

THESIS

EXCESS FLESH:

A STUDY ON THE UNIVERSAL COMMODIFICATION AND CONSUMPTION OF THE
COLORED BODY

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2020

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ABSTRACT

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The breakdown of hegemony and the creation of “race” must be explored before moving onto the branching facets of commodified colored figures: Entertainment, Labor, Sexuality. Western societies' basic understanding of race is laced with phenotypical notions. The term itself is entwined within every societal construct that exists within the contemporary world. In order to completely discuss my artistic practice and the pieces that have developed throughout my time within this program, we must study these compartments of racial discrimination and overall consumption of the Black form.

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“For the sake of our own dignity, the dignity of our race, and the future good name of our children, it is
“mete, right, and our bounded duty” to stand forth and declare ourselves and our principles, to teach an
ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring
women. Too long have we been silent under unjust and unholy charges; we cannot expect to have them
removed until we disprove them through ourselves”. —JOSEPHINE ST. PIERRE RUFFIN, The Women’s
Era

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Negro woman “totes” more water; grows more corn; picks more cotton; washes more clothes; cooks more meals; nurses more babies; mummies more Nordics; supports more churches; does more race uplifting; serves as mudsills for more climbers; takes more punishment; does more forgiving; gets less protection and appreciation than do the women in any other civilized group in the world. She has been the economic and social slave of mankind. (Nannie Burroughs, 1995, Words of Fire pg. 831)

Background

The process of obtaining a Masters of Fine Arts degree is a mind-bending combination of both boundless exploration of the self and molding your experience to fit the needs of our continuously flawed education system. Upon beginning this whirlwind through higher education, I had thrust myself out of the Deep Southern culture I had been raised in, and into the arms of a promising “progressive” locale. Back in the Southern states, my black skin was an outwardly apparent threat to the White-skinned folks surrounding me. This lifestyle granted me mistreatment, threats, and the lack of general safety for my livelihood for the vast majority of my upbringing. Nevertheless, I continued to strive for unlimited education and constantly grasping at the human ontology of why certain groups of phenotypical similarities would be forced into this societal discrimination.

Once removing myself from that environment and into this outwardly progressive state, self-reflection and analysis became an option that actually seemed obtainable. This understanding of the self comes much easier for non-black individuals: their livelihoods entwined within a society that both favors and coddles them. Due to this, graduate studies often become a facilitator of reflective spaces for Black academics. Unfortunately, as non-black students have mostly already accomplished a large amount of self-rumination, Imposter Syndrome runs strong among Black academics.

Identity Politics

As a Black academic, this disconnect permeated through the beginning two years of my graduate program and bled into my artistic practice. I had chosen to pursue a Masters degree as a method of becoming more contemplative and understanding of my own identity. Ultimately, I came to the realization that the Black academic isn't given much chance to have these same privileges as other students. Colored bodies hold negative connotations on their shoulders, gifted to them by white supremacist society from birth: and these connotations create discrimination and overarching danger to both the psyche and the physical form. Identity politics run rampant within the higher education system and create further disconnect between the Black academic and majority non-black institution surrounding them. The effort of “decolonizing” the college syllabus is still a young notion, and academics continue to center their curriculum around white achievement only, leaving non white bodies perpetually feeling like they are infiltrating a space they do not also belong to. Your body is wanted for a superficial depiction of diversity within the academic institution while its needs are neglected and feared. Making “art for art’s sake” is simply an unreachable pedestal that Black artists cannot obtain, as no matter what your practice encompasses your black body outweighs the meaning of your work.

Coming to this realization, I began to focus my practice and thesis on this disconnection my whole body has felt throughout academic institutions. How, no matter the effort, the color of my skin and the semiotics attached were always placed at the forefront. My thesis background is based on missing bodily autonomy; how colonizer society has created a systematic machine devouring the colored body in every aspect as a means of perpetuating its hegemonic structures, most of which are nowadays subsumed

to a very specific economic structure, namely capitalism. In such a capitalist system, everything is turned into a commodity - everything from objects, to landscapes, to intellectual and artistic "products", and ultimately - and this is my accusation - the human body, including and especially the black body.

First, the breakdown of hegemony and the creation of "race" must be explored before moving onto the branching facets of commodified colored figures:

Entertainment, Labor, Sexuality. Western societies' basic understanding of race is laced with phenotypical notions. The term itself is entwined within every societal construct that exists within the contemporary world. In order to completely discuss my artistic practice and the pieces that have developed throughout my time within this program, we must study these compartments of racial discrimination and overall consumption of the Black form.

CHAPTER TWO: HEGEMONY AND THE CREATION OF RACE

When discussing race relations within a society we must first breakdown the anatomy of racial oppression. What is this construct of “race” we continue to throw around in conversation and use as an identifier for certain social groups? More importantly, where did “race” even come from? If we were to look back hundreds of years, it would be understood that race itself is a very recent concept in human history.

