmoving figure. Should artists then totally avoid producing works that risk conjuring similar reactions in their depiction of explicit sexuality? As previously discussed, such a deemphasization of black female sexuality produced a silence which prevented African-American women from openly expressing the depth of their sexual identities. Walker creates a critique of this dominant narrative, by provocatively suggesting that during slavery African-American women did in fact enjoy and actively seek sexual pleasures. Being placed within the role of the

101 Julie Burrell, "The Lower Stratum of History: The Grotesque Comic Stereotypes of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker," in *Imagining the Black Female Body: Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture* ed. by Carol E. Henderson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 128.
[102] Wagner, "Kara Walker: "The Black-White Relation,"" 92.
[103] Shaw, "The Rememory of Slavery...," 160.
[104] Musser, "Queering Sugar," 155.

eternal victim discounts any possibility of African-American women's possession of sexual agency. The Mammy is given a much greater depth through merging her image with that of the Jezebel. Walker does not try to reconfigure these stereotypes into positive images but points to an alternate vision of black female sexuality. In the discussed case studies the assumed asexuality of the Mammy is subverted by her juxtaposition with sexual desires and the full display of her sexual organs. What does it mean to see the Mammy sexualized in this way? A space is created that makes visible the way individual viewers will react to each work based on their own background and preconceptions. Most importantly it conjures debates that include the voices of African-American women.

Chapter 3:
The role of Satire and Irony in Visualizing Black Female Sexuality

What emerges in *Les Trois Femmes Noires*, *Courbet 3 (Sleep), The End of Uncle Tom* and *A Subtlety* is an underlying satirical approach taken by both Thomas and Walker in their engagement with the black female figure. Although it has primarily been discussed by scholars within a literary context, satirical creativity also defines the work of African-Americans visual artists in the twenty-first century. According to psychology scholar Rod A. Martin, satire refers to an "aggressive humor that pokes fun at social institutions and social policy."[105] It acts as a form of critique that employs a biting wit to bring into focus issues within society and challenge widely held assumptions. Intriguingly, despite its presence over the past three decades within African-American culture, only the publication *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights* has so far explicitly focused on the use of satire within the work of contemporary African-American artists. Derek Conrad Murray is perhaps one of the most prominent figures currently analyzing this subject, particularly in relation to its role within the work of 'post-black' artists. I refer back to his writings throughout this section in addition to cultural critic Darryl Dickson-Carr's analysis of satire in African-American literature. Both Thomas and Walker are closely linked to the post-blackness movement that emerged with a new generation of artists born after the Civil Rights era. For Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, who famously coined the term in the late 1990s, post-black artists engage with a wide variety of topics, such as sexuality, gender, culture, feminism, popular culture, and abstraction, to name but a few.[106] Particularly this focus on representing the multifaceted nature of African-American culture has created a space that facilitates the visibility of artworks which deal with black female sexuality through direct appropriation.

In relation to the specific themes made visible in the discussed case studies, one might wonder in what way a 'post-blackness' ethos has impacted the ways in which sexuality is articulated in each work. This includes the use of satire and irony to draw attention to certain conventions and stereotypes that continue to impact public expectations of what African-American women's sexuality encompasses. Would it have been possible for Walker and Thomas to engage with subjects such as lesbian identity, sexual subjectivity and the meta-narrative of slavery in the same manner

[105] Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 13.
[106] Quoted in Mary Schmidt Campbell, "African American Art in the Post-Black Era," *Woman & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3 (November, 2007): 318.

thirty or forty years before? It seems unlikely that their work would have been received with the same approval then as it is today. Walker and Thomas began creating art in a moment in time when African-American cultural producers were actively rethinking the dictates of what constituted a so-called 'proper' African-American identity. Murray argues that post-black art has opened up important opportunities for moving away from blackness as an ideological framework and instead concentrates on the complexity of varying black identities.[107] In the four selected case studies, each engages with a distinct articulation of black female sexuality through the use of satirical elements, irony and appropriation. Included in this engagement is an attempt to unburden their works from the restrictions of race, while nevertheless mediating the unstable terrain occupied by the visible black female body.

In this chapter I analyze how an engagement with a 'post-black satire' can facilitate the possibility of pushing the parameters of a self-determined sexual identity through a strategic appropriation of stereotypes and clichés. Satirical wit provides an alternate way of criticizing societal misrepresentation by directly dealing with traditional conventions or myths as a form of confrontation. Writer Ralph Ellison describes it as the "extravagance of laughter" which is able to enact change and self-determination.[108] The complexity of such appropriations and the ambiguous nature of satire, that requires viewers to understand the specific cultural context and discourse the work alludes to, is also examined in this section. Moreover, Thomas and Walker's works will be investigated based on the notion of 'stable' and 'unstable' irony, which shapes the way the embedded satirical content is received by the public.[109] Irony figures strongly within African-American satire, and according to Dickson-Carr, is when the statement of the artist is meant to be understood as ridiculous if the image is taken at face-value.[110] It should, furthermore, be noted that an exact definition of both satire and irony remains elusive and can be discussed in a number of different ways. As argued by literary critic D.C Muecke, irony, as a literary device, is not essentially related to satire, but is sometimes used as a technique for satire.[111] These differences will be addressed in more detail throughout the scope of this chapter. By focusing on the black female figure as refracted through an intra-cultural mixture of clichés and stereotypes, I will consider in

[107] Derek Conrad Murray in an interview with Alicia Eler, "The Queer Art that Helped Define Post-Blackness," *Hyperallergic*, March 1, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/361646/the-queer-art-that-helped-define-post-blackness/.
[108] Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 145.
[109] Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 13.
[110] Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African-American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 20.
[111] D.C Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1969), 27.

what way an inflexible and singular understanding of black female sexuality within North American society can be overcome.

Feminist post-black satire

Each of the four discussed works by Thomas and Walker creates an opportunity for making visible differing aspects of sexuality and concurrent issues that have previously been underrepresented within public discourse in the United States. The deliberate use of stereotypes and cultural clichés, which are underscored by a satirical wit, is of particular interest here. Not only does it serve as a critique of the dominant culture's misrepresentation of black female sexuality, but also the African-American community's own complicity in normalizing this.[112] According to Murray, 'blackness' is still often held as a "nationalist cultural politic" that concerns itself primarily with recovering male dignity at the expense of deemphasizing issues faced by African-American women.[113] An image of patriarchal strength was thereby advocated within African-American communities which advanced a misogynistic mentality.[114] African-American studies scholar Brandon Manning further argues that satire has for a long time been considered "a repository of andocentric perspectives" that often were dismissive of African-American women as sexual objects.[115] However, in the twenty-first century satire has begun to strongly figure within the works of contemporary African-American women cultural producers to counter exclusionary and misogynistic voices.

As a type of rhetorical strategy, satire within visual culture is often characterized by the rendering depicted figures as 'strange'. This is particularly achieved through an overt exaggeration of physical features and attributed traits in order to provoke a reaction from the viewers. Both literary satire and satire within visual art employ exaggeration to hint at the intended critique behind the work. Within literature, which is first consumed word for word before the entirety of the text fully becomes clear, the characters are taken to a hyperbolic extreme, often making their behavior too absurd or ridiculous to be taken seriously as realistic representations. By the end of the narrative the author's ridicule of, say, certain societal follies or shortcomings ought to become clear to the reader. However, it should be noted that there are many examples of literary satire that are not necessarily immediately obvious as such. Conversely, when looking at a painting the viewer usually first takes in

[112] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 4.
[113] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 5.
[114] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 5.
[115] Brandon Manning, "I Felt Like I was Part of the Troop": Satire, Feminist Narratology and Community," in *Post-Soul Satire*: *After Civil Rights*, ed. by Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue (USA: University of Mississippi, 2014), 125.

the image as a whole before becoming aware of the individual details. The satirical elements thus tend to emerge throughout a longer process of viewing and reflecting upon the depicted content and form of the work. Visualizing satirical elements within an artwork often remains ambiguous and, similar to literary satire, is sure to evoke varied and opposing interpretations. In addition, irony is often used by satirists to further emphasize the point they are trying to make. Muecke claims that satire thus functions as a correction of societal moral failings and usually utilizes a kind of 'normative' or 'corrective' irony within this context.[116] Such irony turns the failings of an institution or a foolish opinion into a spectacle in order to expose its absurdity. It is therefore also in the service of satire, which pokes fun at "life's corrigible deformities."[117] A satirical approach, making use of the ironic, provides a means of imagining the unspeakable and at the same time dismantling projected categorizations.[118] For example, the appropriation of stylistic elements of ethnographic photography in *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* (Figure 4) that traditionally exoticized the black female body as 'Other' is evoked in order to underscore Thomas' intended critique of exactly this tradition.