Caste System

The term “race”, that many still today use as an identifier, originally stems from the colonizer theorem. The colonizer theorem formulates the presumed necessity of a classification of social groups around the known-world. Before race became an explicit construct (and thus criterion), class and other identifying factors operated as criteria for such a classification.

If your family was one of nobility, your name stayed linked to this nobility forever: also if your name was of a slave family it would forever be connected to the life of a slave.

This societal construct can be especially examined within India’s caste system. Typical of the ancient religion of Brahmanism, this was and remains active as a societal construct where your birthright determines your placement on the social pyramid. This system divides Hindus into four categories within the pyramid (in descending order: Brahmins, Ksatryia, Viashsyas, and Shudra. On the bottom, completely outside of the pyramid are the Dalits (also known as the Untouchables) who are not allowed any type of social standing whatsoever as they are the “lowest of the low”. These individuals are sentenced

to a life of servitude by other worldly power completely directed by fate itself. This system keeps the upper class individuals in a persistent economic and social advantage, compared to the lower tiered. But, when examining The caste system, a Westernized mind might not be able to associate race within this context, as every person within it has an “Indian” phenotype. This reflection should , hopefully, induce the question of whether race operates similarly.

The Construct of Race

Using the caste system for an analogy, it is safe to say that the concept of race was created for the same socio-economic results within Western colonized societies. Global colonization by the European nations has existed since the late 1500s, but even this preceded the notion of race contemporaries have come to adopt. Around the time of general admiration for Darwinism, another prominent theorem came into popularity: eugenics. Sir Francis Galton (Darwin’s first cousin) was a psychologist that used Darwin’s findings as a method of examining humans as a mammalian species. In 1883, Galton coined the term eugenics, which ultimately translates to “well born”.

Certain traits, such as intelligence and mental deficiency, have been the focus of eugenic research and propaganda. This focus on such eugenic traits builds on three commonsense ideas: (1) People differ with respect to some of their traits, such as eye-colour and height; (2) Many traits run in families, being passed on from parents to their children; (3) Some traits are desirable, while others are undesirable. These three ideas about traits—their variability, heritability, and desirability—fed the much more controversial eugenicist view that some traits make a person of “good stock”, while others reflect the fact that she comes from “inferior stock”. (Wilson on Galton’s Eugenics¹)

¹ Wilson, R. (2014, April 28). Eugenic traits, <http://eugenicsarchives.ca/discover/tree/518c1ed54d7d6e000000002>

Galton, using this theory, begins to single out physical traits of the human body in order to back his discourse. Phenotypic traits such as: bright colored eyes, pale skin, equal jaw-to-nose bridge ratio, pointed nose, wide eye shape, and general facial symmetry were linked to “good stock” and considered favorable traits in civilized societies. Traits mirroring these: dark eyes, dark skin, uneven facial profiles, rounded noses, small or bulbous eyes, large hips and breasts, were labeled “inferior stock”. Those born into these physical traits are simply lesser on the social pyramid due to attributes gifted by birth. Galton’s usage of the word “race” is to be seen as synonymous to genus or species, as his theory suggests differences of species within humans; much like separate species of monkeys and apes.²

Galton also used sociological and psychological traits to separate humans into racial categories. He explained that a “civilized race” held traits of: advanced politics, usage of silverware, economy, eating of meals at a table, and humility towards the body (a need to be prudish and fully clothed). Worldly societies that held some semblance of these traits were considered “salvageable”. Native American tribes were considered “Noble savages” or uncivilized peoples that held traits that would suggest that they could become civilized with the help of European influence. This influenced American colonizers to attempt to “whiten” indigenous people in an effort to enhance their racial status. They were allowed to be a part of the racial tier pyramid if they adopted European customs. Although much like the untouchables, one grouping of humans was seen as unsavable savages, devoid of intelligence, and a devolved species: tribal Africans.

² Banton, Micheal. *Galton’s Conception of Race in Historical Perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillian , 1993.Pg 1-12

The Black Race

The idea of the black tribal community being lesser precedes eugenics theory. As early as Plato, there have been suggestions of "selective breeding" in order to purify "civilized races". The African continent had long been colonized by European countries before Galton's theory came into popularity; but this colonization was mainly for access to material goods and the natural resources.

“The political impetus derived from the impact of inter-European power struggles and competition for preeminence. Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain were competing for power within European power politics. One way to demonstrate national preeminence was through the acquisition of territories around the world, including Africa. The social factor was the third major element. As a result of industrialization, major social problems grew in Europe: unemployment, poverty, homelessness, social displacement from rural areas, and so on. These social problems developed partly because not all people could be absorbed by the new capitalist industries. One way to resolve this problem was to acquire colonies and export this "surplus population." This led to the establishment of settler-colonies in Algeria, Tunisia, South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, and central African areas like Zimbabwe and Zambia. Eventually the overriding economic factors led to the colonization of other parts of Africa. Thus it was the interplay of these economic, political, and social factors and forces that led to the scramble for Africa and the frenzied attempts by European commercial, military, and political agents to declare and establish a stake in different parts of the continent through inter-imperialist commercial competition, the declaration of exclusive claims to particular territories for trade, the imposition of tariffs against other European traders, and claims to exclusive control of waterways and commercial routes in different parts of Africa”.³

This focus on capitalism is extremely important, as it is imperative to understand that colonizations' main goal was simply economic gain and not the race driven operation contemporary society labels it as. But with the long history of colonization of Africa, naturally came the need for more commercial resources as capitalism is a machine that constantly needs fuel.

³ Iweriebor, Ehiedu E. G. "The Psychology of Colonialism." In *The End of Colonial Rule: Nationalism and Decolonization*, vol. 4 of *Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002.

Hegemony

Slavery is an economic tool used by the ruling class as a supplier of free labor. It's a tool that has existed throughout time worldwide. As explained before, this system operated on birthright or by conquering rights if a community was enslaved by the victors. Slavery was originally not fueled by the concept of racial hierarchy but instead as another means of economic gain.

The early Victorian Era was a time period in which slavery was abolished but semiotic usage to fuel European supremacy still reigned. Charles Darwin, along with his colleague Charles Lyell began the discussion of evolutionary ideals within material culture; the natural order of life with ourselves at the apex. Darwinian theories of natural selection and evolution began to spread amongst the Western World in regards to the human race. One of the biggest and most influential ideal was the argument of anthropocentrism vs. animism. This argument was popularized by Edward Burnett Tylor, the founder of cultural anthropology. Tylor's views reflected on 19th-century cultural evolutionism, leading him to create his first work in 1871, *Primitive Culture*. *Primitive Culture* suggests that there is a universally functional basis for the development of society and religion based off of three stages: savagery, through barbarism to advanced civilization. Material culture and societal structure of the non-western world began to be categorized and placed into sections of hierarchy; savagery being the lowest with Eurocentric civilization being the highest. The discussion of racial hegemony started with the focus of the darker skinned races, especially that of African, South American, and Native American descent. These cultures were fueled by a type of polytheism, which he describes as "animism"; the religious beliefs that objects, places and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence. According to Tylor, animism often

includes "an idea of pervading life and will in nature"; a belief that natural objects other than humans have souls. Tylor describes the cognitive view upon the natural world as being "savage" as it suggests it be positioned on a lesser rank in the ladder of evolutionary advancement evolutionary advancement from animal to human. Western societies hold the view of anthropocentrism, or the general focus of culture around humanity with nature being secondary. Within anthropocentric thinking, "God" is seen as ourselves; the human being, its intelligence, and consciousness are meant to reign supreme over the natural world compared to the animistic belief of humanity coexisting evenly with the natural. As these "races" did not center the natural world around themselves, instead believing in the souls and vibrant matter of their material culture, they were officially assigned a "scientific" category of under developed intelligence.

Both Tylor and Galton's theories would continue to be used much after the abolishment of cattle slavery in order to justify the marginalization of darker skinned societies. The United States, a young capitalist and objectivist driven country, would especially take hold of this ideology ever re-naming and morphing it in order to both uphold the status quo and prevent uprising of the citizens.

CHAPTER THREE: CONSUMPTION OF BLACK LABOR

“We view prison labor as real slavery...in 1865 when the 13th Amendment was ratified...they started the first wave of mass incarcerating black people.They use [these prisons] as a tool of control. They target African-American communities. They target politically conscious people, politically conscious organizations. And they use these prisons as a form of social control in addition to a plantation [that’s] generating revenue.” - Melvin Ray, Free Alabama Movement, YES Magazine, June 7, 2016

Chattel

Every aspect of the black body has become a consumable item through the capitalist system in which our society functions within . This “commodifiable blackness” has been in place within the States since the creation of chattel slavery. It is true that slavery has existed for many years throughout history, but chattel slavery, the most common type of slavery that Americans are privy to, was very new invention within the 1600s.

The definition of the word “chattel” is “an item of property”⁴. Meaning that chattel slavery is a system which operates by allowing social groupings of people to become legal property, which would in turn be bought, sold, and owned forever to groups who were placed higher on the racial pyramid. Due to the widespread idea of the black race being classified as “unsavable savages”, capitalist countries zoned in on them to become products to be bought and sold for profit within the ever growing free-market.