Satirical sub-contexts are aimed specifically at so-called 'in-group' viewers, namely an African-American audience which is expected to recognize the critique embedded within such art. However, how fully aware is the majority of visitors of these satirical nuances when they view *Courbet 3 (Sleep)*? The negative public reactions to the sexual deviance figured in *The End of Uncle Tom,* or the exposed vagina of the Sugar Baby (Figure 15), offer distinct examples of when an artist's incorporated satirical commentary is not understood by the general public. Many spoke out against the sexually explicit nature of the Sugar Baby, or found the grotesque stereotypes of lecherousness personified in the three suckling women as affirmations of racist ideologies. Walker has been widely criticized for inviting such a potentially harmful gaze, especially as the visual realm is already seen as largely punitive in its representation of the black female figure. These two case studies certainly do not obviously restate the values of African-American culture that celebrate respectability and racial uplift. The necessity of such exact contextual knowledge raises questions as to how accessible the underlying critique of the master narrative for remembering history actually is. Walker's satirical approach in its grotesque exaggeration of the behavior and appearance of her silhouettes, however, does have the ability to push past the boundaries set by cultural propriety by unsettling her viewers. For example, in trying to understand who exactly the subject of critique in *The End of Uncle Tom* (Figure 12) is, visitors are forced to reflect upon why the trio of suckling women are presented acting in specifically that way. If they are familiar with the figure of the Mammy, known for her ungendered asexuality, the three Mammies engagement in a deviant sexual act would come as a surprise, for this

[116] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 119.
[117] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 27.
[118] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 137.

does not adhere to the dominating stereotype of her character. The satirical exaggeration of sexuality featured in the figure group therefore can compel a new encounter with the in-place stereotype of the Mammy.

The notion of 'post-blackness' has also generated a great deal of scholarly and public debate. Post-black art is often criticized for engaging in a naïve post-racial ideology that plays into the fetishistic desires of the white art market. It is therefore far from uniformly accepted by all contemporary African-American artists and art and cultural theorists. The success both Thomas and Walker have achieved within the mainstream art market could be seen by some of her critics as misusing the pertinence of the subject of black female sexuality for economic gains. However, I would argue that it is not the fame of the artists which is significant within the discourse on sexuality, but rather the importance of the debate triggered by their work. Within this context, satirical wit and irony provide a significant opportunity for making visible issues that have otherwise not been taken into consideration within public discourse and critical debates. The four discussed case studies open themselves up to scrutiny in a way which can be considered part of the wider endeavor of post-black artists to redefine African-American identity within more complex terms. The discussion of black female sexuality becomes widened through the assertion of the existence of different narratives and identities as directly defined by African-American women.

The willingness of post-black artists to engage in a critical self-reflection has also generated the more widespread reemergence of the use of satire. Satirical humor has been part of African-American culture since the Slave Era where a coded form of expression was developed that offered an indirect way of acting out their frustrations.[119] According to Dickson-Carr, the goal of such satirists was to lay bare the ludicrousness of slavery.[120] However, the satirization of whiteness, that criticized white supremacy and oppression in the United States also eventually led to the satirizing of blackness. It was specifically the performance of blackness that came under critique, and how it flattened the diversity of African American experiences.[121] In order to improve their already difficult economic and physical conditions Africa-Americans often refrained from public critical commentary on this issue.[122] Especially during the Black Power Movement, when African-Americans were engaged in struggles to advance liberating and positive images of their culture, such satirists were considered traitors to this cause.[123] Nevertheless, there remained satirists in the Black Arts

[119] Dickson-Carr, *African-American Satire*, 3.
[120] Dickson-Carr, *African-American Satire*, 3.
[121] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 141.
[122] Derek C. Maus, "Mommy What's a Post-Soul Satirist?": An Introduction," in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*, ed. by Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue (USA: University of Mississippi, 2014), xiv.
[123] Dickson-Carr, *African-American Satire*, 123.