Eugenics theory classified black Africans as being savage but also as being the epitome of physical fitness due to genetics. Black people were seen as incredibly strong,

⁴ The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center defines Chattel slavery as the most common form of slavery known to Americans. This system, which allowed people — considered legal property — to be bought, sold and owned forever, was supported by the US and European powers in the 16th – 18th centuries.

fast, tall, and in peak physical shape because of muscle distribution and the massive amounts of outside labor African communities put in to maintain their way of life. European nations, having already colonized much of the continent, began to put focus on much of the Western coast of Africa for product collection. Countries such as Togo, Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal became the main havens for capture and selling of Africans to non-black citizens worldwide for profit.

It is important to remember that this was seen as ethical due to the established belief that blacks were not evolved humans; but instead closer to animals. Much like cattle, black males would be advertised with animalistic terminology such as “bucks” or “bulls”, making their bodies comparable to strong cattle. They were seen as ideal for plantation, railroad, or general outdoor hard labor that non-black races did not care to do; and were treated as low as the cattle they were named after. Black women, “sows”, were seen as mostly profitable for indoor labor; mummies, cooks, and general house slaves.

Theodore W. Allen’s book, *The Invention of the White Race*, summarizes the reasoning for racial slavery concisely:

I approach racial slavery as a particular form of *racial oppression*, and racial oppression as a sociogenic - rather than a phylogenic - phenomenon, homologous with gender and class oppression. Second, in bourgeoisie incontinental Anglo-American had recourse to that anachronistic form of labor, slavery, but rather on how they could establish and maintain for such a long historical period that degree of social control without which no motive of profit or prejudice could have had effect. I believe that the thesis here presented - of the origin and nature of the so-called “white race,” the quintessential “Peculiar Institution” - contains the root of a general theory of United States history, more consistent than others that have been advanced. Only by understanding what was peculiar about the Peculiar Institution can one know what is exceptionable about American Exceptionalism; know how in normal times, the ruling class has been able to operate without

“laborite” disguises; and know how, in critical times, democratic new departures have been frustrated by reinventions of the “white race”.⁵

Current Day Slave Labor

As Allen states, racialized slave labor is not a past history, but instead an ever-present growing industry that is the support beam of the United States economy. The Prison industrial complex is a system that privatized correctional facilities and allows them to be owned and run by conglomerate companies. As prisoners within the system have no rights, they are required to work jobs without wages.

One might ask how this is possible when we have the U.S Constitution in place; a document presented to have banned slavery with the addition of the 13th adementent. When revisiting the 13th amendment fully, one sees that it actually does not ban slavery of humans but, rather gives it another name.

The amendment reads; “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, **except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted**, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”⁶. This means that slave labor is still allowed and legal within the country as long as that person has been incarcerated.

After the supposed “abolishment” of slavery, slave masters, salesmen and catchers needed a new profession to gain profit. Mainly Southern states just refused to tell slaves of their freedom in order to maintain their economies, but others decided to take a different route. As the idea of what we understand as the “police” has only existed for the past hundred years, it should come to no surprise that previous slave catchers

⁵ Allen, *Invention of the White Race*, pg 33

⁶ Constitution of United States of America 1789 (rev. 1992)

created the institution of the localized state police. When researching the history of the police force, the connections of slave bounty hunters, the Klu Klux Klan, and the social elite are too massive to be considered coincidence. As the idea of black people being lesser humans grew among the masses, new measures for social control needed to be put in place. Studies of the black mind being “naturally more violent” came to popularity and the spread of crime being linked to newly freed slaves became an extremely common narrative being pushed by the social elite. Historian Kirtian Williams, explains this change best in his book *Our Enemies in Blue*;

Where conflicts arise between workers and bosses, between the rights of one class and the interests of the other, the machinery of the law is typically used as a weapon against the workers. Even where the law is contrary to the demands of powerful corporations, the police often act not from principle or legal obligation, but according to the needs of the ruling class. This tendency shouldn't surprise us, if we remember the lengths to which the cops have gone in the defense of White supremacy, even as laws and policies have changed. With class, as with race, it is the status quo that the police act to preserve and the interests of the powerful that they seek to defend, not the rule of law or public safety. The law, in fact, has been a rather weak guide for those who are meant to enforce it.⁷

As long as the black body is seen as more naturally violent and crime ridden, the more society will accept over-incarceration of it. Citizens believe in the notions of heroism and justice that have been newly attached to the police, which outweighs a negative and one-sided view of criminal intent. Economically, disenfranchised, and marginalized colored bodies have systematically been categorized as a threat to society leading to massively disproportionate numbers of them behind prison walls; in turn allowing large companies that are trusted within the States (such as Whole Foods, Victoria's Secret, Starbucks, Walmart, etc) to cut costs by utilizing the massive number of slaves that we

⁷ Williams pg 202

hold within our prison systems. In fact, there are more slaves now than there ever has been in United States history. This form of economic boosting is nowhere near a product of the past; racism is a tool used for profit, not a symptom of feigned mental illness.⁸

As I have researched and began to understand the reasoning for racialized slavery and its connection to capitalism, I began to attempt to depict “consumption of black labor” into my work. Racism and social marginalization is yet another gear within the system; meaning it is not a symptom as many would view it, but instead a structural mechanism used to fuel the society we live in as palatable. One can not truly view race whilst separating it from class, as they are one in the same. This research led me to create the piece *Massaranduba* (Figure 1).

The word “massaranduba”, is the Spanish name for a type of blood redwood that is grown in many South American countries. This wood is heavily sought after by the statewide social elite, so in order to cut down on costs, both child and slave labor are used to farm and process this wood. The Afro-latinx population of Brazil is economically the poorest of the nation and are affiliated with the same notions of racial bias, therefore this beautiful wood that becomes admired within our country was farmed from the free labor of colored bodies.

Massaranduba is meant to represent the monolith that is the colored body within slave labor. The black body becomes a single, machine-like entity: with no personality or individuality given to it. These slaves power the society that we have become accustomed to today and they suffer while citizens with wages consume their products. The figures are blood red, like the wood of the massaranduba, morphing into

⁸ Allen, pg 145

a single mass of flesh. No traces of identity, gender, or individualism can be seen. Schematics of tree cutter machinery overlay the figures hinting the importance of the machine compared to the mass of humans.

Another piece, *Cochon* (figure 2) is meant to capture the dystopian feeling of living within the current police state. *Cochon*, the french word for pig, shows a riot gear clad policeman, with no facial identity. Instead, within the riot mask lies a “murder” of crow feathers. The figure’s head is focused outward and it’s hands are gripping a baton while dismantled structures crumble around the figure. This piece grasps at the violence given by the hands of law enforcement in order to keep the social status quo running smoothly for the elite.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONSUMPTION OF BLACK ENTERTAINMENT

“It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story” - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

The Minstrel

Eugenics took the views of social hierarchy and human ontology to the next level as it suggested that racial class determined ability of cognition, races that continued to operate in ways of animism were pushed even further away from humanity. These humans, who were already seen as property in areas around the world, could continue to be seen as mere objects as if they were not even fully human. Exaggerated depictions of these races had existed along side slavery way before these theories became popularized. But the idea of using them in a widespread commercial practice was rarely used until 1900.

The 19th century sprang forth a type of marketing that would further the capitalistic means within American society well into our present day. Views on primitive cultures began to manifest as both disgust and fetishism of the “other”, which became an easy strategy of selling products. The stereotype would begin to be put to use as more than a social anxiety, but also as a complete form of commodified material culture. Depictions of each race would be confined to being portrayed with only having a few primary features, all of them signifiers of their “de-evolution”; the large nose, big lips, “nappy hair” and “animalistic” features of the African American.

Around the times of segregation with the States, the black body was barred from entering the growing industry of Hollywood and music. Rather than actually black

people representing themselves, caricatures of black people were popularized in order to gain profit from the white race.

Characters, such as the Pickaninnies, the Jiggaboos, Uncle Bens, and mammies were⁹ plastered on merchandise that correlated with the stereotypes centered on the black body. White actors dressed in black face would play these characters within shows referred to as minstrels, both portraying the exaggerated black while entertaining the white audience.

The Jester

The popularity of the minstrel, led to a new stereotype being born one which held the black people and the black body as the pinnacle of comedy. Black actors began to be allowed into roles as a form of comic relief for the white audience and often embraced the personas of the previously mentioned minstrel characters. The black body became the jester of entertainment, full of distinct characters, much like the Italian Zanni in the *Commedia Dell'arte*.

Blackness is still deeply associated with comedy in contemporary society. The most notable comedians worldwide, often quoted and revered by white society are black men and women. The stereotype of the funny “black” has allowed out bodies to become tokenized to play these roles in cinema and everyday situations. Many of these entertainers through history have also emphasized African American Vernacular, exposing white audiences to words and phrases that become the next popular jargon;

⁹ Important to note the these minstrel characters are still present in today's society (Uncle Bens Rice, Aunt Jemima, Pine-Sol, and many fast food fried chicken restaurants utilizing the Black woman as a spokesperson)

this same dialect being labeled as “ebonics” and uneducated if coming from black mouths. Sinbad, a notable black comedian is quoted “I'd say a lot of black comics were forced to do the black comedy circuit. I'd go into black comedy clubs and see what they're going through, which is different because they're almost made to be in another world”. Contemporary social media, such as Twitter, are also havens for black comedy to be distributed and consumed by the masses. The cultural phenomenon of “meme” culture culminates” in a space known as Black Twitter, a haven for AAVE and black comedy that becomes the next big source of comedy on the internet.