Movement (BAM), primarily in the literary field, but also by visual artists, such as Robert Colescott. In the twenty-first century, an increasing flow of contemporary artists have begun introducing forms of satire and irony into their work. It is this endeavor, which literary and visual culture scholar Margo Natalie Crawford describes as a need to find "a black inwardness that is not over determined by a collective performance of blackness," that is significant for broadening the discourse on black female sexuality.[124]

The satirization of such a performance of blackness that inhibits the articulation of sexuality outside of prescribed categories is reflected in the four discussed case studies through the rendering the black female body as 'strange'. *A Subtlety* and *The End of Uncle Tom* represent a grotesque exaggeration of racial myths that ridicules the binary construction of African-American women's sexuality in terms of victimhood and sexual deviance. In *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* an ironic intra-cultural dialogue of traditions and clichés places the black female figures into a phantasmatic space that seeks to interrogate the notion of a black authenticity. The photographic and painted versions of each work also present an exaggeration within their overall appearance due to the rich amalgamation of patterns and stylistic forms. Distinct images of black female sexuality are thereby visualized that are simultaneously recognizable yet unfamiliar to viewers. While particularly Walker's cut-outs have been the subject of harsh critic and calls for censorship, Thomas has primarily enjoyed an overall positive response to her images. This comes as a result of differing levels of exaggeration and the accessibility of the distinct forms of irony advanced in each work.

Irony plays a significant role within African-American's use of satire. There exist many different definitions of what irony is however, most often it is described as a rhetorical device in which the speaker, writer, or visual artist says one thing, but in fact means the opposite. Literary critic Wayne C. Booth in his book *A Rhetoric of Irony* refers to the existence of both a 'stable' and 'unstable' irony. He defines stable irony as requiring a reader's rejection of the literal meaning of an ironic statement as it simply cannot be taken at face value.[125] The reader is confident that the writer was being ironic and that both are in agreement on the rejection of what the statement implies. Within unstable irony on the other hand, an author refuses to align him or herself with any stable proposition.[126] Here, the intent of the writer remains uncertain and readers must decide for themselves how they interpret the discursive markers which could have a number of different meanings. For example, the ironic appropriation of stylistic elements of Blaxploitation films in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* as a commentary on the subordination of black women within popular culture

[124] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 149.
[125] Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 10.
[126] Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 240.

seems to be far easier for viewers to understand. There is a higher degree of shared knowledge that aligns with Dickson-Carr's notion of stable irony than in Walker's works. Here he claims that within a literary context, readers reject a term's "normal meaning in favor of one accepted by a selected in-group."[127] *Les Trois Femmes Noires* appear more obviously identifiable as an overall positive image for Thomas' target black female audience. The satirical nuances found in this work are less likely to offend the majority of her viewers as Thomas' critique is directed at traditions widely acknowledged for being debasing towards women.

Conversely, the complicity of Walker's black female characters in the sexual acts presented in the three suckling silhouettes in *The End of Uncle Tom* creates a somewhat unfavorable agency. It diverges strongly from dominant narratives about the Slave Era that primarily illustrate an image of victimization. This figure group and the Sugar Baby become symptomatic of an 'unstable irony,' in which it is more difficult to decide whether Walker is actually being ironic or not. The myths of black female sexuality as deviant developed during the Slave Era to justify rape remains a contentious subject within US society. Murray suggests that there is a fault line between "an externalized critique of white racism and…one that is not afraid to direct a potentially unflattering and self-critical lens towards one's own culture."[128] These two works not only implicate white America, but also questions African-American cultural memory of slavery. This does not always sit well with every African-American viewer, some believing that Walker is ridiculing the injuries historically inflicted upon the black female body. Black female sexuality is not presented as separated from its affiliated stereotypes, and is not perceived as being beyond the realm of the racial grotesque. Thomas, on the other hand, is less concerned with exposing the absurdity of slavery but rather deals with a dialogue between the intersections of race and feminist representational politics.[129] *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* could therefore be considered more soothing to African-American viewers than Walker's works. The varying levels of irony found within each work strongly effects its reception. In order for the underlying ironic statement to be properly understood a degree of shared knowledge for specific cultural references must exist. In its absence, the use of satire offers a way of rattling viewers' expectations when looking at images that deal with black female sexuality. Literary scholar Charles Johnson claims that in order to create new and better conceptions of black identity a new vocabulary must be present, "with an understanding that each is a provisional reading of reality."[130] The four works discussed in this text move away from a narrative that claims an 'absolute

[127] Dickson-Carr, *African-American Satire*, 25,
[128] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 10.
[129] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 13.
[130] Charles Johnson, "The End of Black American Narrative," *American Scholar* 7, no.3 (Summer, 2008): 42.

truth', but rather provide a possibility of being tested and put into question by visitors' own lived experiences.