The Musician

As a black woman growing up near New Orleans, I was exposed to Jazz, Swing, Blues, and Soul music at an early age. My parents would often remind me of the reason I was named Jasmine; their love of jazz music and how when said with emphasis my name sounded like just “Jazz-man”. Jazz music was a genre of music created by Southern black people as a means of societal rebellion. Before the 1920's, classical “sophisticated” music was what was seen as enjoyable. The birth of Jazz music in the 1920s, combined negro spiritual soul with brass and percussion instruments focusing on improvisation and the genius of experimentation. Initially, this growing style of music was considered not only barbaric, but also dangerous. White critics labelled Jazz as “the devils Music” corrupting the innocence of white women into sexual deviancy and sleeping with the negro race. Maureen Aderson’s *The White Reception of Jazz in America* further examines this:

As magazines first began to recognize jazz, between 1917 and 1920, critics' principal aim appeared innocently enough to be asking what, exactly, jazz was. Yet, delving deeper into the language of early articles, one soon discovers that the

explanations of jazz are also the signs of aggression by white critics against the recently emancipated black man. Popular publications such as *Literary Digest* and *Current Opinion* linked jazz immediately to slavery and Africa and, shortly thereafter, disqualified any claim jazz might have to being a serious musical genre. For example, in the *Literary Digest* article "The Appeal of Primitive Jazz" (1917), the critic begins by analyzing the word jazz but finishes with an outright racial manifesto against the black man. Jazz, the article begins, is "a strange word, an adjective descriptive of a band" but the article then goes on to explain what sort of "band" might be called a "jazz": The groups that play for dancing, when colored, seem infected with the virus that they try to instill as a stimulus in others. They shake and jump and writhe in ways to suggest a return of the medieval jumping mania. The word, according to Walter Kingsley, famous in the ranks of vaudeville, is variously spelled jas, jass, jaz, jazz, and jascz; and is African in origin. The switch from Africa to slavery is a short leap for this writer, since shortly after asserting the word's African origin, the article links the word to slavery: In old plantation days, when slaves were having one of their rare holidays and the fun languished, some West Coast African would cry out, "Jaz her up," and this would be the cue for fast and furious fun. No doubt the witch-doctors and medicine-men on the Kongo used the same term at those jungle "parties" when tomtoms throbbed and the sturdy warriors gave their pep an added kick with rich brews of Yohimbin bark. The distinction between jazz and African tribal music disappears in this critique. Accordingly, black American men and women and Africans become interchangeable as the article reduces the black jazz musicians to "witch-doctors and medicine-men."¹⁰

Like black comedy, black music would eventually become another massively consumed form of entertainment within the same society that condemns the people who created it. Jazz is a type of music that is credited to the origin of modern day Rock'n Roll, Rap, Ska, and almost any other modern genre found in Western culture. Although, as Jazz grew, white Jazz artists emerged and began to take the place of black bodies, making the musical form more "palatable" for white audiences. Soon, Jazz would become a type of music more associated with the social elite than the marginalized communities. This consumption is still taking place with contemporary hip-hop and Rap, another black anarchist form of music now popularized, watered down, and adopted by white artists that gain more recognition than the original creators of the genre. This is mainly seen

¹⁰ Anderson pg 136

within white run award shows, especially the Grammys, where the majority of black rappers have not been given the same number accolades white rappers have received.

I began to include black entertainment consumerism within my artistic practice at the start of my third year of study. The decision to do so stemmed from a conversation I had with an older white gentleman, where I was called “pretentious” for enjoying Jazz music. This attitude baffled and angered me so much that it led to the piece, *Jass (Figure 3)*. Within this work is a mass of black models drawn to form one monolithic unit. The models are colored with an array of pigment in hopes of causing the viewer to not assign the “white” social normative. These bodies are black, but my pieces are meant to challenge our notions of what makes a body “look black”. All of the bodies are dancing, nude, and molding into one another capturing a form of forbidden eroticism. The improvisation of Jazz can be seen within the erratic marks of colors splashed on the masses of flesh. The monolithic structure of bodies is cut out and hovering above a static sheet of plantation banana paper. This is meant to show parallels of economic consumption and black culture erasure for the easy consumption of white society.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONSUMPTION OF BLACK SEXUALITY

“A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings —all fuse to create a politic born of necessity.” —Cherríe L. Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*

Excess Flesh

As I continue my research, I needed to explore other avenues of marginalized identity that I held. As a black woman, the way in which my body is policed bears difference to that of the black male body. Throughout history the black female body has been seen through the euro-centric lens as being “excessive”. Our melanin, our hair, our busts, our hips, our thighs, our lips, our voices, etc are still labeled primitive, oversexed and vulgar within western society. But the most interesting thing is, that they only hold these negative connotations when attached to the blackest skin. Every asset of our physical features has been made into a commodifiable resource within capitalist society. The bodies of black women are bestowed names such as “hottentot” and placed on display for western white society to gawk and observe in amusement, while products and procedures are massively done to change European features into our mimics.