Potentialities of appropriation

Despite clear divergences in style and method each case study presents a departure from cultural traditions that de-emphasize the possibility of black female sexual pleasure and desire. It thus breaks with the conception of blackness furthered during BAM in the 1960s and 70s. BAM has been criticized, particularly by Murray, for advancing a heteronormative and monolithic blackness that marginalized certain African-American identities, especially those of women and gay men.[131] This male-oriented focus consequently pushed the issues faced by hetero and lesbian African-American women into the background. Despite its ambiguous nature, the works created by post-black artists have the potential to facilitate a different kind of discourse. Without the burden of representing chiefly uplifting imagery, the possibility emerges to render different sexual identities that might previously have been considered harmful to the black cause. As suggested by Greta Fowler Snyder, post-blackness, in its broadest sense, involves rejecting the dictums of what African-American individuals can or cannot do.[132] Artists such as Thomas and Walker consequently no longer follow the restrictive boundaries set by previously taboo topics concerning aspects of black female sexuality.

Each case study holds elements of what Patricia Hill-Collins refers to as 'controlling images'. These are racist and sexist ideologies that were created by white American society in order to keep African-American women within a subordinate position.[133] They include negative stereotypes such as the black woman as a prostitute, Mammy, and Jezebel. Black feminist theorists had previously sought to keep these controlling images completely separate from discussions on black female sexuality. The works discussed in this text reflect a type of 'two-ness' in which Thomas and Walker specifically create art about blackness, yet nevertheless try to move beyond the limitations set by race.[134] The hyper-masculinity of the Black Power Movement, the politics of silence and respectability, and disengagement with previously reigning identity politics are all subject to scrutiny within this context. Thomas and Walker try to dismantle the heroic construction of a primarily masculine black subjectivity furthered during the Civil Rights Era that sidelined the lived experiences

[131] Murray, "Afro-Kitsch," 9.
[132] Greta Fowler Snyder, "On Post-Blackness and the Black Fantastic," *Souls* 16, no. 3-4 (2014): 331.
[133] Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.
[134] Murray "Post-Black Art," 6.

of African-American women. In rendering the black female body 'queer' by means of satirical wit, the imagery of, for instance, an immense nude Mammy sugar sculpture placed in the position of the mythical Sphinx opens up a space for reassessing dominant modes of thinking about black female sexuality. The gaze is reflected back onto the viewer while they try to grapple with understanding the exact nature of the satire found within this work. Here questions of autonomous sexual agency are framed based on the imagery and stereotypes that had complicated such expressions in the first place. According to L.H. Stallings, African-American women "use non-visual resources of expressing desires to keep the visual means from corrupting or making deviant those desires."[135] The works presented in this text create an opposing approach by taking on the difficult task of visualizing sexual desire and sexuality, which has largely been defined as 'troubling' to dominant society. This involves a direct engagement with, rather than a complete separation from, controlling imagery.

What particularly stands out is the merging of the black female figure with a historic stereotype, mythical figure or cultural cliché as a type of satirical approach. Black feminist theorist bell hooks argues that in African-American women's creation of 'self', an oppositional tactic is not enough as there still remains the questions as to what kind of self they are actually trying to present.[136] By appropriating a number of cultural clichés and racial myths the discussed works do not necessarily offer a concrete answer to hooks' questions. However, they provide an opportunity to question previous discourse on what are considered 'suitable' representations of black female sexuality. As already mentioned, in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* (Figure 1) the three female figures are shown directly engaging with cultural clichés that have been deemed as damaging by feminist theorists in the past. Subverting the negative associations of these conventions and forging new meanings within the context of this image thus becomes possible. There remain fears that such appropriation could generate an 'Otherness machine', which according to Murray "churns out essential difference."[137] For those who do not possess the required 'in-group' knowledge of the specific stylistic and cultural tropes embraced in these works through different means, including satire and irony, this perception could hold true. Moreover, the clichés appropriated in this work have been criticized primarily within a specific feminist art historical discourse that might not be known to the general audience who view *Les Trois Femmes Noires* within the public realm.