This is the form of consumption that has halted my studies that most, as it goes beyond being just educational research. Higher Education must take into account the impact racially charged research has on students of color as this research not only enlightens our thesis but also directly affects our self image. This is especially true within feminist research as feminism is meant to encompass all types and colors of

women. Open displays of sexuality empower some, while others need modesty and to be seen as vulnerable.

Since slavery, the black female body has been seen through polarizing lenses; inherently sexual but also absurd, lustworthy but unpure, fertile but unfeminine. Rape and sexual deviancy is inflicted upon the black woman but love and affection towards our bodies is taboo. This type of consumption folds into our every aspect of life (work and non-work related), where we are fetishized, lusted after ,and discarded in the same breath. Our bodies ultimately do not belong to us, but instead to the eye who chooses to secretly linger on our “excessiveness”. The black female body must constantly fight its right to take up space within society and also its right to be looked at as more than a sex object. Black feminism means we are allowed to be vulnerable, shed tears, and be shy individuals within white society informing us that we are only allowed to be the tokenized “strong, black, independent, woman”. We crave affection and love like other bodies, but are denied it more because black tokenism is more popular.

Think of it in terms of men's and women's cultures: women live in male systems, know male rules, speak male language when around men, etc. But what do men really know about women? Only screwed up myths concocted to perpetuate the power imbalance. It is the same situation when it comes to dominant and non-dominant or colonizing and colonized cultures/ countries/ people. As a bilingual/bicultural woman whose native culture is not American, I live in an American system, abide by American rules of conduct, speak English when around English speakers, etc., only to be confronted with utter ignorance or concocted myths and stereotypes about my own culture.¹¹

I created the piece *Dzilla (Figure 4)* in response to my research into black feminist epistemologies and idea of the black body being excessive. *Dzilla* attempts to capture the realistic suffocation of the agency of the black body. We are often put on display,

¹¹ Cherríe L. Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, pg 81

commercialized, with our flesh and culture marketed to the masses and silenced of a voice to fight it. Does the black female body possess autonomy? White hands are shown suffocating the colored woman's neck, like neck rings or “dzilla” seen in West African tribes for body modification. We are forced to modify our bodies and sexuality at the hands of White culture in order to be seen as more desirable.

Another piece, *Ovis Aries* (Figure 5) shows two black nude models close together in a stance of supposed familiarity with each other. Most of their faces are covered in white cloths, and injured white lambs adorn their shoulders; but a piece of bright red structural plastic severs their torsos placing emphasis on their genitalia and further obscuring their identities. This plastic acetate symbolizes an easily accessible material that society ultimately consumes, bisecting the black body and leaving only the genitals fully exposed to the viewer.

CHAPTER SIX: ART INFLUENCES

Throughout my practice within this program I utilized the guidance from many black philosophers and writers. Most of my research included intensive studying in order to truly understand my own ontology as a black body existing in this world. Along with an academically heavy practice, I also learned to lean on black fine artists that focused on the same oppression my artwork wishes to convey.

Wangechi Mutu

An artistic influence I found to reference throughout my studies is the work of Wangechi Mutu. Her works depicts the black female body, flesh adorned with washes of color, seemingly torn and missing parts of the skin. She uses collage to emphasize the areas of “excessiveness” and melds sexual imagery with racial stereotypes in order to address the question of our right to hold space.

Kara Walker

Kara Walker is also very influential to my praxis as she focuses on the very dark consequences of chattel slavery against the black body. Her work addresses stereotypes by creating large violent scenes of the atrocities of American slavery. All of her figures are black silhouettes, but the viewer can separate the ruling whites from the blacks with ease due to our learned understanding of racial semiotics. Her work shows that these atrocities are not very hidden, but in plain sight that we choose to ignore.

Sonja Clark

During my studies we had the opportunity to work with Sonja Clark, whose practice is centered around black identity. Her practice directly relates to Black American ontology and our fight to be seen as individuals within a society that places us into a racial monolith. Much of her work uses the importance of black hair in order to illustrate our individualism.

Augusta Savage

Augusta Savage was a black woman artist that was a classically trained fine artist who specializes in sculpture and figure drawing. Her statues of the black body mimicked those of the white “masters” of the art, and her skill was highly praised by black artists during the Harlem Renaissance. Even so, Black artists were not allowed to be seen as technically gifted and she was denied entry into academic teaching of the arts within many white colleges. Her work not only influences my own, but as a classically trained technical drawing artist, I directly relate to her struggle of being seen as authentic. Artists of color are often pushed away from technical work as that is often seen as reserved for white artists. Our work must be wild, “primal”, and abstract to be viewed as acceptable.

Carlos Martiel

Another inspiration is French Nigerian performance Artist, Carlos Martiel. Martiel's performances are excruciating to watch, as he subjects himself to massive amounts of violence and pain for hours in front of a crowd of onlookers. He places his nude body within a white gallery space and proceeds to push through different forms of torture all to the amusement of a well dressed upper class museum patrons.

Yinka Shonibare

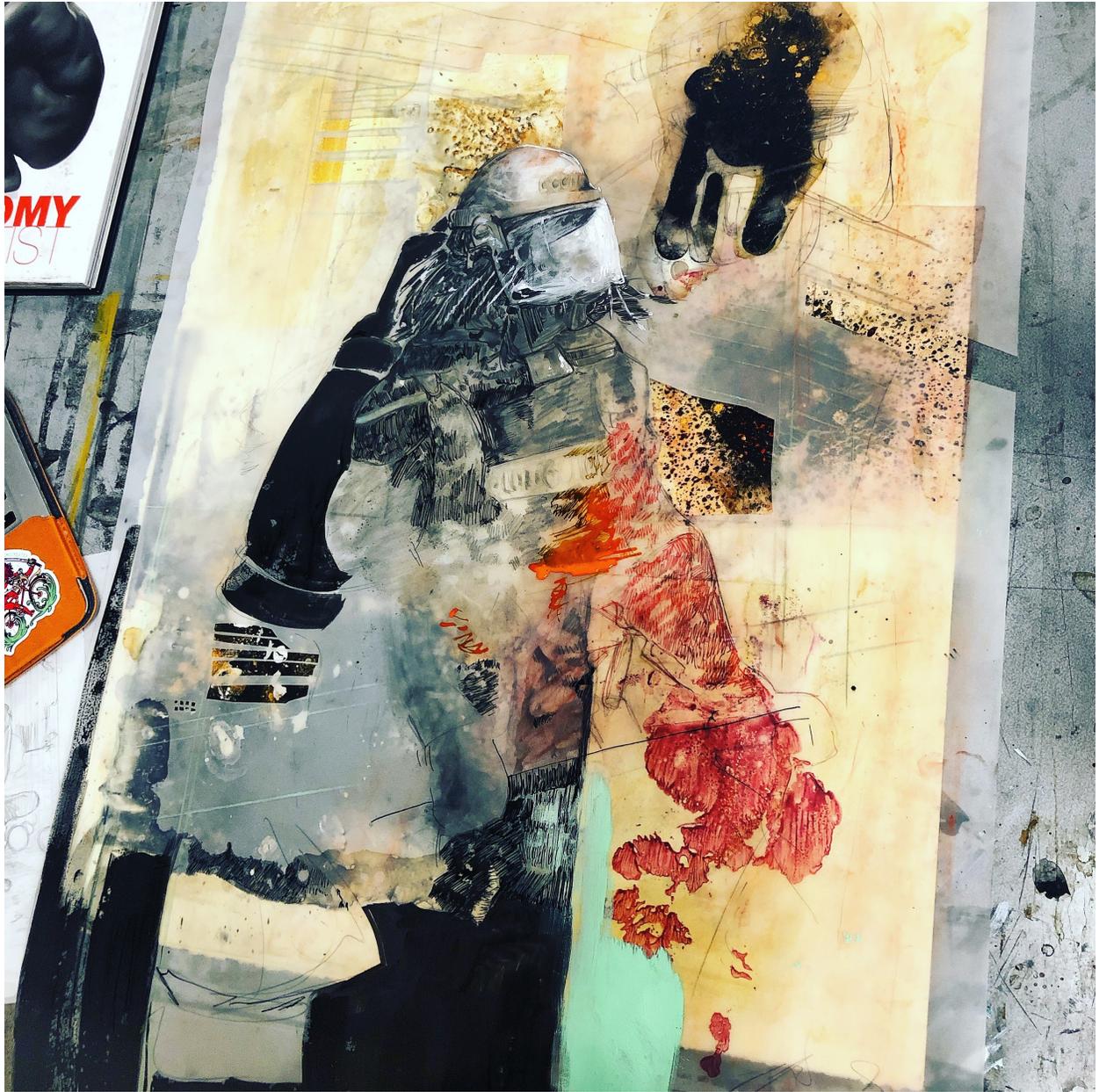
Nigerian born British artist Yinka Shonibare creates fantastical scenes of headless figures adorned in kente cloth sewed into European victorian era fashions. His work shows the black body and cultures as a commodifiable product, which through globalization has caused a diaspora between Black identities worldwide.



Figure 1- Massaranduba 2019



Figure 2- Cochon, 2019



Cochon "Detail"



Cochon (detail closer)



Figure 3 - Jass, 2020



Jass (detail)



Figure 4, Dzilla, 2019



Figure 5, Ovis Aries, 2019



Ovis (Detail Shot)