By playing with what could be categorized as controlling images, Thomas blurs the perception of the negative visual space occupied by African-American women in visual and popular culture. *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* are widely praised as 'positive' images by art

[135] Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word*, 82.
[136] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 51.
[137] Murray, "Post-Black Art," 12.

historians and critics. However, as argued by film theorist and curator Lindiwe Dowey, scholars are able to figure out relationships between artistic appropriations in a way that an ordinary viewer is unlikely to ever do.[138] For example, it can be assumed that the intercultural mix of conventions incorporated within *Les Trois Femmes Noires* would only be partially understood by the majority of viewers. However, how important is it that viewers apprehend all of these cultural appropriations? According to Dowey most lay viewers are governed by 'involuntary memories' when looking at an artwork which evoke emotional, rather than rational responses, as is the case with scholarly apprehension.[139] The emotional responses which might be triggered by *Les Trois Femmes Noires* can have a destabilizing effect upon viewers as they create associations with the original sources through conscious or subconscious memories. The strong black female subjectivity of the three women clashes with the various debasing histories of black female representation alluded to within this image. The type of satire which is present in *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* is less about exaggeration, but rather presents a subtle, corrective irony, creating a culturally specific statement. The very idea of black female sexual agency becomes considered in a different way through this creative process by giving controlling images a new shape through the rearticulation of their fetishizing nature.

Despite there being no overarching 'post-black aesthetic,' satire seems to play an especially important role within the ethos of this movement. Part of creating a critique on the dominant culture's treatment and production of 'otherness,' is a self-reflective scrutiny of African-American culture. Such a biting satire, governed by an unstable irony, has more widely been connected to Walker's work than that of Thomas in her use of what Michael B. Gillespie refers to as 'the racial grotesque' as a type of satirical approach. Here, he describes it as an artistic technique used to illicit new encounters for viewers with oppressive in-place hegemonies on race that "derives new meanings from old ideas" and almost always evokes the paradox of slavery.[140] Walker's work reanimates racist stereotypes, but arguably does so in a satirically productive way through its ridicule of racial structures within the United States. Instead of trying to hinder the circulation of such imagery, reanimation offers an alternative approach based on satirical wit in order to work through their troubling associated memories. Author Guillermo Hernãndez defines a satirist as "a subversive whose art represents an opposing incompatible, and overwhelming evaluative norm that

[138] Lindiwe Dowey, "Fidelity, Simultaneity and the 'Remaking' of Adaptation Studies," in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts* ed. by Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (Berlin, Boston: DE GRUYTER, 2012), 165.
[139] Dowey, "Fidelity, Simultaneity and the 'Remaking' of Adaption Studies," 166.
[140] Michael B. Gillespie, "Pretty Dirty Things: The Racial Grotesque and Contemporary Art," in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*, ed. by Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue (USA: University of Mississippi, 2014), 69.

challenges the legitimacy of cherished normative values and figures."[141] Provocation and eliciting an emotional or intellectual reaction becomes part of the overall satirical image in its oppositional tactic. The sexual characteristics of the three suckling female silhouettes and the Sugar Baby sculpture are taken to a hyperbolic extreme, rendering them as absurd figures through their exaggerated form. Yet, as seen especially with the Sugar Baby, Walker's satirical appropriation can also be deeply disturbing to some viewers. As satirical content often requires a specific contextual knowledge to grasp the critical intension of a work, the appropriation and sexualization of the Mammy is therefore not a creative act every viewer will perceive as progressive. However, an overarching positive interpretation is not the intention of these works. They do not require universal agreement, but rather thrive precisely because of the opposing interpretations that are evoked through the ambiguous nature of its satirical content. Viewers have to pay close attention to the ironic nuances and characteristics of the figures to come to a conclusion on Walker's possible intention for merging the trope of the Mammy with that of the Jezebel. If not, the underlying meaning of, say, the three suckling women as a critique of the restrictive categorizations of black female sexuality, remains hidden.

What the satirical and ironical within the four discussed works brings into view is an alternative method of confronting negative controlling images. Through the distinct use of irony and exaggeration as satirical tools the works do not try and separate themselves from such stereotypes and clichés. Instead they directly engage with them as a means of ridiculing traditional imagery and myths to forge a more intricate understanding of black female sexuality. Following the self-reflective ethos of the post-blackness movement, not only white North America is criticized, but also African-American cultural traditions that misrepresented African-American women within sexist terms. Moreover, as is visible in Walker's works, the remembrance of only one dominating narrative of African-American women's sexuality during the Slave Era is complicated. Although still partially contested, such open criticism would not have been possible in the same way during the Civil Rights Era as it is today. By investigating the satirical and ironic elements within the four case studies the potentials of direct appropriation, rather than separation from controlling images become apparent. Exaggeration becomes a key characteristic in the visualization of satire within these differing works of art and artistic approaches. The forms of stable and unstable irony that are present in the different satirical approaches found in Walker and Thomas' works provide an insight into the differing public reactions towards the satirical content of the case studies. Especially the intention of Walker's art often remains vague and therefore generates divergent interpretation. It is precisely the debates provoked through the ambivalent nature of these works that is significant for broadening

[141] Guillermo Hernãndez, *Chicano Satire: A Study of Literature Culture* (University of Texas Press, 1991), 5.

public understanding of black female sexuality. The satirical appropriation of sexual stereotypes and clichés in *Les Trois Femmes Noires*, *Courbet 3 (Sleep), A Subtlety* and *The End of Uncle Tom* reanimate these conventions and racial iconography as a direct critical approach.

Conclusion

Reaching the end of this text I refer back to Spillers' claim that black women are "unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb."[142] Based on the analysis of black feminist theory in relation to the four selected case studies, I would however argue that Walker and Thomas have in fact taken control of their verb in these works and thereby refuse being the "beached whales of the sexual universe."[143] Instead of distancing themselves from the cultural conventions and stereotypes that have been criticized by scholars for their objectification and misrepresentation of the female body, Thomas and Walker strategically appropriate these stylistic elements and tropes. Whereas *Les Trois Femmes Noires* and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* engage with Western art history and clichés from popular culture, *A Subtlety* and *The End of Uncle Tom* fixate on the sexual stereotypes linked to the Mammy and the Jezebel. At this point let me once again return to my research question: to what extent does the appropriation of clichés and stereotypes in my four selected case studies counter restrictive categorizations of black female sexuality within dominant US culture? How is the binary positioning of African-American women's sexuality as either totally absent and asexual, or lecherous and deviant complicated? Ultimately, on the basis of my analysis, I believe that such an appropriation especially enables two things. On the one hand, it draws attention to a range of issues and complexities connected to the visualization of black female sexuality, which otherwise remain elusive within scholarly discourse. On the other hand, the satirical merging of different clichés and stereotypical tropes refutes a single authoritarian definition of *the* black female sexuality and instead creates a space that makes visible the versatility of this identity. *Les Trois Femmes Noires* (Figures 1 & 2) and *Courbet 3 (Sleep)* (Figure 3) play with viewer's associations with the conventions appropriated within each work. Blaxploitation films typically marginalized its black female characters, ethnographic photography exoticized and exploited black women's bodies, and nineteenth century paintings of white female nudes are seen as eroticized. These two works problematize the perception of the visible black female figure as always troubling within dominant culture. Moreover, Thomas' advancement of a queer feminist gaze provides a space for African-American women to both identify with and also desire the sitters of each work, something which has been largely missing within the history of art. Nevertheless, it remains important to consider the risk of the possible misinterpretation by those viewers who are not part of the intellectual discourse alluded to within these works. This intricacy became further underscored within the examination of *The End of Uncle Tom* (Figure 12) and *A Subtlety* (Figure 13). As the exact target of critique remains vague, the female

[142] Spillers, *Black, White and in Colour*, 153.
[143] Spillers, *Black, White and in Colour*, 153.

figures are often taken as negative affirmations of negative sexual stereotypes. However, in satirizing the violent legacy of the Slave Era important questions are raised as to the validity of 'right' or 'wrong' representations of black female sexuality. Not only does the merging of the Mammy and Jezebel in *The End of Uncle Tom* show the constructed nature of such stereotypes, but also gives a figurative shape to otherwise taboo subjects. A 'rememory' of the past is thereby created that collapses the ascribed sexual characteristics of the Mammy and the Jezebel and suggests the possibility of black female sexual pleasure during the Slave Era. Conversely, the Sugar Baby brought sharply into view continuing issues of violation of the sexually provocative black female figure within the public realm that contradict art critical expectations. There remain certain wounds that have not fully healed, which emerge once the public is given unlimited access to a sculpture like the Sugar Baby. The satirical elements and stable or unstable forms of irony found in each work create an alternative approach to destabilizing existing miscategorizations of black female sexuality. As viewers cannot fully be certain about correctly understanding the commentary or critique, they must reflect upon their positioning towards the image based on their own associations often derived from the dominant culture. A theoretical analysis of black feminist texts, post-blackness and writings on satire and irony revealed the different layers of meaning linked to viewing each of my case studies. Not only did this theoretical framework provide me with the wider socio-cultural implications of addressing black female sexuality within visual culture, but also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the differences between the expectations of the artist, scholars and the general public. There are multiple ways of interpreting renderings of black female sexuality based on theoretical and also public debates on what are considered progressive representations. The multiple layers of meaning that makes up each of my case studies only truly emerged through an in-depth reading of distinct theoretical discourses. *Les Trois Femmes Noires, Courbet 3 (Sleep), The End of Uncle Tom* and *A Subtlety* go beyond the stereotypes and cultural clichés they appropriate to interrogate the way we perceive black female sexuality. They speak on many levels in dealing with issues that create a resistance to a singular and ultimately restrictive representation of sexual identity.

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(Figure 3, Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, oil on canvas, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris)

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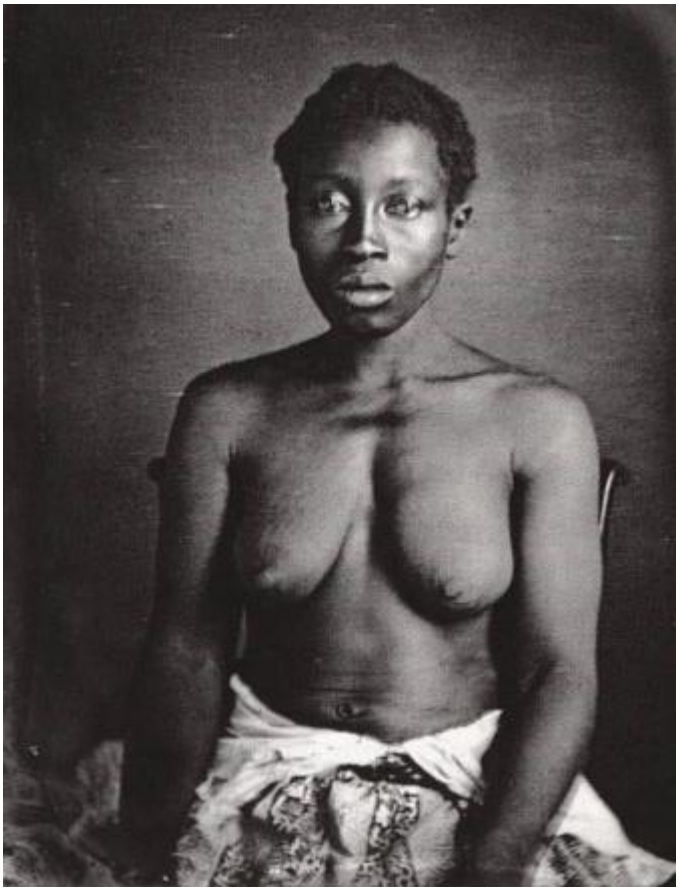

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(Figure 12, Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven,* 1995, Cut paper on wall, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

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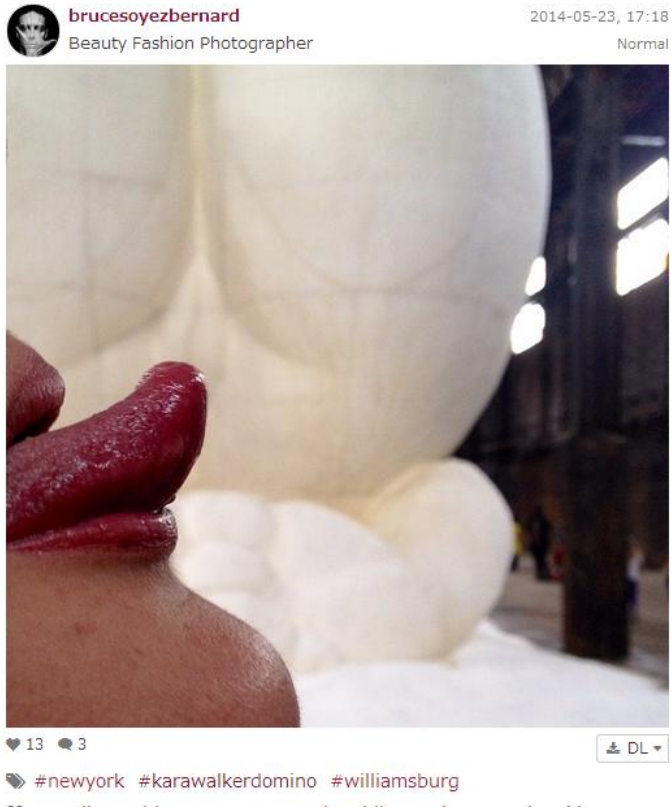

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